

SHORTBREAD

AND
Short



Stories



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY COLLECTION

ALINA JACOBS

SHORTBREAD AND SHORT STORIES

A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY COLLECTION

ALINA JACOBS

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SYNOPSIS

Need more Happily Ever After? Need more wedding drama?
Then get *Shortbread and Short Stories*!

This collection has all of the short stories from the Weddings in the City books! These bonus short stories are all being given away individually to mailing list subscribers. But if you'd like the full collection, look no further!

Shortbread and Short Stories does have an exclusive bonus story featuring all of the wedding planners!

Taking six billionaires to a destination wedding is about as much fun as traveling with six cats in a basket. Add a wedding saboteur, and things get crazy! This is an exclusive novella found only in this bonus short story collection.

List of short stories in the collection:

- A Short Engagement – Evan and Ivy
- Wedding Mayhem – Mark and Brea
- Marriage in a Second – Chris and Grace
- Wedding Flowers – Sebastian and Amy
- Weekends & Wedding Cake – Wolf and Sophie
- Cupcakes & Save-the-Dates – Ryan and Elsie
- Weddings & Whimsy – Novella featuring all the couples!

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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OTHER BOOKS BY ALINA JACOBS

Check out other books about characters mentioned in this one on my website:

<http://alinajacobs.com/books.html>

A SHORT



Engagement



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Evan plans a proposal and Ivy plans a wedding! This 4,400 word bonus short story follows *Bridezillas and Billionaires*.

IVY

Ah, the end of wedding season! I stretched out on the large king bed, still amazed that I couldn't touch all of my possessions from said bed.

I rolled over and made starfishes on the bed just because I could. Fergus meowed from above my head. Now that he had three floors in a penthouse that were all his and windows he could survey the city from, Fergus's mood had improved greatly.

I had gotten home from the final wedding of the season, and for the first time in the past seven months, I didn't have to scramble to prepare for a wedding or a meeting with a bride. Evan and I had been together since Imogen's wedding disaster, and every day had been better than the last.

As dreamy as this penthouse was, it was not my dream penthouse. We were not living in the clock tower penthouse. It was probably for the best, I thought, as Evan walked back into the bedroom wearing nothing but a pair of boxer briefs and a chef's hat. I enjoyed seeing him like this every morning, but I really didn't need half of Manhattan to enjoy it as well.

He was carrying a tray with a bowl of pasta on it, and my mouth watered.

"He cooks, he brings breakfast in bed," I quipped, sitting up. The sheet fell down, exposing the other reason I was glad we weren't living in a space with two-story-high windows. Evan bent down to kiss my chest.

I pulled up the sheet. "I don't want cream sauce all over the comforter."

Evan's mouth quirked. "I did tell you to take the comforter off because you creamed everywhere."

"You're insufferable," I told him then leaned over and kissed him.

"But you like me anyway," he whispered against my mouth. He smiled at

me, then he fed me a bite of pasta.

“I’m surrounded by all my favorite things,” I joked. “What’s not to love?”

“There aren’t any weddings coming up?” Evan asked.

“Thankfully not. And you know me, I love a wedding, but I’m glad to take a break. All I want to do today is craft, cook an elaborate recipe, read romance novels, and snuggle with you and Fergus.”

Evan stiffened. “I thought you had plans. I already scheduled time with my friends today. Sebastian is coming into town.”

“Oh.”

“But I can cancel,” he said hurriedly.

“No, no,” I assured him, feeling slightly miffed. “That’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I planted a kiss on his chin. “I don’t want Sebastian to think I’m stealing you away!”



“SENT!” Grace announced when I walked into the brand-new offices of Weddings in the City.

“Champagne?” Elsie offered, popping a cork.

“Those were the last of the wedding photos for the final bride,” Grace informed me. “We only have two weddings booked through Valentine’s Day, but those are Christmas and New Year’s brides. They’re always fun and low maintenance.”

“A whole three months off!” Amy said, sprawling on one of the large leather chairs.

When Evan had bought the clock tower penthouse, the furniture had been included. We hadn’t had a chance to really explore decorating because of all the weddings. Now we would finally have time to decorate the space. We could buy desks, put in plants, and have fancy white chairs.

The Roomba whirred by. It was festooned with flowers. Fergus sometimes came to the office with me, but Evan for some reason wanted him at home that day.

“How is Fergus liking his new digs?” Sophie asked, slicing leftover cake and passing it around.

“He and Evan are weirdly close. Evan cleared out a whole room for him and installed a cat elevated highway.”

Sophie snorted.

“Has Fergus lost any weight?” Brea asked.

“I think he’s actually gained some. He and Evan spend the weekends lying on the couch and watching football,” I said.

“It sounds like Evan might be losing his girlish figure!” Grace snickered.

“Oh, he works out,” I assured them.

“I bet you’re giving him a good workout, Ivy!” Sophie cackled.

“Oh my!” I ate a large bite of cake.

“I do feel bad that I’m gone like every Friday and Saturday night plus random weeknights. Now that wedding season is over, we’ll have more time together. And I’m putting Fergus on a diet. He doesn’t even use his cat superhighway. He just climbs up on one particular perch and hopes that a bird will smack against the window.”

“Now that we have a smattering of free time, we can talk about decorating this place,” Grace said. “At the very least, we need curtains in the bathroom.”

“Having a man staring at you while you pee might be the start of a beautiful romance,” Brea said earnestly.

Sophie made a face. “We need to start censoring your Kindle.”

My phone beeped with a picture of Fergus, Evan, and Sebastian drinking whisky, though Fergus had cream in his glass.

“I’m surprised you aren’t with him now,” Elsie remarked, looking over my shoulder.

“I wanted to come see all of you, my dearest, bestest friends!” I said.

“You’ve spent sixty hours a week with us for the past five months,” Amy said flatly. “None of us are going to begrudge you if you spend a Sunday with Evan.”

I chewed my lip.

“Is everything all right?” Grace asked.

“He said he already had plans for today. Maybe he’s rethinking this whole relationship,” I said, worried.

“He was probably just confused. He didn’t know wedding season was over. Usually you do work on Sundays,” Sophie said reassuringly.

“I guess,” I said, looking down at the picture. “But what if Evan is unhappy?”

EVAN

“**Y**ou have to help me!” I said when Sebastian showed up at the door.

Ivy had taken a car to the clock tower penthouse. She had turned it into her company headquarters, which I was fine with. I wanted to be able to fuck her in the living room without all of Manhattan watching us.

“How’s soon-to-be married life?” Sebastian asked, bending down to greet Fergus.

“That’s why you’re here.”

“You’re going to propose?” my friend asked.

“Do you think it’s too soon? I figured it would take her years to plan her wedding in between all the other ones she plans,” I explained as we walked into the living room. I poured him a drink at the wet bar.

“Six months is probably fine if you think it’s going to take years to plan a wedding,” my friend said, nodding. Sebastian took a sip of the whisky. “Now walk me through your proposal plan, and bring your A game. Ivy’s seen hundreds of proposals. You’re competing with all her ghosts of grooms past.”

“Shit. No pressure, huh?” I made a drumroll motion. “For my epic proposal, I am going to have Fergus help me!”

Sebastian made a face then gave me a thumbs-down.

“Come on! Ivy loves that cat. I’m training him to bring a ring box when called, and I’m going to put him in a little bow tie, throw flower petals everywhere, and light a shit ton of candles.”

“That cat?” Sebastian pointed at Fergus, who was licking his nonexistent balls.

“So we have a little more work to do. But it will be perfect.”

“Orrr,” Sebastian said, “you could take her on a fancy vacation to a château in France, have them plant MARRY ME in lilacs, and take her up in a hot-air balloon ride.”

“She has had to travel to exotic or at least luxury locations every day for the last five months. I don’t think she wants to travel. She likes to be at home.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Well, you may want to wait a few months before you propose so you can get *that* under control.”

Fergus, done with licking his balls, had slumped on his behind, legs sprawled, tummy sagging on the ground.

“You might want to put him on a diet too.”

“I don’t want him too hungry,” I argued. “He might eat the ring.”

“Dear god. Where is the rock anyway?”

“That’s why you’re here!”

“You don’t want to ask one of her friends?” Sebastian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“They may ruin the surprise.”

“So you’re just going to buy her a ring blind?” Sebastian looked skeptical.

“Mika’s going to help me!”



“JUST FOR THE RECORD,” Mika said when we walked into the jewelry store, “I think this is a terrible idea.”

“Why? You know Ivy’s taste, right?” I said, feeling confident. “You can help pick out an engagement ring.”

“Have you even talked to her about marriage?” Mika asked, exasperated.

“I will. This proposal isn’t happening for a couple weeks. I’m trying to train a cat.”

“You don’t want to know,” Sebastian told her.

“And what are we looking for today?” the sales associate asked brightly.

“An engagement ring.”

“What kind does your girlfriend like?”

I looked to Mika. “My sister’s here to help me.”

“It’s going to be a surprise,” Mika said dryly.

“I see,” the saleswoman said. “Let’s start with the cut of diamond that your girlfriend prefers.”

Twenty minutes into the appointment, I had learned more than I ever cared to about the various cuts of diamonds and the styles of rings. And I was no closer to picking something out for Ivy. “Maybe I should just buy the most expensive one,” I said. “Let’s start there and see what it looks like.”

My little sister made a gagging noise when the sales associate took out the largest, gaudiest ring I’d ever seen.

“Is that diamond real?” Sebastian asked. “It looks like you could kill something with that.”

“I think that’s too much. I know for a fact Ivy’s not going to like that,” I told them.

“Yeah, Ivy doesn’t like chunky jewelry,” Mika added.

“Here’s one that’s still going to have an impressive price tag, but perhaps not so showy,” the sales associate suggested. “Have a look at this delicate *micro-pavé* rose gold band with a princess-cut stone.” It had a pink sapphire on it flanked by several square-cut diamonds. The ring was pretty. It was unique and didn’t look like all the other standard engagement rings.

“This ring is from a Weddings in the City designer,” the saleswoman explained.

“Ohhh, Brea designed this!” Mika said. “Ivy will definitely like this one. She loves Brea’s rings.”



“WHAT’S NEXT?” Sebastian asked once we’d paid and left the shop.

“Now we need to pick an outfit for Fergus the Magnificent,” I said as we headed down the street to a high-end pet boutique.

A pretty young woman in a brown bob greeted us.

“We’re looking for cat outfits,” Sebastian said.

“For an engagement,” I clarified.

The sales clerk—her name tag said Ginny—looked at the picture of Fergus on my phone.

“That is a big cat.”

“He likes to eat.”

Ginny didn't say a word.

"He's going on a diet soon," I said, defending Fergus from her silent judgment.

"I don't think we're going to have an outfit that will fit him," Ginny said, flipping through the little tutus and sweaters on the rack. "But why don't you try this bow tie?"



"RING? CHECK," I said later when I was back at my penthouse. "Outfit? Check. All right, Fergus."

I addressed the cat while opening a can of imported tuna from Italy. Fergus had expensive taste. We were both men who enjoyed the finer things in life. Fergus meowed as I tempted him with the fish.

"We need to start organizing for the proposal." I waved the ring box in his face. "I need you to bring this ring to me when I tell you to, okay?"

"I don't think Fergus knows what's up," Sebastian said.

I swapped the ring box with tuna, and Fergus opened his mouth wide. Then I quickly shoved the ring box in his mouth.

"He's clamped on!" I said in excitement. "Okay, Fergus, now bring it to me." I slowly backed up with the can of tuna in my hand. Fergus dropped the ring box then stalked over to me, tail swishing.

Sebastian stifled a laugh.

"You're distracting him!"

Fergus sprang up, knocking the can of tuna to the floor.

Sebastian guffawed. "Try his little bow tie on," Sebastian suggested, wiping the tears out of his eyes.

Fergus scarfed down the tuna as I tied the sparkly bow tie around his neck. As soon as I clasped it, the cat froze, let out an ungodly shriek, and started running around the kitchen, yowling. Then he jumped behind Ivy's record player. But when I looked, there was no cat.

"Oh shit!" I cursed, searching for the cat. "I lost the cat. Ivy's going to kill me."

The door beeped.

"She's here," Sebastian informed me.

"I'm going to have to distract her."

IVY

I heard the yowling as soon as I stepped off the elevator.

“Oh no,” I said, hurrying to the front door. “Fergus has finally lost it and is attacking Evan!”

Evan and his friend Sebastian were looking like two boys who’d got caught with their hands in the cookie jar when I went into the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” I asked suspiciously. “Where’s Fergus?”

“He’s around,” Evan said.

“Hi, Ivy. Bye, Ivy,” Sebastian said, giving me a hug. “I have to go pick up my brother.”

He and Evan did some sort of silent male communication thing, then Sebastian disappeared.

“He didn’t want to stay?” I asked, setting my bag on the counter.

“I told him to get lost,” Evan said, unbuttoning his shirt.

“He’s your friend!” I scolded.

“And you’re the woman I’ve been dying to fuck.”

Like a deer in headlights, I stood there as he made his move. His hands slid around my hips and pulled me closer. “Because going this long without you is something I can’t accept.”

That was followed with a kiss. Again, in shock, I stood there, taking it. After that, I started to lean into it and follow his lead. He ripped my blouse open to expose my breasts. Then he pulled my tits out of my bra to kiss and tease the nipples. He pulled me closer to him, close enough that I could feel the bulge of his cock through his jeans. Just like that, this man was rock hard and ready for me.

“I need you now,” he whispered.

The desire was fervent, him pushing my skirt down, a finger on my clit automatically, reminding me of what he could do to me, really getting my fire inside burning. We shuffled over to the kitchen counter, where he turned me around and pulled my skirt and panties right down my legs.

“I guess you aren’t fooling around.”

“I said I needed you, Ivy. ‘Need’ isn’t a word I’m using lightly. Are you refusing me? Your pussy isn’t giving me that message.”

He rubbed me, feeling my wetness. I heard a condom packet rip. Haste was the name of the game here, him undoing his slacks, his cock poking at me from behind. I flashed him a sinful glare. “Fuck me then. How can I refuse you when you are propositioning me so romantically?”

“I’m nothing if not romantic, babe.” He punctuated his words by thrusting himself in, my eager slit more than ready to accept him so wholly and completely.

I felt him rush in, overtake me as I throbbed within. He didn’t waste time in getting to fuck me properly. There was definitely something sexy about him being so direct and assertive. Our lust for one another was guiding us, both of us almost able to read the other’s mind at this point.

The rhythm set between us was potent and strong, him thrusting into me, me bucking into him. The bliss seemed to be sent through me and then back to him. More and more we did this, our pace rapidly increasing.

Originally, I was bent over my kitchen counter, but I was bending back, throwing my arm over his neck, sharing another kiss with him. There was something complete about this, something real. Even though we were both damn near fully clothed, this felt... well... right.

This quickie we were having? It was better than any man I’d had before, with absolutely no contest.

Our rhythm grew more and more frantic. I had to abandon the kiss, devoting my energy to just keeping myself up as he fucked me. Evan’s finger was still on my clit through all this chaos, massaging me, urging me further along, making sure that I would be screaming for him very soon.

That time was now. I let out a mighty moan as the flood of bliss rushed through my body just then. All of it became immersed in orgasm, my legs shaking, my vision blurry.

Seeing me like this was what must have put him over the limit himself. He held me close for a time, his arms wrapped around me. Even in this

awkward place, it felt so serene.

I had just turned around to kiss him and suggest we take this to the bedroom when Fergus pranced in.

“Aww, he’s wearing a bow tie! But what’s in your mouth, Fergus? That better not be a mouse!”

“Fuck!” Evan yelled, lunging for the cat.

Fergus howled and jumped up into my arms. I dumped the cat in the sink before he could scratch up my bare skin. The thing in his mouth clunked on the metal of the sink. I picked it up.

“Evan, what is this?”

EVAN

“Nothing,” I said, trying to take it from Ivy.

She frowned. “Why are you being so secretive?” She shook the box. “It looks like a ring box. Fergus, did you steal this?”

She opened it.

“Oh, no, this is one of the rings Brea designed. These are expensive!” Ivy shook her head in disbelief. “Fergus, did you take this out of the office? How did I miss this? Why didn’t Brea say one was missing? Evan, this is a disaster! Our cat is a thief! What else has he stolen?”

“Why don’t we figure it out later?” I suggested. “Don’t you want to have a repeat of that mind-blowing sex?”

Ivy narrowed her eyes at me. “Did you just fuck me to distract me?” she demanded. “Whose ring is this?”

“Er.” I glared at Fergus as I zipped up my pants.

“Evan,” Ivy said in a warning tone.

I took the ring from her then dropped to one knee. “Ivy, will you marry me?”

“Is this a joke?” she demanded.

“No, I’m serious.” I took a deep breath. “Ivy, I love you so much. I want you to be my wife and spend every day of our lives together.”

“Oh. Oh!” She clapped her hands over her mouth. “You’re proposing? This is my ring? And you trained Fergus to bring it? Evan!” She bent down to kiss me. “That’s so adorable.”

“So...” I prompted.

“Oh, right. Yes! I accept!”

My heart flooded with happiness as I slid the ring onto her finger.

“This wasn’t exactly how I was going to propose,” I growled playfully as I stood up and kissed her. “For one, we were both going to be wearing more clothes.”

Ivy giggled and placed her left hand with the sparkling ring against my bare chest.

“You’re wearing my favorite outfit,” she teased.

I caressed her curves, then my hand inched down. She grabbed it.

“No celebratory sex?” I asked, dismayed.

She looked into my eyes, her expression serious.

“Uh-oh.”

“Evan, I love you,” she said earnestly. “I love you more than anyone.”

“I love you too, Ivy,” I said, trying to figure out what was going on.

“But I don’t want a wedding.”

Crushing despair.

“You don’t want to get married?”

“What? No! I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life with you and have a family with you. I just—” She grimaced. “I know the cliché is that wedding planners always can’t wait to plan their own weddings.”

I nodded. “I want you to have your dream wedding.”

“I just was thinking maybe we could elope?”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“I sort of wanted my family and friends there,” I said. Was this our first big argument?

“I mean, that’s fine with me, I just do not have the stamina to spend the next year and a half wedding planning,” Ivy clarified.

“We could have a wedding that only takes a few months to plan,” I said, trying to find a compromise.

“I don’t want to give up my break to plan it.” She shrugged. “What if we just get married next weekend?”

“People are going to freak out when we tell them,” I said, taken aback.

“They don’t have to know…” My fiancée smiled conspiratorially.

IVY

The next weekend, the restaurant was packed.

This was it! Evan and I were going to get married in—I checked my phone—twenty minutes. We had brought all our friends and family together for what we were calling an engagement party. Little did they know that Evan and I had a surprise planned!

Evan couldn't stop smiling at me as we milled around and greeted our guests. I was wearing a short white dress and blue suede platform stilettos. It was a little bridal but hopefully not enough to tip anyone off.

"You sure you don't want to have a big giant wedding?" Evan murmured in my ear.

"I don't want a wedding. I just want to be married to you," I whispered back.

"Look at the two lovebirds!" Mrs. Russo exclaimed, coming up to us with her squad of other seniors around her. She hugged me then said conspiratorially, "Thanks to you, I won a thousand bucks in the betting pool."

"There was a betting pool?" I said in horror.

Mrs. Russo nodded. "Ida thought you would end up with one of the Svensson brothers, but I told her that Evan was head over heels for you and wasn't going to give you up without a fight!"

"Damn straight!" Evan growled, pulling me to him and kissing me passionately.

"Do you have the rings?" I asked him after Ida had dragged Mrs. Russo off to talk to some of the Svensson brothers.

Evan patted his pockets. "I have them, but do you have the officiant?"

I'd hired one I used before. I saw her through the window out on the sidewalk, talking animatedly on her phone. I motioned her inside. The band stopped playing, and Evan led me up to the front of the room.

"Thank you so much for coming to celebrate our engagement," Evan said into the microphone. "As everyone knows, I am a wedding cynic. The whole pageant wasn't anything I wanted any part of. Until I met Ivy. I love her more than anyone in the world. She's my best friend and the only woman who can make me want to create handmade centerpieces and decorate a historic ballroom and spend the next five years planning the most egregious over-the-top wedding. Ivy, I cannot wait to be married to you."

I gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Evan, you're the love of my life, even if you did eat all my lasagna. You're just too dang sexy, strong, kind, and wonderful to stay mad at. I must say though," I told the crowd, "that if I corrupted Evan into loving weddings, he might have corrupted me a little bit too. We have a few months until wedding season picks back up. I could spend that time planning a wedding—or I could spend it with my wonderful husband. That being said, is there an officiant in the house?"

That was the cue.

There were cheers and applause. I looked around for the officiant we had hired. Crap, where was she?

"Here's one!" Archer announced cheerfully as he and his brothers dragged Greg Svensson up to the stage.

"I'm not marrying them," he scoffed.

"Do it! Do it!" his brothers chanted.

Greg gave a long-suffering sigh then climbed up onto the stage. "Dearly beloved..."

As Greg spoke the words that I'd heard a million times before, I looked up into Evan's eyes. It felt right and perfect. I couldn't wait to marry him.

"If anyone can show just cause why this couple cannot lawfully be joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace," Greg said.

"I object!" Amy called out.

I looked at my friend in horror. She hopped up onto the stage with a huge bridal bouquet and a crown of flowers.

"You can't get married without a little flair," she said, setting the crown on my head and shoving the bouquet into my hands. "Proceed!"

Evan and I looked at each other and started laughing.

Greg cleared his throat in irritation. “Do you want to get married, or should we just put these people out of their misery and start the reception?”

I could barely contain my excitement as Evan and I recited our vows and slid the rings that Brea had designed onto each other’s fingers.

When Greg said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife, you may kiss the bride,” Evan tipped me back in a movie star kiss to a roar of cheers and whistles.

Our guests applauded as we descended to receive congratulations. Then the crowd parted to reveal...

“Geez, that is an insane cake,” I said in shock. “Sophie! Why is there a wedding cake here? And Amy, how did you just have all these flowers on hand.” I turned to Evan and demanded, “Did you tell them?”

“No,” Evan insisted. “I told no one.”

Brea laughed.

“I get a notification from the shop whenever people buy my jewelry designs! I have to keep a record for tax purposes and for warranty information. They told me the engagement ring had been purchased by a Mr. Harrington, who had then returned and purchased two wedding rings.” She shrugged. “We figured you had a little something up your sleeve!”

“Yeah,” Elsie said. “We couldn’t just let you completely get away with not having a real wedding!”

Grace snapped our picture, then Sophie cut a big slice of cake and handed each of us a fork. I swiped my finger through the addictive buttercream frosting and dabbed a bit on Evan’s nose. He kissed me, getting frosting on my face and making me shriek.

“You know,” I told him, “the only way I thought I could love you more was if you were covered in frosting. And I was right!”

WEDDING



Mayhem



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Mark and Brea get married...eventually...

BREA

“We need a name,” I announced to Mark.

“Right now?” My fiancé—yes, friends, my *fiancé!*—looked at me skeptically.

“Maybe we should just let him decide?”

“You don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl,” I countered.

Mark looked down at the Roomba and frowned. “He feels like a male.”

“Ugh, fine. I was going to name him Rainbow Sparkle Princess, but I guess we’ll name him Bob.”

Mark smirked. “See, you think he’s a boy too.”

He scooted the Roomba out of the way with his foot so he could wrap me in his arms and kiss me. I would never be tired of this. And the kiss was even better now that the penthouse was freshly done.

“Stay,” Mark murmured against my mouth. “Or are you too frazzled with wedding planning?” He grinned and took my left hand to admire the ring that sparkled there. “The wedding is in a week,” he reminded me.

I blanked. *A week? Really? My wedding? Funny, I have another bride’s wedding that weekend...*

“On Saturday,” Mark prompted.

“Saturday?” I squeaked. Mark gave me an odd look. *Fuck.*

He went to his study, opened a drawer, and pulled out an invitation. “See?”

“Yep! It’s going to be great! I can’t wait!”



“EMERGENCY! Emergency! My life is in shambles!” I cried as I ran into the Weddings in the City office. Though I now had my extra-special studio in the penthouse, I still went to the office, though it was a lot easier now that it was only a few subway stops away. That was a much better commute than coming from my parents’ tiny apartment.

“You’re getting married to a rich, handsome man who worships the ground you walk on,” Ivy said mildly. “What could possibly be the emergency?”

“I don’t have half the decorations, my dress isn’t done, and it’s on Saturday.”

Elsie gave me a confused look. “No, your wedding is on Friday. It’s always been on Friday. It’s on the calendar.”

“I might have kind of put the wrong date down on the Google calendar,” I admitted.

“Hmm,” Elsie said as she swiped through the calendar. “The twenty-first is a Saturday. The last Saturday the twenty-first was a few months ago. Maybe you were on the wrong month when you were inputting the date.”

I slumped down on the couch. “Who forgets their own wedding day?” I wailed. “What am I going to do?”

“I’ll just have the flowers delivered the next day,” Amy said. “No big deal.”

“Thankfully it wasn’t early,” Sophie joked, “I can definitely give you the cake a day later.”

“Well,” Ivy said, “we have the Schmidt-Keller wedding earlier that day. Brea’s wedding ceremony is at five. Fortunately, the Schmidt-Keller wedding is a small one, as it’s his third marriage and her fourth, so we were planning on a late lunch, some light dancing, then that was it. I should be able to make it over in time.”

I nodded.

“No worries!” Amy told me, giving me a hug.

“I’m concerned,” Elsie said, shaking her head slowly at the calendar. “What if something goes wrong?”

“What could go wrong?” Grace asked. “The bride is a seasoned veteran at this point. It’s going to be ‘I do,’ eat cake, drink, then go home. Then we’ll be over at Brea’s wedding for the real fun!”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, pulling some emergency ice cream out of the freezer. “The only thing is we cannot breathe a word of this to Mark or

anyone outside of this room. I don't want him to freak out and think I don't care about him."

MARK

Wes's little daughter smiled and laughed when she saw me. I immediately went to her and picked her up. The toddler was large now, and she shrieked and laughed as I snuggled her to my chest.

"How's the soon-to-be married man?"

"Still not married yet."

Wes laughed. "Is Brea neck deep in wedding planning?"

I frowned, thinking back to our evening together. *She has been working on wedding planning. I'm just not sure if it was ours.*

Liz came in, and Aspen Marie ran to her to wrap her arms around her legs.

"So how's the wedding planning?"

I was seriously tired of that question.

"Uh—"

"You mean you haven't been choosing which particular shade of white is going to be used for the napkins?" Wes teased. "For shame."

"You can't just show up!" Liz chastised.

"I've been busy with my business."

Liz snorted and pulled out her phone. "I'm texting Brea right now to see what else needs to be done."

"Come on, Mark," Wes said, "we can slap logos on party favors."



IT WAS MORE than slapping some labels on the mini bottles of alcohol.

“We need how many yards of white chiffon?” I asked as Wes read off of the list.

“Why didn’t they just order it online?” Carter asked, yawning as we headed down the street in the garment district early the next morning.

“I’m not sure.”

Why *hadn’t* Brea ordered it online? Or at least order in advance from a local shop and have it delivered. It was unlike her. Usually she was super organized with weddings.

Just not yours.

Why is that? I wondered as I followed my cousin Grant into a cramped fabric shop. *Does she not want to be married to me, and is this a subtle way of showing it?*

I hated to admit it, but even after everything with Brea—moving in with her, building a life with her, loving her—a tiny part of me was afraid this was all going to come crashing down. Was the chiffon a red flag, the proverbial smoke before the fire? I shuddered.

Grant leaned against the counter, took off his sunglasses, and smiled broadly at the older woman who was running the shop. “We are here to buy all of the white chiffon you have, please.”

The shopkeeper looked over her glasses, took a sip of her coffee, and then said, “We don’t have any.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, starting to panic, “you don’t have any?”

“No. You should have ordered ahead of time.”

“Fuck,” I said as we left the shop.

“Cheer up, bro,” Carter said. “There are other shops in the garment district.”

But not a single one had a scrap of white chiffon.

“What am I going to do?” I said as we left another shop. “How is it all sold out?”

At what appeared to be the final shop, the man went to the back to look then came out of the storage room shaking his head. “We just sold our last two bolts.”

“How? To who?”

The shopkeeper shrugged. “We sell a lot to Broadway and production studios. Two men in expensive suits came in and bought all my stock. Won’t have more in until next week.”

“There’s one more shop,” Wes said, scrolling through his phone. We

headed across the street, and as we reached the door, two men came out carrying three bolts of white chiffon.

“What the fuck!” I yelled, completely losing it. “You can’t buy all of that.”

The two Svensson brothers looked over their sunglasses at me. “Screw you. We need this. Order ahead.”

“What the fuck could you possibly need all of that for?” I shouted at them.

Wes pushed me aside. “Look, we really need that for a wedding,” he said. “I’m friends with Greg Svensson, and I’m hoping you can do me a favor here.”

“There’s no way you two are friends, because Greg doesn’t have any friends,” one Svensson brother scoffed.

“What do you need all this chiffon for?” Grant asked.

“For the mayoral race,” the other Svensson brother said. “Hunter’s going to bring Meg down.” The two laughed as a black car pulled up, screeching to a halt. The back half of the SUV was filled with bolts of shimmery white fabric.

“Just give me a couple of those,” I begged.

Carter pulled out his wallet. “I have five hundred dollars and two Monopoly squares from McDonalds,” Carter said, waving the bills around.

The Svenssons finished loading the fabric. “Like we need the money.”

“Those guys are the worst,” Grant fumed as their car sped away.

“What are we going to do? I can’t show up without chiffon.”

“We’ll think of something.”

The shopkeeper from down the street waved us in as we walked back to our car.

“Did you find some?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, no, but we do have a lot of polyester white stretch net. Someone ordered it for a Broadway play then decided they didn’t want it. It could work in place of chiffon.”

“We’ll take it,” I said, handing over my credit card.

BREA

Mark was arranging the sushi on a plate when I arrived back home. “How was your day in the wedding mines?” he asked, kissing me. I let myself sink into his strong arms. I did love Mark, and I couldn’t wait to marry him. I was, however, anxious about actually putting on the wedding.

“Liz said you found chiffon,” I said. “Thank you! I don’t know where my mind has been. I completely blanked on ordering it.”

Actually, that was a lie. I felt terrible. I had ordered it, then the store had gotten another order mixed up, and I’d had to use my chiffon for another wedding.

“I found some. No big deal.”

I should have just told him the truth about everything, but I didn’t want him to think I didn’t care. I did care. It was just that we were super busy. I should have planned the wedding for late January and not during wedding season. What had I been thinking?

And I still had to finish my damn dress.

I was antsy as Mark and I sat at our brand-new handcrafted reclaimed-wood table to eat.

Beowulf had grown into a huge German shepherd mix and sat at my feet, begging for food. Mark never gave in, but I couldn’t resist puppy-dog eyes. I snuck him a little bit of fish, making sure it didn’t have any spicy wasabi sauce on it.

“Are you feeling okay for the wedding?” Mark asked me seriously.

“Of course!” I chirped. “Can’t wait!”

“Anything else you need help on?”

Like, everything? But I didn’t want to admit that I had let the wedding planning spiral out of control.

“Nope! Everything should be ready to go,” I said.

“Dress is done?”

“I hope you aren’t in my studio, peeking!” I said. *Especially because I’m not even close to being done.*

Mark laughed. “You’ll tell me if you need anything, right?”

“Right!”



I LAY in bed next to Mark, waiting for his breathing pattern to shift. The reality was that my dress was barely in pieces. I had the fabric and had a few pieces cut out, but I hadn’t even sewn it together, let alone started any of the embroidery I had planned.

When I was sure Mark was fast asleep, I snuck out from under the covers to tiptoe upstairs. My wedding was in two days! In the low light, I took out my sketchpad. I was going to need to rethink my dress design.

I had planned an elaborate ball gown, but there was no way that was happening. I simplified it to make a more flowy gown and started to modify my fabric pieces. Even though the gown was now much simpler, I wasn’t able to finish it that night, even after sucking down a huge coffee.

I couldn’t finish it the next day, either, because I had to help with the Schmidt-Keller wedding. The bride had decided she wanted her award-winning cat to have a veil like hers to go along with her little bridesmaid dress. All through the day’s meeting, I embroidered the cat veil as opposed to my own dress.

I guzzled caffeine through the elaborate rehearsal dinner my dads had planned. It was at an old movie theater and featured a huge cabaret number starring them and their friends.

“At least they didn’t bring the Roombas up on the stage,” Mark whispered in my ear after the dance number was over.

“If you don’t want to marry me, you can totally back out. After that display, I wouldn’t even hold it against you!” I told him.

He kissed me, mouth soft against mine. Then he leaned back and smiled.

“I want nothing more than to make you my wife.”

That made me feel even worse when I didn't even spend the night before my wedding cuddling with Mark. Instead, I spent it finishing the gown.

But at least I finished. I raised my hands in a silent victory celebration as the sun rose. “It's my wedding day!”

MARK

“**W**hat the fuck is this?” Liz demanded as Wes and I proudly unloaded the not-chiffon fabric out at the New Cardiff country club. Grant and now Wes had both been married at the Holbrook estate. But I still had some bad memories attached the house and didn’t want to have anything ruin my wedding day.

Now that it was actually the morning of and we were scrambling to set everything up at the clubhouse and help straighten everything up from the previous night’s wedding, I was sort of wishing I had agreed to get married at the Holbrook estate just so we could have had a full week to do setup.

“Seriously,” Liz continued as I dodged a man carting a tower of chairs. “This looks like bird netting. This isn’t romantic.” Liz was irate as she inspected the fabric. “Where are we supposed to put this? What are we going to do? Brea has a whole design for draping the chiffon!”

“The fabric seller said this was the same thing,” Wes said defensively.

Liz unrolled the bolt of fabric and spread it out on the floor. In the light from the large windows in the historic country club building, the fabric did look more like something you would go fishing with than something you would drape in an elegant venue space.

“Fuck, Brea’s going to kill me.”

“It looks okay when it’s all bunched together, right?” Wes said uncertainly. “Look here.” He unrolled another bolt and bunched it up. He stood on a chair and held it over the window. “See? It’s not so bad.”

Liz made a face. Before she could comment, we heard yelping. Grant’s chubby corgi, Gus, had wandered into the wedding planning and gotten

tangled in the netting.

I cursed as I tried to detangle the dog. Then Wes's daughter toddled over and got stuck in the net as well and started to wail.

"We better get it together before the wedding," Wes said.



AFTER WORKING with the event space managers, we finally configured the reception area into something respectable. Then I helped them set up for the ceremony outside. There were two hours until the wedding ceremony, and Brea and her friends still hadn't arrived.

A horrible thought struck me. What if Brea wasn't going to come? What if she didn't want to marry me, and she was currently running away to Oregon with a hipster? I had noticed the last couple of nights that as soon as she thought I was asleep, she left our bed. Had she fallen out of love with me? Had I just not noticed? Had I done something wrong? Maybe I had been making other bad decisions like the bird netting that she hadn't said anything about that she was just saving up to use as excuses to leave.

I felt sick when I envisioned Brea leaving me alone at the altar.

BREA

“This is a disaster!” Ivy hissed to me when I arrived at the Schmidt-Keller wedding with the new and improved cat bridesmaid outfit. It was early in the morning, and the wedding was in shambles. The bride was screaming unintelligibly at the groom. The flowers had been scattered all over the floor, and several chairs had been tipped over.

“Where is the cat?” I asked, holding up the garment.

Just then, a large, fat cat, moving too quickly for her size, careened around the intimate venue space, the bride running after her. Something whizzed past my head, and the cat howled, changed direction, and came toward me, claws bared. I cursed and hopped onto a chair.

“As you can see, the bridesmaid is chasing the ring bearer,” Ivy said grimly as a large macaw fluttered up to the rafters. He was wearing a little tuxedo festooned in sequins. The cat, hissing and spitting, jumped up on the chair next to me.

“You’re the wedding planners. What are we paying you for? You have to get the bird down!” the bride insisted.

That was easier said than done.

“I have my own wedding to get to,” I reminded Ivy.

“I know,” Ivy hissed back, “but the sooner we get the bird, the sooner we get this wedding shit show on the road.”

But the bird didn’t want to come down. Even after we put away the cat and had the groom, the bird’s owner, cajole and offer treats, the macaw wouldn’t come down from the rafters.

“I’m not getting married if the bird isn’t in the wedding party,” the groom

insisted. “This bird has been with me since I was eight years old. He was in all of my previous weddings.”

I could tell Ivy was resisting the urge to facepalm.

There was more commotion as the cat, bedecked in her new bridesmaid garment, tore back into the venue. The bird, seeming to get a second wind, dove off the rafters to dive-bomb the cat, and the two tangled in a flurry of lace, shrieks, and sequins.

The bride and groom pried the animals apart. Neither seemed worse for the wear. However, their outfits were trashed.

“Please fix these!” the couple begged me.

I was supposed to be at the country club, getting ready. But instead I gritted my teeth and took out my needle and thread.



“THAT WASN’T SO BAD!” Ivy said as she accompanied me to New Cardiff. The historic country club did look beautiful when we drove up.

My dads were fluttering around in the bridal suite when I arrived. “Brea!” Todd exclaimed. “You’re supposed to be married in twenty minutes.”

“Yikes.” Beau sniffed. “You smell like a barn.”

I scrubbed off as best as I could in the bathroom. Then I threw on a robe and rushed through hair and makeup.

“I’m not sure we have time to do this elaborate updo that we were planning,” the stylist said.

“It’s fine,” I told her, checking the clock on the wall. “I changed the style of the dress anyway. Just something light and breezy.”

Screeech! Crunch!

“What the—” I turned my head quickly, my hair yanking on the curling iron it was wrapped around. I yelped, my head smarting. The pain was quickly forgotten, though, because my dress was on the floor, being eaten by a Roomba.

“No, Harriett!” my father snapped at the robot. “Don’t eat Brea’s dress.” He grabbed hold of the dress to pull it out of the vacuum’s rollers.

Riiiiipp!

“Oh shit.” I winced.

Normally I made my dresses sturdy enough to withstand the apocalypse.

It was a point of pride. I wanted my dresses to be able to be passed down through multiple generations. But that had not happened with my own wedding dress, because I was a walking disaster and had pieced it together with caffeine and prayers.

“Oh, Brea. I’m so sorry!” My dad started to cry.

“It’s fine,” I assured him, walking over to inspect the dress as the hair stylist tried desperately to do something with my wet curls.

The dress was somewhat salvageable, though the front right panels were missing. I couldn’t even sew the strips of fabric back on, because there were Roomba tire marks all over them.

I quickly sewed the dress back together as much as possible. The stylist really did try her best. My hair was up in a topknot, decorated with miniature roses and an antique hair comb.

The stylist looked sad.

“It looks great! Honestly, this is how I normally wear my hair. There is something nice about looking like yourself on your wedding day.”

A smear of makeup and half a container of brownie dream coffee, and I was ready! I was pumped! I was going to be Mrs. Holbrook!

The clock chimed. “Aaaand I’m officially late to my own wedding.”

I raced down the stairs, landing hard on my heel.

Snap!

“Seriously?” I yelled.

The heel of my shoe had broken clean off.

“Fine. We are going au naturel,” I said, kicking off my shoes.

There were pained yelps as Beowulf came careening toward me, trailing yards and yards of bird netting.

“I could have used that earlier,” I mused. I jumped out of the way as the dog ran past me and out the double doors leading out to the wedding ceremony and my future husband.

MARK

There was chaos at the other end of the aisle, but all I could see was Brea. She'd come! Relief burst through me—and then confusion as not Brea but Beowulf limped down the aisle, wrapped in the bird netting.

“Fuck, I wish I'd just bought it online and paid expedited shipping,” I said to Grant.

My voice was louder than I'd meant it to be, and at the other end of the aisle, Brea giggled.

My heart soared. She looked stunning. Fresh-faced, her hair up in a high bun, it was similar to how she usually wore it, just with a few extra flowers. She looked exactly like the woman I had fallen in love with. And her dress was something else—sexy and a bit sweet, flowy, with a slit halfway up her thigh that gave me a hint of her bare legs as she walked down the aisle to disentangle Beowulf.

Wes's daughter ran after her. She was the flower girl and was taking her job very seriously. “Wait, wait, Brea. Bad! I go first!” she scolded my soon-to-be wife. She threw flower petals at her as Brea disentangled the dog.

Then Brea took Aspen Marie by the hand, grabbed the dog's collar in the other hand, and skipped down the aisle.

I could not stop smiling when I saw her. She handed Aspen Marie to Liz, and Beowulf collapsed, panting, at my feet as the ceremony started.

As the officiant spoke, all I could think about was how much I loved Brea.

“Brea,” I said when it was time for the vows, “I must admit, a part of me was afraid you wouldn't show up today. You are a perfect woman—caring,

creative, with a great sense of humor. I'm still shocked that you want anything to do with me. I consider myself the luckiest man in the world."

"Mark," Brea said, smiling up at me, "I have to admit I almost didn't make it." She grinned. "I'm glad you love me, because I don't think anyone else could appreciate the craziness that is my life. I had another wedding this morning where I was basically wrangling animals. Then a Roomba ate my dress, and my shoe broke. I clearly don't have it together enough to plan my own wedding. Though we do have alcohol!" she said to the audience with a wink. "So I did have the second-most-important thing down. But Mark, you are the most important. Even if we were married in a dumpster surrounded by raccoons, it would be the perfect wedding for me, because I would be marrying you."

I laughed. "My cousins are basically raccoons," I told her.

"Hey!" Grant piped up.

I kissed her passionately when the officiant gave the word, then we were married. Finally and forever.



"I CAN'T BELIEVE I actually made it," Brea said after we danced our first dance and the guests were happily eating the delicious food. My wife was drinking some sort of syrupy ice-cream-and-alcohol concoction that she had insisted on serving.

"Did you seriously double-book the wedding?" I asked as we greeted the well-wishers.

"Oh my God, I don't even know how that happened!" Brea groaned.

"How about if you don't say anything about the bird netting, I'll forget all about the double-booking."

Brea giggled. "I really could have used that earlier when we had to get that parrot. Also, remind me to never adopt a bird, even if I think it's cute."

"Noted."

My grandfather came up with Ida.

"You want me to toss the bouquet to you?" Brea joked to the older woman.

"Don't waste your flowers on me, missy. I'm still young," Ida declared. "I need to play the field."

“Wow,” Harris said, taken aback.

I laughed. “Getting a taste of your own medicine, huh, Granddad?”

“You’re lucky I like you,” my grandfather scolded playfully.

“Food for the happy couple,” Elsie offered, handing us plates.

“Yum!”

“Good. Anything to make her stop drinking that sugar concoction,” I said, plucking the glass out of Brea’s hand.

“I would complain, but this mac ’n cheese is so good.”

“I hope you planned somewhere nice for the honeymoon,” my mom said, coming up with Jack. “He didn’t tell me what he was planning, Brea, so if it’s terrible, don’t blame me. I tried.”

“You did plan something, didn’t you?” my father asked.

“Of course I did.”

“Where are we going?” Brea asked.

“It’s a surprise.”

BREA

The plane to take us on our honeymoon was waiting on the tarmac when the limo pulled up. This wasn't one of those small Gulfstream jets; this was a custom 747, designed to hold more than four hundred people. But today, it would just be transporting Mark, me, and the crew.

As soon as the plane was in the air, Mark unbuckled his seat belt and pulled me into a private suite of rooms in the tail of the plane.

I collapsed onto the sofa. "God, that wedding! I will never plan another wedding again. We should just elope for our next one."

"Already tapping out, Brea?" Mark stood over me, smug and smiling. "We haven't even started the honeymoon."

I tapped the sofa loudly, making it known that I was a wuss and didn't care who knew it.

"I haven't even taken off my wedding dress. I was going to change into my special lingerie for our wedding night. But I just have my boring undergarments on."

"Nothing you wear next to your tits and your pussy is boring," Mark growled.

He was on top of me in a flash. The sofa was broad, but there wasn't a whole lot of room for the two of us. His hands were already on me, exploring my body. The goose bumps were already forming up and down my flesh. I nibbled on my lip in anticipation for what was to come, ready for him to do his thing and properly blow my mind, just like he always did.

He grabbed hold of the dress to pull it off of me.

Riiiippppp!

“Oh shit!” Mark looked mortified.

I laughed. “It’s already been ripped once,” I told him, kissing his nose. “The Roomba got there first!”

“Well then, in that case...”

He ripped the dress the rest of the way, exposing my skin to the slightly cool air. Then Mark tossed off his own clothes too, ready to present his hot, naked self for me, all raring and ready to go on command.

I supposed when Mark wanted something, little things like fabric weren’t going to get in the way of him fully indulging in his drug of choice—me.

His fingers poked into my slit, stroking my clit, stroking my pussy, getting the fire really cooking. I yearned for everything he could do to me. My hands slipped down his bare body, enjoying his firm muscles, which he had kept strong ever since I’d first felt them.

And of course, he was always prepared with a condom. If I didn’t beat him to it, he was rolling it on himself with never a protest, never a struggle. Sexy, thoughtful, and mature, he was everything a woman could ever want out of a man.

Though a part of me did want to go without. We were married after all.

He guided himself in, giving me that surge of bliss I enjoyed ever so often. He was my man, my lover, my cock, utterly devoted to pleasing me and giving me everything I could ever ask for.

“I’m never going to get sick of you, babe. I could fuck you every day for the rest of my life.”

“Then do it.”

“I specifically took this plane so we would have an actual bedroom and, you know, fuck on a bed. Yet here we are on the couch. Guess we’ll have to try the bed next,” he said with a sly grin.

We melded fully into one another. My legs folded around him, urging him deeper. I wanted to feel all of him, and his hands all over me felt much the same. We both wanted to learn one another and please each other.

This was what soul mates truly were.

We were guiding one another to another fine climax, another divine orgasm. Every little bit of it all, every little touch of our flesh against the other’s, from my arms around the back of his neck to his hands on my ass to my breasts pinned against his hard pecs fed the intensity. All of it was wonderful.

All of him thrusting in and out of me, me screaming for him, all of it was

serene, and all of it was powerful.

Mine. Always mine. Forever mine.

Blissfully, orgasmically, climactically mine.

Those highest of highs would only get higher. The flood of bliss all over my body, and hearing those subtle groans of his as he smashed in me—it was all simply perfection.

“Fucking love you, Brea.”

“I love you too,” I whispered and kissed him.

“So what are we going to name it?” I said after I caught my breath.

“What?”

“The baby we are going to make on our romantic, Instagram-worthy honeymoon!” I giggled.

Mark’s eyes widened. “Well, we’re going to Iceland, so it’s not the romantic honeymoon beach vacation you might have expected,” Mark admitted.

“Are you kidding me? Iceland is even better—hot tubs, wilderness, wood fires...the mountain man aesthetic really turns me on! You in flannel? Yum! You know, maybe we should make it an airplane baby instead!”

MARRIAGE

IN A



Second



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Chris plans a wedding and discovers just how hard it is! This is a 4500 word short story that takes place after *Marriage in a Minute*. It is given away for free to mailinglist subscribers.

GRACE

“I’m surprised you’re not more stressed out,” Ivy remarked when she came into the office that morning. “Usually the day before her wedding, a bride is super-duper high-strung.”

“It’s a vow renewal, hardly anything to be worked up about,” I replied, looking up from my laptop. “Besides, it’s going to be super small and low-key.”

“Are we still doing barbecue?” Sophie asked.

I shrugged. “Chris is planning it.”

“You haven’t had any input at all?” Brea asked me. “What if he messes up?”

“How hard could it possibly be?”

“Wedding planning is a lot more difficult than people think,” Ivy said, “as we all know.”

“But this is your last chance to have a big, huge, blowout wedding,” Amy insisted.

“I know! I feel like we wasted a marketing opportunity,” Ivy said. “You could have done another viral article about the wedding planner who plans her own wedding.”

“And neglects her work to do so,” I said tartly.

“We could have squeezed in another wedding,” Ivy said stubbornly.

“Only if we did it in the middle of the day on a Tuesday,” I said. “As it is, we’re doing it in the dead of winter so that we don’t encroach on any other bride’s big day.”

“But you don’t even get the big poofy dress,” Brea complained.

“You’re making me a very nice white cocktail dress,” I reminded her.

“But I want a big poofy skirt!” Brea flopped dramatically on the couch.

“You’d think she’d be tired of wedding dresses at this point in life,” Elsie mused.

“Never!” Brea declared.

I shook my head, turning back to my photo editing. I had one more set to finish for our last bride. The few weeks after Christmas were our off-season before the weddings picked back up again.

I cropped the photo I was working on. The bride was in her one-of-a-kind ball gown, backdropped by the heavy timber of the converted industrial warehouse, which was strung with fairy lights and huge bouquets of white-and-red flowers. It was magical and similar to the type of wedding I had always secretly imagined myself having.

Stop being ungrateful, I chastised myself. You have a wonderful husband, a puppy, and fantastic friends. You don’t need a huge, fancy wedding.

Besides, Chris and I had talked about it and mutually agreed that a small, intimate vow-renewal ceremony made the most sense. Otherwise, there would be all the confusion about who would be invited and where we would have it. And then I would have to plan it because, while I dearly loved Chris, I had very low expectations of his wedding planning ability.

No, a big wedding would be a terrible idea. It wasn’t us.

But I still sort of wanted one.

CHRIS

“**O**peration cake topper is a go,” I announced over the penthouse intercom system the minute the doorman told me that Grace had climbed into her town car to go to her office for work.

Gran hustled out of her bedroom, carrying rolls of paper, swatches of ribbon and lace, and photos of flower bouquets. She set them out on the long dining room table while I set out our containers of wedding planning supplies.

“Grace is going to be so surprised when our intimate vow renewal turns into the big blowout wedding of the year!” I crowed.

Lulu, our little Dachshund, barked in agreement.

“And,” I reminded her, “your flower girl outfit is arriving today!”

“I already have Zeus’s tux ironed and steamed and ready to go. Now just remember,” Gran instructed the parrot, “don’t eat the wedding rings!”

“Okay,” I said, running my finger down the wedding checklist I had printed off of the internet. “Flowers, ordered. We have catering covered, thanks to Antonio. We have alcohol.”

“Very important!” Gran added.

“Yep. And you have the cake covered?”

“My friend is making a super amazing cake!” the old woman said, giving me a thumbs-up.

“Cool. See? Wedding planning isn’t that hard,” I said, folding up the list. “I have an intimate dinner planned for two tonight, and I already have the honeymoon booked. We’re going to Vienna.”

“Gonna give Grace some of that wiener schnitzel,” Gran said. “I like it.

Me and the girls will be down at the venue decorating all evening. You and Grace can get it on all over the penthouse!”

I smirked, thinking about the fantastic evening I had planned. Grace had been busy with weddings lately, and I was looking forward to spending time with her.

“But first, party favors.”

I had tagged along with Grace to enough high-society weddings that I knew the drill. All the weddings had a goodie bag with booze, snacks, and little knickknacks with the couple’s initials on them.

I wasn’t exactly sure where the Weddings in the City company sourced all those items, and I hadn’t wanted to ask them because then they would jump in and start planning it. Then Grace would find out, and it wouldn’t be a surprise. So I had asked the Svensson brothers to help me source the party favors. Of course, that meant that the delivery was somehow late.

“Eric,” I said, when he picked up. “Where are the party favors?”

“Okay, so look, dude,” Eric began. “I didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but—”

“Give me the phone,” his brother, Greg, demanded in the background. “Honestly, what were you thinking?”

“Hi, Greg,” I said. “So party favors?”

Greg made an irritated noise. “Apparently there has been a strike at the Svensson brothers’ sweatshop.”

“I want pizza!” one of Eric and Josh’s much-younger brothers shouted in the background.

“They farmed my wedding favors out to your little brothers?”

“There was a mix-up,” Josh said urgently. “The kids were only supposed to stuff the bags. Remy thought that they were doing all the gifts. And so he didn’t put in the order with his craftsmen.”

“And the solution to that problem,” Greg said, voice slightly muffled, “is not to have our little brothers up working all night.”

“Look, I have to go,” Eric said. “Josh and I will be there in the morning.”

“I don’t have any wedding favors!”

“We’re going to work it out!” Eric promised me. “Don’t worry.”

“Crap. What am I going to do?”

“Those Svensson brothers are very attractive,” Gran commented, “but not all that organized.”

“I can’t not have a party favor.” I ran a hand through my hair.

“I got you, fam.” Gran fist-bumped me. “We are going shopping.”



THE MALL WAS PACKED when Gran and I arrived.

Lulu had separation anxiety and also a propensity for chewing the furniture, so I had her in a little dog carrier. The parrot was wearing his emotional support animal vest and was flapping his wings happily on Gran’s shoulder.

“These are cute,” Gran said, pointing to a glass penguin knickknack.

“That’s way too random,” I complained.

“You don’t have any options, buddy. Plus, you already promised Grace you were making lasagna. Clock is ticking.”

“Fine,” I said, waving a saleslady over.

“Hi. Ma’am, we need five hundred and fifty of these little glass penguins. Individually gift wrapped and put in a small sack. And add in one of those boxes of chocolate you always have at the cash register. Chocolate is a good wedding favor, right?”

The saleswoman glared at me.

“Sir, we are a place of business and do not have time for pranks.”

“I assure you, ma’am,” I said, putting on my best serious businessman face, “I have a wedding I’m putting on tomorrow, and I need party favors to hand out.”

“And your fiancée and her wedding planner asked you to do this?” she asked, her expression communicating she highly doubted that.

“Er...my wife doesn’t know about the wedding, and I’m the wedding planner,” I explained.

“We do not have five hundred and fifty of those items in stock,” she informed me.

“Do you have five hundred and fifty of anything?” I begged.

“I suggest you try the home goods department on level one,” the woman replied.

The salesguy downstairs was much more helpful.

“You have literally made my week,” he said, shaking my hand. “I was so going to get fired. I was only supposed to put in an order for five of these lava lamps, but I have fat fingers and ordered five fifty-five.”

“Can you gift wrap?” I asked him.
“Absolutely!”



THE GIFT WRAPPING WAS slow going.

“Sorry,” the guy said as he wrapped the third of five-hundred-something lava lamps extremely slowly. “This is only my second week on the job, and I’m really not cut out for retail.”

I checked my watch.

“Also”—he gave me an apologetic look—“I think we’re all out of normal wrapping paper. Is Christmas okay?”



WE LEFT hours later after I had begged and pleaded for the other sales associates to come help wrap. Even Gran and I joined in. Some of the packages, mainly mine, looked a little strange, but I now had party favors.

“Almost there,” I told Gran when the town car dropped us off at the tower.

“Roger!” Gran said, saluting me. “I’ll see you at the ceremony at oh eight hundred tomorrow!”

This is fine. Everything is going to be fine. So the party favors weren’t that great, but it was the thought that counted, right?

Now I was going to cook my intimate lasagna rehearsal dinner for two.

Lulu yipped.

“Okay, three,” I told her, “but no garlic for dogs. I’ll make you your own plain dish.”

I went into the kitchen, washed my hands, then read the recipe I’d printed out.

I looked down at the little dog dancing at my feet.

“First, we make the sauce.”



“WHY IS LASAGNA SO FREAKING HARD?” I complained. My pasta was rubbery. I had forgotten to defrost the ground beef and had instead thrown the whole thing in with the sausage and the whole tomatoes into the pot.

“That doesn’t look right,” I decided, staring into the pot. Instead of thick, meaty sauce, it looked like soup.

“I think I did something wrong. Maybe we need to purée it,” I said to the dog.

She wagged her tail at me.

“Yeah, I bet it gets puréed. Now, where is the Vitamix? I think I know how to use this thing,” I said, pouring my soupy tomato-and-meat water into the blender. I clapped the lid on and hit the high button.

“Shit! Shit!” I shouted as sauce sprayed all over me, the dog, and the kitchen.

“Take cover!” I yelled to the dog. I threw myself on the floor and felt around on the counter to turn off the blender.

“Bad idea,” I muttered. “Terrible idea.”

There was sauce everywhere. And what’s more, Grace would be home in an hour.

“I need to have something for her,” I said, panicking. I opened the freezer, looking for the extra hamburger. Maybe I could make sloppy joes.

“Who am I kidding? I can’t cook! I should have ordered in.”

I went to toss the hamburger back in the freezer, and then I saw it. A red box that said “Stouffers.”

GRACE

The penthouse smelled amazing when I arrived. It was also suspiciously clean.

“Hi.” Chris wrapped me in his strong arms and kissed me. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you!” I grinned back at him. “Ready for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? What, uh...is there to be ready for?” he asked, sounding slightly panicked.

“Our vow-renewal ceremony,” I reminded him.

He gave me a blank look.

“I know it’s just a small thing after work,” I said only half-jokingly, “but you should have remembered.”

“Oh, right.” He nodded. “Ha ha, yeah, just had a lot going on today with...er, work.”

“That was nice of you to make this delicious meal,” I told him. I reached up to wipe away a little streak of flour that was on his forehead.

He scowled and then rubbed the spot with his sleeve, looking grumpily adorable. Time to lighten the mood.

“You have something here.” Stepping into his space, I brushed at a non-existent particle on his chin. “And here.” I leaned in, teasing his earlobe with my teeth.

He huffed out a breath, but his hands came around to land right on my ass. As I nibbled and sucked on the lobe, he squeezed, bringing me flush against him. This close, I could feel the stir of his arousal coming to life.

With sudden strength, he lifted me under my legs. I laughed, bracing

myself against his shoulders. Chris turned and placed me on the counter, heedless of the flour.

Then he stepped in between my legs and kissed me. My lips parted, and I murmured happily around the sweep of his tongue. His hand trailed up my inner thigh, up my skirt. His fingers pushed my panties to the side, and I shivered against him. I loved how he knew exactly how to touch me. Some pressure on my clit, but not too much. And when he fingered me...

“Oh,” I gasped as he shifted and slid the first digit in. Chris kissed me again, flicking in and out of my pussy in slow arousing torture.

I pulled at his shirt, opening buttons so I could rub my hand up the muscled length of his chest. He was so broad, so well-built... above and below.

Speaking of his dick, I wanted it in me, yesterday.

As Chris kissed down my neck, I unbuckled his belt and reached in for the prize. He was hard. I stroked him as he stroked me, biting back a moan as he added a finger and crooked upwards.

“Condom. Right pocket,” he said in my ear.

Since his hands were currently occupied—one cupping a breast the other making my pussy quiver, I reached for the pocket. It was hard to concentrate, but I was able to grab the condom before his pants puddled to the floor.

“Hurry,” I panted, pushing it into his hand. “I need you.”

He didn’t make me wait for long. After rolling it on, he stepped forward and grabbed my ass to tilt me at the right angle.

I groaned anew as he pushed his cock in. Looping my arms around his shoulders, my legs around his waist, I clung on.

It was hard, fast, and dirty. Just what I wanted. Warmth and pleasure pooled inside me with his every thrust.

Chris picked up speed, pounding into me with abandon. Tightening my legs, I rode him, desperate for every sensation he would give me. I was so close I could taste it. I came with a cry, a whole universe of stars dancing behind my eyes.

“Shit!” I gasped. “I guess we earned that lasagna.”

Chris gave me a sloppy kiss while I adjusted my clothes and drank the rest of my wine as my skin cooled.

“So did Antonio give you his recipe?” I asked Chris, reaching for the wine bottle. He took it first and topped me up. A piece of paper fluttered out of his pocket.

“I got it!” he practically shouted as I reached for it.

I was a little taken aback. Why was he being so weird? Chris crumpled up the note and stuck it in his pocket.

I cleared my throat. “Eric and Josh are coming to the vow renewal?”

“Yep,” he said. It felt awkward, even though we had just been super intimate the moment before.

“I have the restaurant reservations made,” he added.

Good.

Chris looked down at his glass.

“Should be pretty straightforward,” he said.

“Yep!” I chirped. “It’s going to be perfect. Super small, low stress, not a ton of people. Barbeque and then bed.”

He gave me an odd look.

“You sure you didn’t want a big wedding?”

Was he testing me?

“Nope,” I said. “Never ever.”

“Oh.”

I crossed my arms. Was he still suspicious of me, after all this time?

The timer dinged, and he grabbed the lasagna out of the oven. I grabbed a piece of string off my shirt and went to throw it in the trash. A familiar red box peeked out.

I narrowed my eyes then wrapped my arms around Chris and laughed.

“Using an old family recipe?” I teased, feeling slightly more relaxed.

“Lasagna is hard,” Chris admitted, taking off the oven mitts.

I snorted.

“I’m so glad that was all you were worried about!” I admitted.

“As opposed to what?” He tilted his head in confusion.

“I thought you might be having second thoughts about the vow renewal,” I admitted.

“Absolutely not!” he insisted. “I love you. I cannot wait to be married to you—again.”

“Just a vow renewal,” I corrected, “no big dress, no big cake.” Unfortunately, a part of me was sort of regretting I wouldn’t have that. “I love you, Chris,” I said to remind him and myself that that was enough.

Chris kissed me. “Tomorrow is going to be the best day ever.”

CHRIS

“It’s horrible!” Eric said, running to me when I arrived at the venue the next morning.

“What?” I asked. “Flood, pigeons?”

“The flowers,” Eric said.

“I received a text that they were delivered thirty minutes ago,” I told him, taking out my phone.

“Yeah,” Josh said, “but that’s just it—it’s crates and crates of flowers. They aren’t arranged or anything.”

“Shit. Okay, just pivot. We’ll just have to put them together ourselves,” I said, thinking quickly. “Can’t be that hard, right?”

It looked like half of the botanical garden was in boxes in the middle of the venue.

“What were the flower arrangements supposed to look like?” Eric asked me.

I showed him pictures on my phone.

“Dude, we need to scale that way down.”



IN THE END, I sent out Eric to purchase as many glass vases as he could find, then we stuffed flowers in them.

“The bouquet!” Josh said suddenly. “We need to make a bouquet for Grace.”

“Damn it.”

I ran around, grabbing one of each flower from the table decorations and wrapping them with some ribbon.

“Done. What’s next?” I walked around the venue. “Décor is up. Food is being set up. Flowers are done...”

“And we have the gifts!” Josh said, coming back into the venue, trailed by dozens of his younger brothers dragging pallets of brightly colored boxes behind them.

“Guess we didn’t need all those lava lamps,” Gran said.

“I’m actually surprised you brought something,” I said, looking in a box then struggling not to curse in front of the children.

“Rice Krispies treats?”

“We have all different flavors,” Eric said magnanimously.

“And,” Josh said, lowering his voice, “we managed to make them with a hidden pocket of booze in the middle.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I said faintly.

“We have normal ones for the kids,” Eric assured me.

“We can’t have two party favors,” I said, looking around at the piles of mismatched gifts.

Gran shrugged. “I’ve seen weddings where there is a big take-home gift then smaller gifts at the tables. These baked goodies could be table gifts.”

“And,” Eric said, “if the cake doesn’t show up, then these can be used instead.”

“Where is the cake?” I asked in a panic.

Gran shrugged. “I can’t get in touch with the gal who’s supposed to be bringing it. She may be at another event. But she promised the cake would be here by six for the dinner.”

I took a deep breath then checked my watch. Grace would be here any minute.

“I can go to Costco and buy a cake,” Eric offered.

“Too late,” I said. “Everyone put a bag at each seat, and then it’s time to get married!”

GRACE

“Time to get married!” Brea sang happily, pulling out my dress.

It was a lacy cocktail dress with a sweetheart neckline and off-the-shoulder sleeves. The whole thing had a vintage fifties-inspired look.

“You look amazing!” Brea said as I admired myself in the mirror after putting it on.

Ivy frowned. “It looks like a reception dress, not a wedding dress.”

I burst into tears.

“Oh, no!” Sophie cried, hugging me. “I thought you wanted the vow renewal.”

“I wanted a big wedding because I’m secretly a spoiled five-year-old,” I wailed.

“You should have told me! I would have organized the best dang wedding ever,” Ivy said, joining the hug.

I sniffled. “I’m just being a brat. This will be fine. We’ll have barbecue.”

“Yes, barbecue!” Brea said. “But you know what would make it better? If you could have a vow renewal in a big ball gown.”

“I don’t have a ball gown.” I wiped my nose.

“Hold on!” Brea yelled, running upstairs. She came back down with a voluminous overskirt and tied it around me with a flourish.

“Ta-da! Now you look like a bride!”

“This is so extra!” Elsie said with a laugh.

“It’s Grace’s second wedding day,” Ivy said, delighted. “We have to be extra!”

“Besides,” Amy said, “it will go amazing with the tiara of flowers I made for you.”

“Amy,” Ivy said, “I thought you weren’t going to...”

“It’s not going to look seventies,” Amy protested, taking out a delicate tiara of tiny pink roses woven with gold thread and delicate greenery. She carefully pinned it on my head.

“You look amazing, dahling!”

My friends applauded then went downstairs to the waiting limo.

“Champagne?” Ivy offered, pouring it out for us. “To the best bride ever!”

“And if you want a big wedding,” Elsie said, “we can totally host another one. This can be your intimate vow-renewal ceremony, then next year you can tell everyone you’re having a wedding for real!”

“Seems excessive,” I mused, sipping on my champagne.

“Everyone loves a wedding,” Ivy assured me. “Especially if it’s local. People can just come, drink, and have a good time!”

But when we arrived at the venue, all my friends and I went silent in shock.

“Looks like someone’s already having a wedding,” Sophie said as we watched the crowd of people stream into the converted warehouse while the limo waited to pull to the side entrance.

“We rented the smaller ceremony space,” I said, checking my notes. “But I don’t think the other wedding should be too much of an issue. I won’t have that many people attending.”

“I wonder who their wedding planner is,” Elsie said, frowning, as we all stepped out of the limo once it pulled around the corner.

“I know, right?” Amy joked. “Did you see those flowers? My word!”

“Grace!” Gran called when we were inside the building. I was walking down the hall, holding up the overskirt so it wouldn’t drag.

“You’re early.” Her eye twitched slightly.

“Of course I’m early. I’m always early. Where’s Chris?”

“Always my punctual granddaughter,” Gran said, rocking on her feet.

“So should we get going?” I asked. “The restaurant reservation is in an hour.”

“Right this way!” She slowly turned around and practically led me down the hall in slow motion.

“You need water or anything?” she asked.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked in concern.

“Yep,” Gran said. “Just dandy.”

I looked around and frowned.

“This isn’t the right way. We rented the smaller room.” I pointed up at the directional signs. “We have to go down this other hallway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, come on.” I turned and headed down a side hallway.

“Oh shit!” Chris yelled as I smashed into him.

He looked me up and down. “Damn. You look amazing.”

“So do you!” I said, adjusting his tux.

He made a what-the-fuck face at Gran.

“Where are you going?” I asked him. “The other venue is that way.”

“Funny thing,” he said, talking fast, “actually we’re going to be in this big one because the other one is filled with pigeons.”

“Pigeons?” I said as Chris took my hand, leading me back the way we had come.

“What in the world?”

I wrenched my hand away from him.

“The big venue is too large. It wasn’t as nicely decorated as the other one. Do people even know where to go? Plus, there’s another wedding in it. I’m going to go talk to their wedding planner and find out just what’s going on.”

“Wait! Don’t!” Chris said as I threw open a door.

“Surprise!” several kids yelled as I walked in.

“Oh my God,” I moaned and backed out of the room. “You should have told me, Chris.”

He was dejected.

I immediately felt bad for snapping at him. He had, after all, just told me not to go into the venue.

“You don’t like it?” he said, crushed.

“Like what? I just walked in on someone’s wedding!” I said, horrified. “I ruined their big day.”

Chris doubled over laughing then picked me up, spun me around, and kissed me.

“It’s your wedding, silly!”

“Mine?”

I opened the door back up.

“Surprise!” the kids all yelled again. I waved to them, recognizing the

blond Svensson clan.

A wedding trio consisting of an accordion player and two bagpipers began playing “Here Comes the Bride.”

“Not yet!” Chris yelled, waving his arms, but they obviously couldn’t hear him over the cacophony.

Zeus, riding on Lulu’s back, screeched along with the glass-rattling music, tossing flower petals in front of us. I shrugged and held out my hand to Chris.

“Want to get married?”

“Always,” Chris said as we walked down the aisle.

“Dearly beloved,” Gran announced, taking her place as the officiant, “we are gathered here today to celebrate the marriage of my granddaughter and the sex-on-a-thirteen-inch-stick of her husband!”

I rolled my eyes while Chris grinned and winked at me.

“While this happy couple has already said, ‘I do,’ now they’re saying it one more time! Do you, Grace, want to keep Chris as your attractively wedded husband?”

“I do!” I said happily.

“And Chris, do you want to keep this banging busty babe as your wife?”

“Always.”

“Now kiss!” Gran shouted, throwing her papers in the air.

The bagpipes thundered while Chris kissed me passionately.

“I love you, Grace,” he whispered.

“I love you too!”

The doors banged open. The bagpipes stopped playing with a whine.

“Cake delivery for a Mrs. Grace Winchester,” a delivery man puffed, wheeling a seven-foot-tall white wedding cake into the ceremony space.

“Wow!” Chris said. “At least the cake went right.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, at least?”

“Er...just don’t look too closely at the flowers.”

I wrapped my arms around him and laughed.

“Let’s take it to the reception hall and have the best Italian food you’ve ever eaten,” Chris announced to the crowd. The bagpipes started playing again, and at that moment, the top of the cake exploded and a ninety-year-old, tanned naked woman wearing a skirt made out of bananas and nothing else sprang out of the cake in a way that made me make a mental note to be more serious about my yoga.

“Conga line!” she hollered. “Who’s ready to party!”

The bagpipes switched to upbeat seventies conga music, and several other seniors jumped out of their seats and started conga-ing around the venue.

Gran whooped, “To the reception hall! And don’t forget to grab your lava lamp before you go home this evening!”

“A lava lamp?” I said in confusion.

Chris made a face. “Wedding planning is hard.”

“Who knew?” I said with a laugh.

WEDDING



Flowers



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Amy plans a wedding. Again! This time it's her own. This is a 4700 word short story that takes place after *Flower and Financiers*. It is given away for free to mailinglist subscribers.

AMY

“**W**hy did I agree to get married at a wedding festival?” I complained to Ivy.

“Festivals are fun,” she reminded me. “You like festivals, remember? You always used to go back to Harrogate for the festivals.”

“Yes, but now that I live there full-time, it is a lot,” I admitted.

“Besides, you told us Sebastian wanted to have all your friends and family at the wedding,” Elsie added.

“And you guys are both from a very in-your-business small town,” Brea added. “Unless you eloped to a small island, your wedding was always going to be insane. And if you did elope, people in town would give you the cold-shoulder treatment, and you would probably never hear the end of it. On your gravestones, it would say, ‘Ran off, eloped, and betrayed the town.’”

“It will be fun,” Sophie cajoled me. “We’re getting so much buzz with the wedding festivals. Plus, there’s the whole reality TV show surrounding it.”

Another clue that this new iteration of the wedding festival has gotten way out of hand.

“You can’t skip the wedding. Think of those of us who do not have a rich man to buy us everything we want and also provide amazing sex,” Sophie pleaded. “Let me live vicariously through you. All I have is cake in my life. Speaking of, we are going to have your favorite! Seven-layer chocolate bliss cake with raspberry, caramel, and amaretto fillings.”

“Yum,” I said, sitting up on the couch.

“Speaking of overindulging in cake, I signed up for the bridezilla run!” Brea exclaimed, clapping. “We’re going to wear super-glam makeup, and I

sewed running outfits for us!”

She rummaged in her big sewing bag and pulled out a set of matching white spandex outfits.

My jaw dropped.

“Ooh,” Ivy said, wincing. “Too bad you only have two of them. I guess I’ll have to cheer you guys on from the sidelines.”

“Brea,” I said. Usually, my friend designed unique, award-winning wedding dresses. Every once in a while, though, she had an out-of-this-world bad idea.

These spandex wedding running outfits? Bad idea.

“It’s going to be so much fun!” she squealed.

“Brea, if we were going to be in a run, we needed to start training earlier! All I’ve been doing is stress-eating and stress-drinking.”

“There’s champagne at the run.” Brea scoffed. “No one is expecting anyone to seriously run the whole 5K.”

“It’s a 5K?” I shrieked.

“You walk that much using the subway.”

“And I just about die every time,” I reminded her. “Now I’m going to have to do all of that in front of potential clients, fellow townspeople, and all the reality TV show cameras?”

“You’ll be great,” Brea insisted. “We’ll run it together. We can pregame beforehand!”



I TRIED to pep-talk myself into feeling in the wedding spirit as I took the train back to Harrogate and back to Sebastian’s estate house. I had been spending the majority of my time in the small town and traveling into Manhattan for meetings and wedding conferences during the week. It was nice to spend more time in my hometown. I was working on expanding the greenhouses, and my grandfather, Ernest, seemed happier that I was around more.

The additional time in Harrogate also meant that I had way more contact with the local characters.

“Top of the morning!” Ida said cheerfully.

The workers were decorating the train station for the wedding festival. People had already started arriving, as the bed-and-breakfasts in town had

mandated a three-night-stay minimum.

Many people were also carrying miniature dachshunds, for some reason.

“I had this killer idea,” Ida continued, talking a mile a minute. “We at the festival committee wanted to surprise you.”

My eye started twitching. It had been doing that a lot lately.

“We’re hosting a dog run—to be more specific, a wiener dog run—today!” Ida said, extending her arms.

“Why?” I asked, hoping I didn’t sound hysterical. “Don’t we have enough going on?”

“We have to keep the tourists amused,” Ida said, grabbing me by the arm and hauling me toward the town square. “It’s all wiener themed. You know, like a town-wide bachelorette party. Weiner dogs, wiener hotdogs, wiener dildos.”

“Lord, help us.”

“Now this is partly your own doing, missy. I wanted to have a nice family-friendly event where we burned the bridal effigies. However, someone was concerned about burning down the gazebo. Even though she had promised we were supposed to burn them on Halloween.”

“Harrogate could not afford the extra overtime for the fire department,” I said. Now both eyes were twitching. I did not want to have that argument again. I had hoped the effigies would disappear or be forgotten, but unfortunately, they had their own Facebook group.

“Fine, but you can’t blame us. We had to do something to keep it interesting!”

SEBASTIAN

Amy's text message sounded unhinged. It was full of misspellings and random emojis.

I peered at it.

"I'm not sure what this says," I finally admitted.

Hunter looked up from his laptop and took my phone. He read the text message and frowned. "Maybe she was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?" I started to panic.

"Or it's about the wiener-dog race."

"I didn't hear about that," I said in confusion.

I had been at a conference and just arrived back in town. I felt bad for leaving Amy alone, but she had assured me she had everything under control. Now I wasn't so sure that was true.

"Meg thought it would be cute. And she wants Maleficent to be in the competition."

On the floor at Hunter's feet, a small, chubby wiener dog with long golden hair napped.

"I can't believe you all adopted a dog," I said.

"Meg wanted the baby to have a dog friend. I didn't want a dog, so we compromised and got the dog. My brothers got to name her."

Maleficent seemed to know we were talking about her. She woke up and yawned.

Hunter's phone went off.

"Meg says it's time for Maleficent to show everyone what she's made of."



THE OTHER DOGS in the wiener-dog race seemed to have a bit more fighting spirit than Maleficent, who looked around, confused, in Hunter's arms.

Amy seemed to have a similar look when I found her.

She had a finger pressed under her eye and was furiously sipping a coffee slushy from a large Styrofoam container.

"I need to let go of the things I cannot control," she muttered.

I leaned in and kissed her. "Hey."

"Hi!" She smiled up at me.

"Ready to be married?"

She paused for a moment then opened her mouth. But Alfie and the Svensson brothers raced by before she could speak.

"Hi, Amy! We're trying to get good spots. Do you have your bet in?"

"No gambling." I frowned at him.

"They're gambling with candy. Don't worry," Meg, hugely pregnant, explained, waving at us.

"I could use some candy." Amy gave a thousand-yard stare over the crowd.

"Aren't they all adorable?" Meg squealed as all the little wiener dogs wandered around the town square. "It was a last-minute addition, Amy. I hope you don't mind. But this event is going to be so cute on the Harrogate Instagram account."

Hunter brought their dog over to her.

"There's my big, bad dog," Meg gushed. "And big, bad husband."

The little dog in Hunter's arms yipped.

"You want a dog, Amy?" I asked, petting Maleficent.

My fiancée's eye started twitching.

"The race is about to start!" Meg said happily.

Hunter held out a hand to balance her as she walked up the stairs onto the stage, but Meg batted him away.

"I'm just trying to help."

"Trust me. As soon as the baby comes, I'm handing it to you, and then I'm going on a vacation! You'll be helping more than you want to!"

"Hmm."

Hunter handed me the dog while Amy went to talk to Meg.

"Just go put her at the other end of the track," he said, shaking a bag of

hot dog pieces at Maleficent, who wagged her tail. “Then when the whistle blows, I’ll call her, and she’ll run.”

The little wiener dogs all lined up in a cute little line. Meg and Amy watched from the flower-draped stage, which made a pretty picture. That was, until Meg banged the gong, and all hell broke loose.

“Go! Go!” I yelled to Maleficent.

She took off running then got excited by all the other dogs, took a sharp right, and started chasing them. The other dogs, sensing a game, took off all over the town square.

“For dogs with very short legs, they do seem to run fast, don’t they?” Meg said into the microphone.

I looked out in horror as all the dogs raced around on the town square.

People were trying to chase after their pets. The animals thought it was an awesome game and waited just until their owners were a few feet away then took off at a sprint. Then Hunter threw gasoline on the fire by ordering his younger brothers to catch Maleficent.

“No,” Hunter said as his little brother brought a dog to him. “That is not Meg’s dog. Go put that animal back where you found it.”

“And I think we have the birth of another Harrogate tradition, haha! Get it? *Birth*, because I’m eight months pregnant, and I am so ready to be done,” Meg said over the loudspeaker.

While people chased the dogs, I went to one of the food stalls and bought two corn dogs.

“It seems like there are enough people running after the dogs,” I said to Amy when I climbed onto the stage next to her.

“Yeah,” she replied and took a somewhat robotic bite of the corn dog.

I was concerned.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Sure.”

But she didn’t sound like it. I was worried. What if she didn’t actually want to be married?

AMY

I felt bad that I hadn't been bubblier at the wiener-dog race.

Sebastian seemed to be having a good time. At least, he had been until I acted like a sad sack and ruined the evening.

"You're marrying the man of your dreams, and your whole small town is trying to make the event nice for you," I scolded myself as I carted the wedding planning supplies I'd brought with me back to Harrogate. My own wedding wasn't the only one I was planning that summer. "Shape up!"

But while I wanted a wedding, I just didn't want so much of it.

You didn't even really have a dream wedding in mind. You just wanted to roll out of bed, go to the courtroom, eat pizza, then go to work. You need to stop being such a weirdo.

Sebastian rubbed my back. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," I assured him, giving him a kiss. "Just probably need a nap."

"I might have a way to relax you. You're so tense." His fingers found my shoulders and dug into muscles hardened by stress.

With a groan, I tilted my head back and gave him as much access as he needed for a massage. "In addition to planning the wedding festival, I also have my normal ten thousand weddings. We had a meeting earlier today. The bride has changed the color of her dress three times! Three! And not from eggshell to cream to pearl. No. Now she wants a midnight-black gown. Now I am going to have to switch all the flowers, and she will probably change her mind again and—"

He stopped me with a light kiss on my neck.

"And...what was I talking about?" I asked.

“You need a distraction.”

With that, Sebastian stepped in front of me, grabbed under my ass, and hoisted me onto the counter. I squeaked in surprise, but in the next moment, he was kissing the life out of me.

“Oh my, Sebastian. In front of the children's decorations.”

“To hell with these decorations.” His hands cupped my large breasts, thumbs tracing over my nipples. I sighed in his mouth and widened my legs, allowing him to step in closer.

One hand squeezed my knee, and I tried to keep my grin to myself as it traced upward.

He paused as the tips of his fingers brushed against my bare pussy.

“You're not wearing panties?” His breath was hot over my lips.

I grinned at him. “I was hoping my gallant husband-to-be would come and de-stress me—oh!”

Sebastian's fingers found my clit with the ease of long practice. I spread wider for him, arms looped around his shoulders to suck at his neck.

He stroked me for a few moments for the pure torture of it. We both knew that I could be ready for him in a flash. After all that time, Sebastian still pushed every single button I had.

My hand drifted to his fly. After unzipping, I reached in to pull out his cock, which was hard and ready for me.

“Got a condom?” I asked.

“Back pocket.”

I might have groped him a little in getting it. Sebastian flashed me a grin and took no time at all rolling the condom on.

Then with my bottom at the edge of the countertop and my legs wrapped around his waist, he pushed into me.

I closed my eyes, luxuriating in the feel of him and how deep he filled me. Sebastian set an unhurried pace, rolling his hips in and out as if we had all the time in the world. As if I didn't have the pressure of the wedding bearing down on me.

“You're thinking again,” he murmured and punctuated his words with a hard thrust that had me seeing stars. “Stop.”

“Yes, sir.” I slapped playfully at his shoulder.

With another smile, his tempo increased, and within a few moments, I was thinking nothing at all other than “God, yes!” and “More!”

Sebastian took me to the top. I peaked with a cry, and he worked me on

the way back down. He came with a low grunt, shivering slightly in pleasure as he spilled into me.

When he pulled out, I made a face and reached behind me, tilting to the side.

A sad white roll of streamers sat squished. I hadn't even realized I'd been sitting on it.

"Well," Sebastian said, "good thing the bride chose a different color."



"ARE you sure you're okay with the wedding?" Sebastian asked me later that night when we were in his luxurious master suite. There was a bottle of champagne chilling, and I was planning a repeat of earlier.

"I absolutely want to marry you," I assured him.

"You just didn't want the festival," he added.

"The festival is fine." I waved a hand. "Twenty years from now, we'll look back and have amazing memories."

"We could elope," my fiancé offered.

"The town would burn effigies in our names annually if we did that," I replied, flopping down on the bed. "Besides, I promised Brea I would be in the bridezilla race tomorrow morning. I have to wear a spandex suit."

"Sexy," Sebastian purred.

"I'm going to look like a pierogi," I warned him.

He opened up the bottle of champagne. "Sounds like my kind of race."



"THE PREGAMING WAS A BAD IDEA," Brea croaked at me very early Friday morning. She and my friends had clearly been drinking on the train.

I was in even worse shape. I had terrible sleep habits, unlike my fiancé. I had stayed up late after Sebastian fell asleep, drinking and getting last-minute wedding planning done.

I was bloated in my white spandex romper, which somehow made my tits look flat and gave me a gut like the Grinch. The little white tutu didn't help matters, and I was sure I was going to break an ankle in the heels I was wearing.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ivy asked in concern.

“It’s going to be fun,” Brea insisted as Sophie smeared zombie makeup onto our faces.

The other women in the race had come to win. They were wearing white Lululemon yoga pants, they walked in their heels like they were used to sprinting after taxis in them, and none of them looked like they had been engaging in early morning drinking.

“We’re going to get hosed,” I said.

“It’s all about having fun!” Elsie said.

Brea and I took our places.

“Go, Amy!” Alfie and Sebastian cheered.

I did some light stretching, and my back seized.

“Ugh, I think I threw something out,” I groaned, doubling over.

“We could quit,” Brea said desperately.

I looked over at Alfie and Sebastian and their homemade signs.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t want the memories of my wedding weekend to be of me being grouchy and quitting and not fun.

We’re going to have a better attitude.

“We totally have this.”

Meg banged the gong, and the women around us took off sprinting in a sea of white.

“It’s a whole 5K,” Brea huffed as she and I did a wobble-jog after the group of runners. “Why are they sprinting?”

We managed about five steps before I caught the heel of the stiletto on a pebble and almost fell onto my ass.

“Shit!” I cursed as Brea grabbed me.

“Maybe we’re going to be walking this bad boy,” she said. “See? There are some people walking.”

Behind us came a group of seniors in matching white velour tracksuits and heels, powerwalking along the race path.

“Heel toe, heel toe,” Ida instructed. “You can do it!”

“Backs straight, hips forward, girls!” Dottie added.

“My feet hurt,” Brea complained as we hobbled after them.

“At least there’s food.”

Along the route, people handed out champagne and mini cupcakes.

I took a chocolate cupcake and a glass of champagne and continued to hobble along the route. “I’m getting blisters.”

“My toes hurt.” Brea gasped.

“I’m not made for walking in heels. I’m made for sitting and possibly standing in heels,” I added, wincing as I almost twisted my ankle. We had reduced our speed to a half-hearted shuffle.

“I promise if I make it through this race,” my friend said, wheezing, “I will only wear tennis shoes. Not cute ones, either, but those orthopedic tennis shoes.”

“And,” Meg said into the microphone, “it looks like all of our racers are in except Brea and Amy! Let’s cheer them along.”

“You can do it!” an elderly woman on a walker decorated with flowers cheered as she kept pace with us as Brea and I clung to each other and dragged ourselves to the finish line. “Not much farther! If I can do it, you can do it!”

Finally, we crossed the finish line and collapsed in a heap on the grass.

“I need to start exercising,” I said, wheezing at the sky.

A shadow fell over me, and a bemused Sebastian looked down at me. “I guess we’ll have to up the intensity of our bedroom activities.”

SEBASTIAN

Amy was more chipper as the afternoon went on, and it was almost time for the rehearsal dinner.

“I can’t wait to be married to you,” I told her and kissed her as she lounged in a hot bath. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she murmured. “Also, wedding resolution—I am definitely going to exercise more. Not just horseback riding or other riding, but I am totally going to get my workout on!”

“You’re going to get up every morning and go running with me?” I asked.

“Whoa. Whoa. Let’s not be hasty,” she said, “I might go for a walk a few times a week and maybe lift some weights while I’m watching trashy reality TV.”

I laughed. Then my face went serious. “Are you sure you want to get married at the wedding festival? We could just postpone it then have a normal wedding. We can tell everyone you suffered a high-heel-running related injury.”

Amy giggled. “It will be fine. There will be cake, and we get to ride the train.”

“It’s your wedding day. It should be more than fine,” I countered.

“And it’s your wedding day, too, and you should be happy. You seemed gung ho about the wedding festival,” she said, poking me with a wet finger.

I shrugged. “It feels nice to have people who care so much about you. I certainly haven’t heard from what’s left of my family in over a year.”

“Yeah,” she said. “But the wedding festival is also a town-wide

entertainment event.”

“We can—”

“Yes, I know, but at the end of the day, if I’m totally fine with a civil ceremony and brunch, then a wedding festival is nice too. I just want to be married and spend the rest of my life with you!”

Though Amy kept saying it was fine, I still wanted her to have the wedding she wanted. And I had an idea on how to do that. I just hoped it wasn’t a terrible decision.



THE SVENSSONS’ backyard was packed when Amy and I walked onto the terrace to cheers.

She was wearing a short, lacy white dress and white Converse, and I had on one of my more casual gray suits. We filled up our plates with drinks and appetizers, then we walked around, chatting with people from town. When the cocktail hour was over, Hunter banged on a glass.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming today and celebrating the newest sacrificial couple to the wedding festival.”

Meg laughed.

Amy groaned.

“The man of honor, Sebastian, wanted to say a few words before dinner.”

I took the microphone. “Amy,” I said, “you have certainly changed my life in a good way. I didn’t know you could cram so many plants into a house until you showed up. I love your zest for life, your love for your town, and your love for me and Alfie. It was always important to me that whoever I loved and chose to spend the rest of my life with embraced a more flexible notion of family. You treat everyone in this town like your family, and you have such a caring heart. There is no one I’d rather spend the rest of my life with, and I’m so happy that all our friends and family can be with us for the occasion.”

She blew me a kiss.

“One of the main things about you, Amy, is that sometimes you make terrible decisions. I hope you think that I’m the best decision you’ve ever made. And I also hope I don’t regret making what also may be a bad decision.”

I took a box out of my pocket.

“Amy, will you marry me?” I asked solemnly.

She gave me a confused look. “I am already marrying you,” she called. “There’s a whole festival about it. Did you miss the memo?”

“No,” I said. “I mean, marry me right now.”

“Here?”

“Why not?” I countered.

“I mean—” She looked around. “I don’t have my flowers.”

Alfie handed her a corn dog.

“Alfie...”

Amy grinned. “Hell yeah, this is perfect!”

She trooped up to the stage. “Meg?”

“I love a wedding!” She finished off her own corn dog. “We have gathered here to eat and drink, but now we will watch these two people marry. Amy, do you take Sebastian to be your husband?” Meg handed Amy a ring.

“I do!” my almost-wife said happily and put the ring onto my finger.

“Sebastian, do you take Amy as your wife?” Meg asked, her hands resting on her pregnant belly.

“I do.” I slipped the ring onto Amy’s finger, where it sparkled next to the engagement ring.

“Awesome! By the power vested in me as mayor of Harrogate, I now pronounce you married! Kiss yo’ bride!”

I kissed Amy, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I love you. I love you. I love you,” she said.

“I love you more,” I told her.

“Best wedding ever!” she said happily.

“Who’s going to be married at the wedding festival?” I asked as Amy finished off her corn dog.

Meg gave me a look. “What part of sacrificial wedding couple did you not understand?”

“But we can’t be married twice,” I protested.

“Don’t argue with the pregnant lady,” Amy said mildly.

AMY

“I actually don’t mind being married twice,” I said as Brea helped me into my big ball gown, which was much nicer than the spandex running outfit. “You know me. I love weddings!”

“And now you get twice the cake and twice the food!”

“And twice the post-wedding sex!” I waggled my eyebrows.

“You’re a blushing bride! Keep those impure thoughts to yourself!”

“And Sebastian went out and bought you yet another ring,” Elsie said, shaking her head.

“Yeah,” I replied, “but he said it was a fun ring.”

Once I was dressed, my friends helped me down to the lobby. We were getting married in the town square. It was bigger than the Broughton estate, and more people could watch.

Volunteers held open the big double doors of city hall as I marched out with a pack of the kids from the town as my wedding entourage.

I was having a full-on Meghan Markle moment with a big flower arch framing the entry, and I wore a long, flowing veil as I carefully made my way down the wide stone steps and across the street to the gazebo in the town square, where Sebastian waited.

“I’m getting a bit of *déjà vu*,” he murmured and leaned in to kiss me.

We said our vows again, and I cried. Though I had said I wanted a small wedding, and the previous day had been fun, spontaneous, and nice, there was a certain sense of gravitas to the occasion with tens of thousands of people watching.

When Sebastian said, “I do,” again, he slipped a sparkling ring onto my

finger.

I gazed at it. The design was of a horse surrounded by flowers. It was huge and sparkly and looked expensive.

“This is hideous,” I whispered to him. “I love it!”

“It was supposed to be a birthday present, but what the hell.” He shrugged.

“You may now kiss the bride! Again,” Meg said as my husband swept me up in his arms.

The crowd cheered, and the Harrogate bagpipe club played an extremely loud rendition of their version of the wedding march as Sebastian and I made our way to the train.

We waved to the crowd as the train took us up and down Main Street while the kids threw flowers out of the train car. One kid almost fell out, and Hunter bellowed out of the window at his brothers.

“I feel like a princess!” I said happily as I tossed flowers out to the crowd.

“You look like it,” Sebastian said.

“Why did I think I wouldn’t love a festival?” I asked when the train let us off back at the town square for the festival reception.

Sophie had a giant cake waiting for me, and all the townspeople and our friends congratulated us. Then I proceeded to eat and drink my weight in cake and champagne.

“This was a beautiful wedding!” Ida told me, giving me a hug. “You know what would make it better? A good old-fashioned small-town effigy burning.”

“You know what, Ida?” I said, feeling the small-town spirit. “Go ahead and burn the effigies! Sebastian can pay for the fire department overtime.”

Sebastian frowned at me. “That sounds like a terrible decision.”

“Welcome to my world!” I said happily.



LATER THAT EVENING, as the burning effigies toppled over and lit the town gazebo on fire and the fire department sprayed water on the flames, I leaned against Sebastian.

“In hindsight,” I said, “that was a terrible decision.”

“Never change, Amy,” Sebastian said and kissed me on the top of my

head.

“If you’re married to me,” I replied, “I can’t promise bad decisions won’t happen on occasion, but loving you is the best worst decision I’ve ever made!”

WEEKENDS

AND

W's
Wedding
Cake



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Sophie and Wolf get married. Again! This is a short story that takes place after *Pastries and Proposals*. It is given away for free to mailinglist subscribers.

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SOPHIE

“You seem awfully calm for someone getting married tomorrow,” Ivy remarked when she came into the café kitchen.

I tossed her the tube of icing and climbed down the ladder. “I feel like at this point in my career, I can put on a dream wedding for the ages hungover, with one hand tied behind my back,” I joked.

“The cake looks amazing,” Grace gushed as she and Amy took in the glorious shrine to sugar and carbs.

My dream wedding cake was six feet tall, not including the cake topper, and only needed a few more finishing touches.

“We wanted to go over the last-minute details with you,” Elsie said as we all trooped back into the café. It was late in the afternoon, and there weren’t many people there.

We took a table in the corner, and Ivy spread out the large binder that she had filled with my dream wedding plan. I put out a platter of pastries and took a cheese-and-strawberry-filled treat.

“I added two more people to the invite list,” I admitted.

“Sophie,” she sighed.

“At least we’re not doing a formal sit-down dinner,” Elsie said.

“See? The more the merrier.” I took a bite of my food.

“You can’t keep adding people,” Amy told me. “You already have over six hundred people coming to the wedding.”

“But I have all this cake. Plus, a whole dessert table for people who don’t want cake.”

“No more guests. Next order of business: did you ever get that extra-

special surprise gift for Wolf?” Ivy asked.

I grimaced. “Crawford is being cagey about it.”

“I can make one out of *papier-mâché*,” Brea said confidently.

“And that’s a no,” Ivy replied. “Next order of business: catering.”

Elsie swallowed a bit of her pastry and wiped her hands. “Since you’re the bride and will be busy in the morning, we need to get the cake over to the Van de Berg estate tonight,” she told me.

“I’m not done,” I protested.

“You’re done,” Brea said firmly. “The cake looks amazing. And you can’t be messing after today. Tomorrow morning is my time to shine with dress, hair, and makeup.”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “I’ll have the cake over there.”

“I’ll help you load it up,” Elsie offered.

“I can manage,” I said.



It was midnight by the time I had the finishing touches on the cake. I was getting tons of texts from my friends about getting the freaking cake done and delivered, but you couldn’t rush perfection.

I had decided that the Van de Berg crest wasn’t big enough and had opted to redo it, then I wanted to redo the design of the estate on another tier. Finally, I was done.

“Magnificent!” I crowed.

I wiped my hands then began to carefully maneuver the cake to the exit and to the truck. I wasn’t an idiot, and this was not my first rodeo. The cake was designed to travel in pieces, which would be assembled at the venue.

I blasted the radio as I drove down the dark highway to the Van de Berg estate, where I would be marrying Wolf for the second time. The estate was dark, and I let myself in the back way. I wheeled the first two-thirds of the cake into the kitchen and set them, perched on their carts, in the large walk-in cooler. The last three tiers, I carried carefully down the ramp into the large stone kitchen.

There was a snuffling noise and hooved feet on the stone floor.

“Arnold!” I called out happily as I maneuvered around all of Elsie’s catering equipment piled in the kitchen.

“Are you ready to be the best ring bearer ev—ahh!” I ran into Arnold, losing my balance.

The pig, to his credit, did try to catch me. Unfortunately, that made the situation worse.

I felt myself teetering on the floor as I tried to balance the cake.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” I steadied it.

“Oh my god.” My heart was pounding, and my arms were trembling. I needed a drink. This was too much for me. “That would have been terrible if I’d dropped the—”

Ring! My phone blared from my pocket. As I jumped in surprise, the cake flew up then dropped all over the floor.

“Fuuuucckkk.” I stood there in shock, staring at the cake. I slowly answered the phone. “Hello?”

Arnold was rapidly cleaning up all of the cake off the floor—the wedding cake that I had spent the last week on, that had three different flavors of cake, plus handmade fillings, plus a hundred hours of decoration.

The pig burped. My eye twitched.

“This isn’t happening. This is a nightmare, and this isn’t happening to me. Nope, not at all.”

“Sophie?” the man on the phone said in a drawl.

“Yes, Crawford,” I hissed out through gritted teeth.

“I think I found it. A man in DC knows a guy. Meeting with them now, then I’ll be heading your way.”

“Great,” I said, trying not to sound too angry.

“I’m feeling good about this lead,” Crawford assured me.

I did not have a good feeling about Crawford’s life prospects. I was friends with the trash guys. I bet they’d do me a good turn. I pressed a finger to my eye.

“I need you here tonight.”

“You will have me in the morning.”

There were footsteps in the hallway, and Wolf called out, “Arnold?”

I covered the phone receiver with my hand. “He’s coming! I have to go!”

WOLF

I knew a wedding was a lot of work. So I supposed I should have known that Sophie was going to be baking up until the final hour. Still, I would have thought she would have had her friends to help her.

I'd barely seen her at all the week leading up to the wedding. Not to mention when she was with me, she always seemed preoccupied, like her mind was elsewhere.

I wondered if she was having second thoughts. Maybe the shine of marrying someone again whom she'd only just met was wearing off.

Sure, we had continued to live together over the eighteen months leading up to this insane wedding extravaganza. But most people would be proposing about now in their relationship timeline, not about to get married. But to me, even though she was technically my fiancée, I had never stopped considering her my wife. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

Maybe Sophie was wishing she had explored other options before committing. She certainly didn't seem all that happy to see me when I surprised her in the kitchen.

"Who was that?" I asked her, pulling her to me for a kiss.

"Hm? Oh, er, just, um, just one of the servers. He was confused about the schedule." She smiled at me, but her expression seemed tense. She had her arms crossed, her phone tight in one hand. Her face was partially in shadow.

I desperately wanted to ask her if she actually wanted to do it, if she actually wanted to marry me. Better to know now than five years from now and end up like my parents.

"Sophie," I began.

“Hm?” She reached out and squeezed me lightly.

I loved her so much. What if I asked and she said she wanted to call it off? This might be the last time I saw her. I hugged her, squeezing her smaller, softer body against my own. I never wanted to let her go.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” she asked.

“Are you ready?” I asked her. “Do you have everything together?”

I leaned back and tipped her face up to mine. There was that pained smile again. My heart thudded in my chest.

“Everything is totally a hundred percent under control. Tomorrow’s going to be amazing. And tonight’s going to be even better,” she purred, sliding her hand across my belt.

She does want me; she’s just stressed about the wedding, I scolded myself as I led her through the massive corridors of the estate and upstairs to the bedroom.

Her phone went off right as we walked through the door. She tensed.

What the hell was going on?

SOPHIE

Wolf could not under any circumstances know about the cake fiasco. And yes, it was a fiasco. This whole wedding was a fiasco.

Crawford kept texting me with pictures, and I was trying to hide them from Wolf so the surprise wouldn't be ruined. At the same time, I needed to figure out what the hell I was going to do about the cake—the cake that was now sitting in the tummy of a very sugar-high pig.

In a normal wedding, I would just pull out the extra wedding cake and make three new tiers. The ruined cake was the smaller tiers. I could have pulled it together easily... except I didn't have any emergency cake.

I rarely had to use the emergency wedding cake for the actual wedding and not just as a quick fix for a bottom-of-the-barrel wedding. Not to mention, I had been so pressed for time, and it was my own wedding, so I'd thought, "What the hell? Let's live on the edge."

Terrible idea. Terrible, terrible idea.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Wolf asked, tone slightly sharp.

I needed to throw him off. I couldn't let him know I had ruined our wedding cake because I was lazy!

I grinned at him and lifted my shirt over my head, tossing it away with a flourish. Now he was focused only on me. I unhooked my bra and tossed it onto the bed.

Wolf growled in approval and reached down to cup my tits, using his thumbs to trace the outlines of my nipples.

"I need you," I told him huskily. "Wolf, I want you bad."

"Not that I'm complaining..." And by the way he played with my tits,

complaints were not on his mind. “But I have the feeling that there's something else to this request...”

I growled something under my breath that was certainly not approval. “I’ve been thinking about my husband’s cock all day,” I said. “Are you going to give me your dick or not?”

His answer was to bend down and kiss me, hard. The type of claiming, rough kiss that made me tingle from the inside out. The type that made me want to melt into a puddle on the floor. It wasn't just a kiss. It was a promise.

His hands on my breasts became rougher, squeezing and pressing them together. I moaned, pulling him close so that our bodies were flush to one another. I could feel his erection poking into me. I cupped it and did a little playing of my own.

The next thing I knew, he had turned me around and pushed me to the bed. I landed with a laugh, and he settled next to me, climbing over me and kissing me hard. He roughly pulled down my pants and palmed my pussy through the soaking wet panties. I wriggled out of them.

While he was distracted by my body, I pulled him onto the bed. I climbed onto him, straddling his lap, my bare knees on either side of his hips. I ripped at his shirt, sending buttons flying.

“You *do* want it,” he said, amused, but the possessive way that he grabbed my hips told me that he wanted it too. What he didn’t know was that I didn't just want his cock. I intended to give him a workout.

After all, I needed him sated and sleepy so I could sneak out to fix the wedding cake. It was the perfect plan: one with a happy ending.

In answer, I opened the fly of his pants. Wolf finally decided to stop playing around and helped me remove the last of his clothing.

He scrambled for the condom, which was left on the nightstand. The moment it was rolled on, I positioned myself over his shaft and sank down on him in one smooth glide.

Throwing back my head, I moaned in pleasure. Yes, I had ulterior motives, but I was going to enjoy myself. And I did. Flexing my thighs, I rose and fell on him, gradually picking up speed.

Wolf was never content to just lie there. He moved with me, thrusting up into me, his hands returning to my tits to play. We built up a rhythm, but I wanted more. He did too. With a growl, he shifted to flip me over so I was in a new position—on my hands and knees. Then he entered me from behind.

“Wolf...” I cried, victorious, my spine arching with the pleasure.

Wolf was all but pounding into my pussy now, and I loved every moment of it. I was close now, and I could tell by his frenzied thrusts that he was getting there too.

“Come on, baby,” I urged, wanting him to really tire himself out. “Give it to me.”

One of his hands tangled in the hair in the back of my head for leverage, and he did just as I asked. I reveled in every forceful thrust. He knew exactly how to hit my sweet spot, and when he did with a series of short, sharp thrusts... I was gone. I tipped over the edge and orgasmed, pleasure washing up through me.

Wolf kept on going for a little bit, and I made sure to milk him along the way, tightening my muscles and giving him all the sensation he needed. Then, with a groan, he came deep into me.

When he slumped down, well and truly tired, next to me, I knew that my plan had been a success.

I brushed the hair off his face and lay there, mentally planning out down to the minute how I was going to get all that cake baked, filled, and decorated in time to be back at the Van de Berg estate by seven in the morning, when my friends were going to arrive. We all needed to make sure everything was set up.

Wolf’s breathing was slow and steady. I slid out from under the covers, grabbed my clothes, and pulled them on in the hallway. Then I ran outside to my car and headed back to my café, praying that my wedding didn’t turn into an epic disaster.

WOLF

I felt sick as I watched Sophie carefully cross the dark turnaround in front of the mansion.

Who left their future husband's bed on the night before their wedding? At first, I thought maybe she had just gone down to check on the wedding preparations. But now she was getting in her truck and leaving.

Why? Where? After I saw her truck head down the road, I pulled on my jacket and snuck to my car.

"You should just let her go and call off the wedding," I told myself. "That's the rational thing to do."

But I couldn't just let her go. I had to know why she was leaving me—and who she was leaving me for.

"It was whoever she was texting and talking to on her phone," I told myself as I flew down the highway.

Sophie was heading to Manhattan. Did the man she was meeting live there?

I trailed her truck, staying a few cars behind. Why was she going to her café? I felt like puking. That was why she had had all those late nights at the café. She must have been meeting him there.

I parked in the alley across the street from her shop and watched her look around then sneak inside. I sat there in my car as the traffic zoomed past me, my head resting on the steering wheel.

What was I going to do? Sophie was done with me. I didn't want to be without her. I couldn't.

"You don't know that," I reminded myself. "You are just being paranoid

and crazy. Sophie would never do that to you. Go home.”

But I couldn't make myself turn the car back on. I sat there for an hour, my mind spinning, until another car pulled up in front of the café, and a tall, blond man climbed out carrying a large, long case.

What the fuck?

I was right. It was true. She had another man. She didn't love me. I loved her, and it was meaningless to her. And I hated the man who had taken her from me.

Jaw clenched, I wrenched the car door open and stormed across the street into her café. When I pushed open the door to the kitchen, Sophie was cooling a freshly baked cake with a portable fan while the man—I recognized him as one of Hunter's brothers—was pacing around in front of the table.

“What the fuck are you doing with my wife?” I roared.

The man swore.

Sophie screamed and dropped the fan. It landed on the cake and started spewing up crumbs everywhere while Sophie shrieked, “Turn it off! Turn it off!”

I pulled the cord out of the wall, then there was deafening silence.

Sophie sank to her knees in front of the ruined cake.

“Just fill it with icing. No one will notice,” the man said, flicking crumbs off his jacket.

“No one will notice? Are you fucking kidding me, Crawford?” Sophie screeched at him. “You show up here with half a sword, wanting payment and travel reimbursement for a private jet, and then you tell me to fill a giant fucking hole in my wedding cake with frosting? Get the fuck out of my bakery.”

“I want my payment,” he said stubbornly. “We had an agreement. I'm sure you don't let people stiff you after you bake them a cake.”

“No, because I'm smart enough to get a down payment.”

I looked between the two of them as they squabbled. They didn't seem like they were lovers.

“So you don't want this?” Crawford shook the bag at her.

“What is that? What is going on here?” I demanded.

The man opened his mouth.

“Don't you dare ruin the surprise, Crawford,” Sophie scolded.

“I've had enough surprises, thank you very much,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

Sophie threw up her hands. “God save me from this wedding.”

“Paris is nice this time of year,” Crawford said to her. “You could just elope.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Sophie huffed as she went over to a drawer, pulled out a stack of cash, and slapped it in Crawford’s hands.

“This was not the payment, but,” he said when Sophie reached for a nearby spatula, “I’ll waive the rest of my fee if I can fill up a box with as many baked goods as possible.”

“Sure, why not?”

Crawford saluted her, handed her the package, grabbed one of the large white cardboard boxes, and ambled out into the café.

Sophie slumped on the floor. “The wedding is ruined.” Then she started crying.

“Did he hurt you?” I snarled, grabbing her.

“No.” She sniffled. “He was supposed to get a surprise for you.” She unzipped the case and took out part of a mangled sword.

“It’s one of your family’s swords. It has the crest and everything. And it looks like someone stuck it down a garbage disposal.”

I took it from her.

“And Arnold ate the cake.”

“That’s not like him. He’s usually a very well-behaved pig,” I said soothingly.

“I dropped it on the floor!” she wailed.

“Ah. So you had to go get your emergency cake?” I asked, petting her hair, which was also covered in cake.

“No, because I didn’t have any, and I needed to bake some, but I have to get dressed in a few hours.” She wiped her nose. “This is going to be the worst wedding ever. No one is ever going to ask me to bake them a cake again. I wanted it to be nice, for us to actually have a nice wedding. And it’s all ruined.”

I leaned in to kiss her. “Nothing’s ruined. I’m still going to marry the woman that I love, and that’s all I care about.” I kissed her again.

“Just forget about the cake.” I slid my hand up her shirt, making her moan. “We’ll just spend the night—well, the morning before our wedding how we want to.”

She stroked my face. “I love you, Wolf, and you are on my top-five-favorite-things-in-the-world list, but the cake is missing the top three tiers

and looks like a sad attempt at a fifth-grade volcano. It needs to be finished.”

“Then,” I said, swinging her up to her feet, “we’ll bake a wedding cake.”
I grabbed an apron. “How do we start?”

Sophie smiled at me. “I love you.”

I kissed her again. “I love you too. And I love the half of the sword. And half of the cake.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m never going to live this down.”

“We can handle it,” I said confidently. “How hard can it be? It’s just the three smallest tiers, right?”

SOPHIE

“So it’s done.”

“Yep,” I said, looking at the cake. “Not my best work. Not by a long shot.”

Wolf pulled out his phone and snapped a photo of us in front of the cake.

“I’ll have this printed and put by the cake. Then everyone will know that it’s my fault,” he offered.

I sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have invited so many people. They’re all going to witness my shame.”



Wolf was as handsome as ever as I walked down the aisle of flowers in the English gardens of the Van de Berg estate. Wolf smiled at me as I walked toward him.

Arnold trotted in front of me in the bow tie and the little basket with the rings in his mouth.

My father had decided not to come, which honestly, the less drama the better. I’d already had enough of it, and now I was about to marry the man of my dreams. Again!

Wolf kissed me as soon as I was standing in front of him.

“You’re supposed to wait until I say so,” the officiant joked.

“Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt,” I replied.

“I like your sword,” I mouthed at Wolf as the officiant began the ceremony.

He had the ancestral sword at his side, and the broken blade gleamed in the sun. He made it look hot.

“Had the butler polish it,” he whispered in my ear.

“I meant your other sword.”

His eyes widened slightly.

“Ahem,” the officiant said.

Arnold nudged my side.

Wolf took the rings from him and handed me one of the boxes.

“I think these vows are supposed to go something like, ‘Blah, blah, I loved you from the moment I saw you, but truth be told, I despised you.’” I grinned.

Wolf smiled and shook his head.

“Fortunately for you,” I added, “I have a short memory and low standards. I love you, Wolf, and I’m the luckiest woman in Manhattan!”

Wolf took my hands. “Sophie, I have a long memory and very high standards, and you are everything I have ever wanted in a wife, a partner, and the love of my life. And,” he added, “I didn’t despise you the moment I saw you.”

“Yes, you did,” I countered.

“No,” he corrected. “I thought you looked hot with cake all over your—” His eyes flicked down to my chest.

There were titters in the audience.

“I love you, Sophie,” he said as he slid the ring on my finger.

“I love you too.”

He leaned in to kiss me deeply.

After waiting a moment, the officiant said, “You may now kiss the bride.”

Wolf picked me up and swung me around. “We’re married again.”

The string quartet played a classical version of a pop tune as we walked down the aisle while people applauded.

“Is this everything you dreamed of for a wedding?” Wolf asked me.

“Depends on how that cake fared,” I deadpanned.

Wolf laughed. “If there’s any left at the end, maybe you can smear it all over your tits and let me lick it off as we fly in one of my private jets on our way to the honeymoon.”

“Now that sounds like the perfect start to a marriage!”

CUPCAKES

AND

Save

the

Dates



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA
JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

In which Elsie goes for round two, and Ryan tries to make sure his family doesn't ruin her wedding day. Again. This is a short story that takes place after *Marriage and Mimosas*. It is given away for free to mailinglist subscribers

ELSIE

“**Y**ou got done earlier than I was expecting,” Ryan remarked when he pulled up in front of the country club in his pickup truck.

I tossed the garbage bag full of ruined clothes in the truck bed, climbed in the cab, and let out a long sigh.

“Tough wedding?” He leaned over to kiss me. “You taste amazing.”

“It’s because I got hit in the face with a pie.”

Ryan was clearly struggling not to laugh.

“That sounds traumatizing but also ...” He leaned over to kiss me again. “If I’m not mistaken, was it key lime pie?”

“Yes,” I grumbled. “Seriously, it was one of the worst weddings I’ve had to work in a long time. Because of the ensuing food fight, there are no leftovers. They went *World War Z* all over my kitchen. I had to chase people out with a knife. The groom tripped over one of the bride’s great-aunts and broke his nose.”

“Was that the ambulance I passed?”

“I think that was for the bride’s great-uncle, who might have had a heart attack or might have drunk too much. Who knows? The cake is ruined, not that the bride wanted it after she found out the truth about the groom.”

“Dare I ask?”

“Who,” I exploded, “gets married to someone they only met a few months ago? I mean, what did the bride expect was going to happen? She met this guy at a party and decided they were completely in love, and she couldn’t live without him. Friends and family are like, ‘What the hell? You need to take, like, three steps back and maybe get to know this guy.’ The bride was

incensed. Every single meeting with her, she would go on and on about how people didn't understand that they were in love."

"Well, maybe they were," Ryan said carefully.

"She was," I ranted, "but he wasn't. Turns out he wasn't her Prince Charming; he was just a bum. The bride found out the groom had a secret kid, never graduated college, was cheating on her, and was homeless."

"How did he find the time to cheat on her?"

"Well, to be fair, it was one of the bridesmaids."

"Ah."

"I'm so disgusted, I'm almost ready to not show up to the wedding on Saturday."

"You're going to ditch your sister?" Ryan joked, but his voice might have sounded a little bit tight.

"I guess not," I admitted, digging under my bra strap. There was a piece of cabbage stuck there.

My sister and I were having a joint wedding. It was the only way I could justify a Saturday wedding for myself.

"Her family spent so much money on that wedding too," I said, shaking my head. "And it all went to hell. Her sister was the one who spilled the beans, and then her father went after the groom's uncle while the bride went after her sister. Then all the guests got involved. It was bedlam."

Ryan silently took my hand.

I wondered if I should have kept the ranting to myself. I tried not to get overly enmeshed in wedding drama, but when people were throwing food at you, you were kind of involved.

I chewed on my lip, trying not to breathe too deeply. The key lime pie had gone up my nose. Sophie was in a state. I had helped her spend days carefully zesting and juicing a thousand key limes for the Kermit the Frog-themed wedding that somehow cost a shit ton of money, mainly because of the rush delivery and the fact that everything had to be custom-made because no one sold Kermit the Frog-themed wedding décor.

I looked over at Ryan, face serious in the dark.

He was paying for the whole joint wedding Molly and I were having. It, too, was costing way more than the wedding Wils and I had had, and I felt guilty. Tom insisted that Molly get whatever she wanted, and my mother had taken that and run as far as she could in her Manolo Blahniks.

I should have just had a nice wedding in the park on a Wednesday, I

thought grimly. And not make Ryan pay for it. Because Ryan hadn't been to the wedding planning meetings, and well, it was turning into a lot. And I was pretty sure he was going to be pissed.

RYAN

As soon as we got home, my fiancée immediately went into the shower. Elsie seemed stressed, and knowing she was someone who planned weddings for a living, I wasn't sure why.

Maybe she doesn't want to marry you, I told myself.

I took her dirty clothes to the laundry room and dumped them in the sink with some warm water and OxiClean. The whole place smelled like limes and whipped cream.

I hadn't ever heard her so angry about a wedding as when she was ranting about how that couple had been getting married after only knowing each other a few months. What if she was stressed because she thought it was a bad idea to marry me after a few months? I hadn't actually discussed marriage with her before the surprise proposal last summer.

Maybe she was having second thoughts. Maybe she felt like I had bullied her into it. Maybe she didn't want to share a wedding with her younger sister. Maybe I had seriously screwed up.

Cordelia was crouched on the countertop.

"Nope," I said, scooping her up before she could swan dive into the sink.

I was pretty sure Elsie hadn't managed to eat dinner in between trying to break off a fight between the factions of wedding guests. I assembled a sandwich with thick slices of smoked turkey, avocado, fresh tomato, arugula, and pesto aioli then brought it to the master bedroom.

"I made you a sandwich," I said to her, poking my head in.

She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, at her computer, multiple tabs open.

I could see the outlines of her nipples through the thin tank top, and the short boxers she wore hugged the curves of her hips.

I wanted to fuck her, but she didn't seem like she was in the mood. She hadn't really been in the mood for the past few weeks. I settled for kissing her on the cheek.

"Do you want to lie down, let me rub your back?"

"The wedding is in a few days," she said, "and there's the rehearsal dinner and reception and Sunday brunch I need to finalize. Remind me to never get married again."

"Fourth time's the charm," I joked, curling up next to her on the bed.

She gave me a wry smile.

Maybe we were okay after all, and she was just stressed.



ELSIE WAS GONE when I woke up in the morning.

Chefs kept early hours, I reminded Cordelia, who yawned and began grooming her ears.

Still, it was Sunday, and usually, the Sunday after a wedding, Elsie and I would hang out.

"Maybe she knew you had that groomsmen meeting," I decided. "Stop reading so much into it."

My groomsmen were already at the brunch table when I arrived at the restaurant. Deliha and Naomi waved at me. Tom gave me an anxious smile.

"Deliha took the train here all by herself," Naomi cooed.

"She's a real New Yorker." I ruffled her hair. "How was your sleepover?"

"Amazing! We did flower arranging."

"So wholesome." Naomi giggled nervously.

"What's going on?" I asked, looking between her and Tom.

"So the wedding's on Saturday. .."

"We have it on good authority that your mom and probably a few of the other stepmothers are going to show up in white dresses," Naomi said in a rush.

"Then they need to just be banned. Done."

"If we ban them, it's just going to spark a persecution complex, not to mention they'll probably just show up anyways and create a scene," Naomi

stated.

“Can our mother never not put herself first? This wedding needs to go perfectly. Elsie’s already completely stressed out.”

I wasn’t even officially married, and everything was already going down the toilet. I didn’t know what I was going to do about my mother.

“We can use Elsie’s wine trick,” Deliha said.

“I’m going to have people from my business there,” I said, “and board members and investors. I can’t dump wine on Mom. God, what a freaking disaster.” I massaged my temples.

“Also,” Deliha added, “not to make a bad sitch worse, but I think Angela is preggo and is going to announce it at the wedding.”



I SHOULD HAVE LISTENED to Naomi, I decided as my mother sobbed.

“How could you assume the worst of me?” my mom sniffled. “You never appreciate all I do for you. You’re always embarrassed of me.”

“No, I’m not,” I tried to argue with her. But she just wailed harder.

“Just promise me you’re not going to wear a white dress to my wedding,” I begged.

“You hate me. And I’ll wear what I have because I don’t have money for a dress.”

“For fuck’s—fine,” I said, pulling out my wallet and handing her several hundred-dollar bills. “Go buy a dress that is not white or pink or yellow or blue.”

My mom kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you, baby! Now could you, pretty please, before you leave, help me move this TV to the bedroom? I just bought a new one.”

I spent the next hour helping my mother rearrange her furniture.

Elsie: Do you want to meet for lunch? I have an hour before my next meeting.

Ryan: You have to stop meeting on Sundays.

Elsie: It’s my mother.

Ryan: I guess I can’t talk. I’m at my mother’s. Got roped into being a moving guy.

Elsie: I hope you're getting all sweaty!

My elation that she wasn't completely mad at me evaporated when I opened Mom's master bedroom closet to store an extra shelf from a bookcase.

There was a literal white wedding dress hanging inside.

"Fuck." I closed the door. "Mom," I yelled. "I see a wedding dress."

She rushed in. "I'm not going to wear it to the wedding," she cried.

"Then you won't mind if I take it with me." I opened up the closet and grabbed the garment.

The tears started falling again. "Don't trust me, don't trust your own mother, after everything I did for you."

"Fine," I relented.

"No," my mom said, crossing her arms, "just take it and leave."

I now understood why Elsie was so stressed out. Weddings were the worst.

ELSIE

We liked to have postmortems right after a wedding to make notes of anything that had gone wrong. Normally, they were excuses to pat ourselves on the back and eat leftover food and cake and drink champagne, but today's meeting had been testy.

Sophie was still mad about all the key limes.

"I just feel like we need to start charging brides an additional fee if they start throwing food."

"We can't be nickel-and-diming brides," Ivy argued. "That makes us look like penny-pinchers."

"The father of the bride is still in jail, and I don't know if they're going to be able to pay the cleaning fee," Amy added.

"Why can't the insurance pay for the cleanup?" Grace asked. "What's the point of insurance?"

"Because the bride's family caused it, the bridal insurance they bought won't cover malicious destruction," I explained. "Our policy would pay for it, then our premiums would go up."

"Just charge them a fee," Brea said, tying off a thread.

"Or," I suggested, "let's require a different bridal insurance policy as the minimum. I'll call my father and see if he can't put a policy together through Van de Berg Insurance."

Sophie slumped against me.

"I'm never going to get those key limes back."

"I didn't even get to have any of the pie," Amy complained.

"You want to grab lunch for Elsie's wedding meeting, since we have no

leftovers?” Ivy asked us.

I dragged a blanket over me.

“I don’t want to do a wedding meeting. I should have just eloped.”

“Lame,” Brea called. “This is going to be a cute wedding. Your dress looks chef’s kiss, if I do say so myself.”

“You think Ryan’s going to be upset?” I fretted.

“I made you some special wedding lingerie, and I think even if he is miffed, that will get him back in the wedding spirit.”

“I haven’t been a good fiancée,” I admitted. “I basically just complain all the time to him.”

“As long as you’re giving blow jobs,” Amy trilled.

“She’s not,” Grace said.

“You don’t know that,” I protested.

“Are you?” Ivy asked.

“Er, no. Maybe I’ll see Ryan for lunch,” I said, texting him.

“Oof.” I slumped down on the couch when he blew me off. “He’d rather stay with his mom than me. Crap. Maybe I’ll get left at the altar again. Ryan can’t stand his mother, and now I’m worse than her. How did I screw this up again?”

Ivy patted my hair.

“Brea, why don’t you hand over the bridal lingerie a little early. We cannot have another canceled wedding on our roster.”

“Molly will still get married,” I reminded her.

“I don’t want any more fights at weddings,” Sophie shrieked. “You all are going to sit there and nicely eat all the cake.”



NORMALLY RYAN and I would spend a lazy Sunday together, but he wasn’t home when I got back and hadn’t responded to my text messages.

“Shoot, maybe he is angry.” I put on the lingerie but then felt a little silly. Before I could take it off, I heard footsteps. I hastily grabbed one of his jackets.

“Oh, I thought you would still be at your wedding meeting,” Ryan said, walking into the master bedroom.

“It’s all been planned. My mother just wanted to have an audience while

she spun out,” I explained, rocking on my heels, my hands in the jacket’s pockets.

Ryan took off his jacket and set his helmet down.

“I asked Naomi to take Deliha tonight.” He looked serious.

That didn’t sound good. Maybe he was going to break up with me.

“Elsie,” he asked, eyes searching mine, “what’s wrong? You were flirty on the text message then acted like you don’t really want me around.”

“You were moving furniture with your mother and didn’t want to have lunch with me,” I shot back, on the defensive because I knew I hadn’t been a lot of fun lately. That was what Wils had complained about in the month leading up to the wedding, that I wasn’t as nice.

“I went to see my mom because you were at a wedding planning meeting. I know you want it perfect, but if a few things go wrong, the wedding will still be nice.”

“No, it has to go perfectly,” I practically shouted. “You’re spending a lot of money on it, and my company produces perfect weddings. You shouldn’t just get a crappy wedding just because I’m busy with other weddings. You have to get your money’s worth. God, I should be paying more for the wedding.”

“I’m bringing a lot of my work colleagues,” Ryan said.

“I know, and everything has to go well, and I’m afraid ...”

“This is what you do,” Ryan reminded me. “That’s why I love you, because you can tame the chaos of a wedding.”

“Just the food and drinks.”

“You mean the most important part?” He raised an eyebrow.

I managed a small smile.

“Look, Elsie,” Ryan said. “If you need more time to make sure you’re okay getting married, I’m happy to postpone it.”

“You don’t want to marry me?” I asked in a small voice, feeling the walls closing in. It was happening again.

“That wasn’t what I said,” he corrected. “I do want to marry you more than anything, but you seem to be having second thoughts.”

“I’m not; I want to marry you. I mean I want to be married to you. It’s just this wedding.” I paced around the closet. “And now I can’t act like a professional and keep it together. I’m not being nice to you at all.”

“I figure you’ll have the next four decades to make it up to me,” he said with a crooked smile.

“How about I start tonight?” I dropped the jacket and was satisfied when Ryan sucked in a breath.

He kissed me hard, running his hands over the carefully crafted lace.

I stepped away from him, leading him out to the master bedroom.

“Is that bridal lingerie?”

“We’re a full-service wedding planning company.” I struck a pose and patted myself on the back for the hunger I saw in his eyes. “It’s the same lingerie I wore back when we first got together. I wanted to give you a taste of what you’re committing to tomorrow.”

His answer was a low, appreciative growl as he closed the distance between us again. This time, I allowed it, and he swept me up into a kiss, his hands floating up and down my lightly clothed body as if he wasn’t sure what to touch next.

He could touch it all for all I cared. I couldn’t wait for tomorrow, but until then ... I could think of a few fun ways to pass the time.

Gripping the front of his shirt, I pulled him to the bed.

Ryan was all in on my idea and started undoing the zipper of his pants. I could hear the crinkle of the condom in one of his pockets.

I shouldn’t have been surprised that the man had come prepared. After all, I had known he would sneak in to see me tonight.

We fell onto the bed together, kissing before I drew away to whisper in his ear, “Are you going to take me like the last time I wore this?”

He had a good memory, my soon-to-be husband. I saw his eyes light up before he pulled away enough to start shedding his own clothes.

Soon, I was on my hands and knees, legs spread as Ryan cupped my ass from behind. His free hand came around to stroke over my pussy.

The lingerie had a very convenient open strip in the panties that he took full advantage of, stroking and fondling me.

Then, I heard him open the foil condom packet. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him roll the condom onto his big cock.

My mouth watered.

There were many benefits to marrying this man. That big cock of his and the way he knew how to wield it was definitely one of them.

He pressed in close. “Are you ready for me, wife?” he asked teasingly.

“I’m not your wife yet—oh ...” I broke off with a low groan as he pushed in.

I was used to his girth. Even though it could be intimidating, more

importantly, I was wet and ready for him.

He took me slowly, in rolling thrusts that quickly sped up as I pushed back against him, groaning, needing him.

One hand came around to fondle my breasts as he pulled me up to my knees, pressing me back against his wide chest.

The other slid down to the crotch of my panties and started fondling over my clit.

It was too much; those two points of contact and what he was doing inside of me lit my nerves on fire. I clenched down on his hard cock in a warning and released a loud, long moan. My head tipped back. "Ryan ..."

He sucked the side of my neck. "Come for me."

Gasping, loving every second, and loving this man ... I did.

"I'm going to try to relax and enjoy the day," I said more for myself than Ryan. "It will be good, right? I think I've planned for all contingencies."

"Yeah," he said, but he sounded doubtful.

Shoot, was there some looming crisis on the horizon I hadn't anticipated?

RYAN

“Can you please sit down? You’re stressing everyone out,” Tom begged as I paced around the groom’s suite.

“My mom didn’t respond to my text message about her dress.”

“I’m sure Ivy and her friends can handle it.”

“I should have just banned Mom from the wedding.”

“People will talk if you ban your own mother from the wedding,” Tom reminded me. “It will be fine.”

But when I walked into the antechamber for staging to walk down the aisle, I realized it was not going to be fine.

“Mom,” I hissed, “what in the hell?”

She was wearing a huge white ball gown, a different dress from the one I had taken from her house.

“You need to go change right now,” I snarled at her.

“I don’t have anything else to wear. All my other clothes are ruined.” She pouted.

“I gave you money to buy a dress,” I argued with my mother. “How could you do this to me? How could you do this to Elsie?”

“I have a right to wear whatever I want,” she said stubbornly.

“Then I’m not letting you participate.”

The music started playing.

“You can’t ban me,” my mom yelled. “I’m the mother of the groom.”

“I don’t care,” I snapped. “You’re not going out there.”

She ran away from me and flung open the doors to the chapel, heading down the aisle.

I caught up with her and grabbed her, certain there were going to be gasps of outrage from the audience.

Except ...

I looked out over the crowd—a sea of white.

My mother was mad. “Why is everyone wearing white to a wedding?”

It slowly dawned on me that Elsie had anticipated all of this.

“Damn, she really is good at her job.”

“You and Elsie did this to trick me.” My mother stamped her feet.

“You are more than welcome to go change,” I said dryly. “But oh, wait, you didn’t bring a change of clothes.”

At the end of the aisle was Tom with his mom, who was also in a big white dress. Tom was laughing.

I offered my mother my arm, and she pouted as I walked her down the aisle and escorted her to her seat.

The music shifted, and there were Elsie and her sister on their father’s arm. He was wearing a white suit and beaming with pride. Elsie and her sister were wearing lacy black gowns with layers of petticoats.

“Surprise!” Elsie whispered to me after her father handed her off.

I couldn’t help myself and kissed her through the veil. “I love you.”

“I love you, and I’m so excited to marry you.”

“Oh my gosh,” I heard Tom whisper to Molly, “there are broomsticks on the lace. This is so cool! You look amazing.”

“I didn’t tell you to kiss the bride yet,” the officiant complained as Tom kissed Molly.

“You better get on with it,” Darla said loudly from the audience. “I think Ryan’s about to carry off Elsie!”

ELSIE

The bells in the chapel rang as the officiant announced, “I pronounce you husband and wife and husband and wife. *Now you may kiss the brides.*”

Ryan pulled the veil over my face. He kissed me passionately.

“I can’t believe I get to do that every day for the rest of our lives.”

People threw flower petals as we exited the chapel and headed over for portraits.

“Your wedding pictures are going to look awesome,” Ryan’s sister Naomi gushed.

She gave me a hug, then we turned so Grace could take pictures.

“How did you pull this off?” Ryan asked in amazement.

“Naomi gave me a heads-up a while ago, and I’ve always wanted to pull a bait and switch on a thunder-stealing guest at a wedding. Seemed like the perfect time.”

“I’m just—I’m shocked. For someone who claims they don’t like drama, this was like a master-chess-player level of drama.”

“I knew you had several people in your family who couldn’t help themselves. I’m a wedding planner. I got this.” I slid my palms across his broad chest.

“I love you,” Ryan whispered, leaning his forehead against mine.

I grinned up at him.

“So glad we’re finally married. I love you so much, my wonderful, super-hot husband. Also, if you are really put out by the black dress, I can wear the white bridal lingerie tonight.”

His hands slipped down to caress my ass, which had never looked so

good in a dress. *Thanks, Brea!*

“This black dress is hot, but I like you in a skimpy white lace number too.”

Grace took the last picture, then Ivy started herding up to the reception hall.

“Now all that’s left is to enjoy the reception,” I said happily. “And don’t worry, I’m not going to be in the kitchen!”

Ryan’s face froze a little.

“Uh, yeah, I hope the food is okay. You can never tell at weddings sometimes if the caterer is up to snuff.” I slapped his ass.

“Hey!”



MY MOM MADE wrap-it-up motions as my dad stammered through his long speech.

“And finally,” he ended, “Elsie, I’m so proud of you and Molly, and I can’t wait to watch you start this next chapter of your lives.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I hugged him. He was a little teary-eyed.

I saw Angela, Ryan’s stepmother, start to get up from her chair, cradling her belly in an exaggerated gesture.

I took the microphone from my dad.

“We actually have one more special announcement,” I chirped. “As you all know, Ryan happily took in his little sister Deliha, and she is, I have to say, the best roommate in New York City. Not to mention, they’re so adorable with each other.”

Deliha made a heart motion with her hands.

“One of the reasons I fell in love with Ryan,” I continued, “is because of how important family is to him. Especially his siblings—full, half, step, ex-step, it doesn’t matter. They’re all family. And so it makes me very happy to give him this wonderful news.” I waved to Sophie.

She came over with an elaborately decorated two-tier cake. I took it from her.

“Ryan,” I gushed, “you’re getting a new baby sibling.”

“Whoa,” he said as I showed off the cake that read, “Congratulations, big brother!” in buttercream frosting.

I handed him a knife. “Why don’t you cut a piece? No reason we can’t kick off this reception with a little cake.”

Ryan carefully cut off a small piece to reveal the pink cake inside while people applauded.

“And it’s a little baby girl!” I said into the microphone. “Ryan, you’re an amazing big brother to your other siblings, and you’re going to be an amazing big brother to this little girl.” I kissed him.

“Angela,” I said to his stepmother, “thank you for sharing this wonderful news at our wedding. Isn’t it great when family can all support each other?”

Naomi and Tom fist-bumped beside me.

Ryan took the microphone.

“I always love when I get a new sibling, and Angela, if you decide after the kid’s not small and cute anymore that you want me to take that baby, I have plenty of room in my penthouse.”

Angela was livid, but the audience just laughed.

“Now please eat some of this wonderful food and enjoy the party!”

People were congratulating Angela, who looked like she was going to start throwing things any minute.

Ryan wrapped an arm around me then tilted my face up to kiss me.

“Remind me to never, ever get on your bad side.”

WEDDINGS

AND



Whimsy



A SHORT ROMANTIC COMEDY

ALINA JACOBS

SYNOPSIS

Taking six billionaires to a destination wedding is about as much fun as traveling with six cats in a basket. Add a wedding saboteur, and things get crazy! This is an exclusive novella found only in this bonus short story collection.

IVY

“I ’m just saying that mine’s bigger. No judgment on anyone here.”

I gritted my teeth as Elsie shot her husband, Ryan, a Look. I’d been on the receiving end of Elsie’s Looks. I knew Ryan had, too, but he just winked at her and blew her a kiss.

I hazarded a glance over my shoulder to where the significant others of my friends were sprawled in the back of Evan’s enormous plane.

There were glowers from the rest of the men. It was like traveling with six angry cats in a cardboard box.

“We had the plane packed for days,” I said, already in the desperately eager-to-please mode of a high-paid wedding planner who catered to moneyed clients. “This was more convenient.”

Evan, my beloved husband, wore a bland expression on his face. I knew he was secretly gloating, though, seeing as how we were riding in his plane to the destination wedding from hell.

Not from hell, I scolded myself. Every wedding is a beautiful start to someone’s happily ever after.

“Like she said,” Evan drawled, “the plane was already packed.”

Yeah, there was definitely a hint of smugness in that deep voice.

I shot him a look. I did not do a look like Elsie did a Look.

Are you feeling okay? he mouthed.

I turned around in my seat.

Now Elsie was giving *me* a Look.

“Don’t encourage them,” she said. “They’re just going to have to get through this like adults.”

“All the testosterone in the plane is giving me hives,” Amy whispered over the table.

Yes, Evan did have a big plane with a conference table, bar, bedroom, and other luxuries. With him and five other billionaires—and, of course, my lovely fellow wedding planners—it felt claustrophobic.

I glanced over my shoulder again.

Evan was the cat that caught the canary, baked it with a fancy French sauce, and served it on a silver platter.

Sebastian, Evan’s best friend and Amy’s husband, had a mildly amused expression and smirked at Evan when he elbowed him. Since he was best friends with Evan, he got to be smug by proxy.

Chris, Grace’s husband, was glaring at both of them. Mark, Brea’s husband, seemed downright murderous. Wolf, Sophie’s husband, was politely pretending like the rest of them didn’t exist. Only Ryan seemed dangerously amused by the whole thing. Hence the Looks from Elsie.

I checked the flight map I had running on my phone. Six hours and twenty-three minutes left.

Yay.

“We should have taken two planes,” Chris said loudly.

“That’s the first intelligent thing that’s come out of your mouth,” Mark snapped.

“Asshole. Are you going to let him talk to me like that?” Chris said to Grace.

Grace could also do a Look.

Chris withered.

“You’re free to leave,” Evan said with a smirk. “There is a parachute in the cabinet.”

“Great,” Mark Holbrook said, standing up and taking off his suit jacket.

“Fucking show-off,” Sebastian said.

I was pretty sure he was half joking. He was friends with all the Svenssons, and he and his little brother, Alfie, were practically honorary Svenssons. The Svenssons liked to rib one another.

Mark hated the Svenssons, and he hated being joked with. He was only on this plane because he had been invited as a guest on the Frost side of the wedding.

Mark turned on Sebastian.

Evan stood up to defend his best friend.

“This is a madhouse,” Wolf muttered.

Wolf Van de Berg was the current patriarch of one of the highest of the high-society American families. I was pretty sure being trapped in a flying tin can with the likes of Ryan and Chris was making his ancestors roll over in their graves.

“I think there’s some snacks, maybe some alcohol,” I offered, trying to ease the tension.

“I’ve got Benadryl in my purse,” Amy called.

“I’ll take some,” Ryan said.

“Yeah. Someone who runs a porn company is going to pop pills,” Wolf snapped.

“Don’t be jelly just because you’re an uptight, blue-blooded, repressed SOB,” Ryan said with a laugh. “Just because I’m smart enough to make easy money by preying on people’s existential fear of dying poor and alone doesn’t make me a bad person.”

“You’re the definition of a bad person,” Mark declared.

“Ah, yes, the big bad Marine, America’s finest. You definitely are able to pass judgment on the rest of us,” Evan said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Mark’s shoulder tensed, and his head lowered slightly, like he was getting ready to take a swing.

The motion was subtle, blink-and-you’d-miss-it, unless, of course, you were a wedding planner and had to constantly be on the alert at receptions for a drunk bridesmaid looking to take a potshot at that “ho” who had slept with her boyfriend.

“It’s not a family reunion without a fight,” Ryan said.

“I’m not your family,” Evan snarled at him.

“Of course you are.” Ryan threw an arm around Evan, who shoved him.

Ryan just smirked. “You’re the husband of my wife’s friend. That makes you my bro-in-law.”

“He’s not your bro anything,” Sebastian snapped.

“And now we see why Mark’s about to jump out of a plane,” Wolf said with a sigh.

“Mark, please don’t jump out of the plane,” Brea begged.

“He’s not going to jump,” Chris said with a sneer.

“Yes, I will. I have parachute training from the Marines.” Mark’s eyes were dark. “Buckle up so you don’t get sucked out, ladies.”

“We’re over the ocean,” Wolf said slowly. “Are you out of your mind?”

“A buddy of mine is on a navy ship near here.”

“Mark!” Brea cried.

“You are so full of shit,” Chris scoffed.

“No, *you’re* full of shit!” Sebastian snapped.

I shrank in my seat as they all stood there yelling at one another.

Elsie rolled up her sleeves, stood up, and pushed her way into the group of men. She was a former Big Three corporate accountant and currently a chef. Both industries had gifted her with a no-fucks-given attitude when dealing with hotheaded rich men. They’d also gifted her with strong arms.

She hefted the pitcher of water and threw it, drenching all the guys.

They stood there and sputtered.

“You.” She pointed at Evan.

“I didn’t do any—”

“Zip it. Go sit in the corner.”

“This is my plane.”

“The. Corner.” She pointed. “Sebastian, you can go sit in the front by the flight attendant. Mark, give me that parachute. If anyone’s jumping out of this plane, it’s me.”

“You don’t know how to parachute,” Mark said before he could stop himself.

“Fuck you,” Ryan snarled, turning on him. “My wife absolutely can parachute.”

Elsie raised an eyebrow.

“You can parachute, right?” Ryan asked her out of the corner of his mouth.

“We have planned several parachute weddings,” she said.

“See? Elsie knows how to parachute, so fuck you!” Ryan yelled.

“*Fuck you!*” Mark screamed back.

“Oh my god. Is there going to be a fight?” Sophie whispered to me.

“Everyone hates their in-laws,” Mark snapped.

“Mark, be nice,” Brea scolded. “I’m sorry, Elsie. He’s usually better behaved than this.”

“I think everyone’s blood sugar is low,” I said desperately.

“Ma’am.” Ryan saluted Elsie. “May I be banished to the bar?”

“No, I want to be banished to the bar,” Chris whined.

“Do you two think this is a joke?” Elsie demanded.

The two looked at each other and shrugged.

“I mean, Chris is a joke, but I’m dead serious.” Ryan waggled his eyebrows at Chris.

Chris launched himself at Ryan.

“Feel free to slug him, Elsie,” Grace called.

Chris swore and danced back as Elsie pulled out a very large, very sharp chef’s knife.

“Anyone else? No? Fine. Mark can go to the bar.”

“I thought you loved me,” Ryan complained.

“Ryan, you can go sit in the lavatory.”

“Damn it.”

“You can go sit in the study, Chris. Wolf, you’re sitting there.”

Wolf smirked.

“Looks like the most cultured person is given the choicest seat,” he said, sitting down near Sophie like a sphinx carved out of Italian marble.

There was a chorus of angry protests from the men.

Elsie brandished the knife.

The guys all sulked off.

“*Psst*,” Ryan hissed as he ambled past Mark. “Martini. Neat, a hint of lemon zest. Make sure it’s cold.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Mark snarled.

“Elsie!”

“Out,” she yelled.

“Cool. You made Elsie mad. Now we’re all going to starve to death over the next few days of being trapped in a frozen wasteland,” Ryan called before he disappeared into the bedroom.

My friend sat down across from me.

“And this is why we all don’t hang out together,” she said flatly. “Ever.”



I TOOK a deep breath of the cold Norwegian air as we stepped off the plane into the dark.

My thoughts briefly went to a Norwegian murder mystery I was reading. Maybe I should have talked Greg Svensson out of a surprise destination wedding in the middle of northern Scandinavia.

“I’ve never been so cold in my life.” Amy’s teeth were chattering as she

huddled next to me in a big parka.

“You all need to eat more carbs,” Elsie said to us as she strode past, large box in her arms.

Ryan, carrying more big boxes, followed her. The rest of the guys, not to be outdone, were schlepping boxes and gear out of the plane.

“It is nice to have some muscle around.” Sophie grinned at me.

“But at what cost?” I said with a sigh. “The guys are all pretending like the others don’t exist.”

“I supposed the cold war was better than them coming to blows,” Grace told me.

“Elsie was right. This was why we as couples never hang out,” Sophie said.

That was the drawback of dating a billionaire that no one ever talked about: they knew all the other billionaires your friends were dating and didn’t like them at all.

You thought girls liked to gossip? Whoo boy. Male billionaires were cesspits of drama and gossip. Evan could go on for hours shit-talking my friends’ husbands, aside from Sebastian, of course, who he loved dearly, like a brother. While endearing, it also meant that Evan would happily use a slight against Sebastian as an excuse to fire all cannons and go down with the ship, along with everyone else in a thirty-mile radius.

“Six days,” I told myself. “We can last six days.”

The guests were arriving tomorrow, and I needed to make sure everything was ready. I’d flown back and forth twice already and was in constant communication with the locals on the ground.

Belle Frost was a super-hands-off bride. Her fiancé was making all the surprise plans, and she was showing up.

No bridezillas and a blank check meant this was going to be the easiest wedding ever.

“For once,” I told my friends, “I’m not actually worried about the wedding. It’s going to be a breeze compared to trying to keep the guys from killing each other.”

“Um,” Grace said as we walked inside, “I think you spoke too soon.”

“What is that?” I said slowly.

Evan gave me an alarmed look.

“Oh my god.” I started hyperventilating.

Evan dropped the box he was carrying and ran to my side.

“Ivy, what is it?”

“Where are my carefully curated gift bags of locally sourced snacks, art, and other fun wedding gifts?” I shrieked.

“What’s wrong with these?” Sebastian asked, picking up one of the bright-pink bags festooned with sparkly fuchsia and gold ribbons. “It’s Bath & Body Works. Amy likes their stuff.”

He opened one of the bags. The gift bags looked like they had been made for a tween-girl sleepover. There was hand sanitizer chock full of glitter, pink soaps, and candles. The scents weren’t even adult—the candles had names like Cotton-Candy Bubble Gum.

“I can’t give these to guests,” I groaned.

“Are there even any snacks in the bags?” Sophie demanded.

“Kettle corn and gummy lips,” Chris said, pulling out one of the bags and opening it.

“Chris!”

“I’m a guest, Grace,” he protested.

“You’re the help.” Grace grabbed it from him.

“I think it’s nice, Ivy,” Evan told me, stroking my shoulder while I spun out.

“How long have you been married to a wedding planner?” Chris asked derisively. “Fucking moron. Clearly this is a big disaster.”

Evan made a move toward him.

“I swear to God!” I screeched at them. “If you start fighting, I’m shoving one of the bottles of hand soap up your... er, uh... my apologies. Weddings are stressful.” I pressed my hands together.

“The real gift bags are here somewhere. I was sent a photo of them per email. We just have to find them.” I clapped my hands. “Boys,” I addressed the husband group. “Please take these boxes to the lodge. I need to meet with Sigrid, our local Norwegian planner.”



THE GUYS WERE all in the lodge, studiously ignoring their bros-in-law, as Ryan liked to call them. “All” minus Evan.

“Have you seen him?” I asked Sebastian.

“No, sorry. I was calling my little brother Alfie,” he explained. “He’s

flying over with the Svenssons. They are packing up the planes.”

“Great. The guests are on their way, and I don’t have any gift bags.”

Sigrid had been confused about the guest welcome bags and had gone off to try to figure out what had happened.

I picked up my luggage. I should have slept on the plane, and now I was exhausted. I had an extra-large coffee though, and I was going to power through.

I found the room where Evan and I were staying. It was small and cozy. I stripped down.

“This is just a minor setback,” I pep-talked myself. “You’re going to get out there and find those gift bags. Somehow.”

Maybe if I could just take a quick nap...

I took a sip of my coffee. Yes, in the shower. I’d only been on site for a few hours, but it was clearly going to be *that* kind of wedding. I was so stressed that all it did was nauseate me.

Coffee in hand, I stepped out of a lukewarm shower and into the bedroom. I yelped when I saw Evan was standing there with a gift bag.

“Oh! You found them!”

“Yeah,” he said. “I had Sebastian run a quick analysis on the metadata of the photo the Norwegian team sent you. It said it was taken here. I figured the bags had to be around in the lodge somewhere. I found a whole stash of them piled in a bedroom.” He handed me the bag.

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe something got lost in translation,” I said gamely.

“My company has an Oslo office,” he said slowly, “and they all speak better English than a lot of the Americans.”

Evan frowned.

“Maybe...” he trailed off.

“Hmm?” I asked as I toweled my hair. “What?”

“Nothing,” Evan said and wrapped his strong arms around me, kissing my neck, my chest, then my mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said softly. “Thanks for coming early.”

He kissed me again, making it long and slow. If it were not for the wedding shitstorm brewing, I’d have pulled him down on the nest of blankets. Instead, I tousled his hair.

“Smile, handsome!”

“Just concerned about the gift bags. This doesn’t bode well,” my husband replied.

“Don’t worry. This is just how weddings go. I just hide it from the wedding party!”

CHRIS

“Why are you up? It’s still dark outside.”

“It’s seven in the morning,” Grace replied, bending down and kissing me.

“That’s like one in the morning in New York City.”

Grace was incredulous. “You regularly are awake at this time in New York. You need to acclimate.”

I knew I wasn’t going to get to spend much time with my wife the rest of the day. I threw my feet off the bed then picked her up, swinging her around and kissing her until she laughed.

“You’re smudging my glasses.”

I let my hand sweep under her shirt.

“Don’t freeze your tits off. I want to come on them tonight.”

Grace slapped me lightly on the backside.

“Don’t sleep too late,” she said, hoisting her camera bag.

“Moi?” I pressed a hand to my chest. “I’m offended. I’m about to go on a run.”

Grace raised an eyebrow. “It’s cold.”

“I can take it.”

“I’m sure one of the other guys is out running. Maybe you could grab a running buddy.” Grace rocked on her heels.

I knew it made her sad the other bro-in-law (fuck Ryan, by the way) and I weren’t close friends like she and her friends were. We could manage a tense dinner a few times a year, but this wedding was going to be the longest time we’d all been together. And after how the flight had gone, I was pretty

sure it wasn't going to end well.

"Maybe," I said, noncommittal, and reached for my running clothes.



"FUCK. IT'S COLD."

I wished Josh and Eric Svensson would show up already. Somehow I'd ended up on the guest list, though I'd been told by Josh that I was supposed to sit on the bride's side to fill it out.

No problem. I would hang with my friends during the rest of the time that wasn't the ceremony. And, of course, try to avoid the rest of the fucking losers Grace's friends had married.

I liked Grace's friends, especially the ones who brought snacks. But their husbands? Barf. They were all obnoxious, entitled, and egotistical. I was going to try my damndest to stay away from them.

I was about to cut my run short when I saw a familiar figure cross onto the path in front of me. Wolf raised a hand before I could dive behind one of the snow-covered trees.

"Morning."

I gritted my teeth. Now I couldn't leave. He'd think I was a weakling.

Fuck him.

I increased my pace, preparing to pass him.

Wolf, in response, increased his pace to match mine.

I could keep increasing my pace, or I could take a backhanded, unexpected tactic, a strategy that had made me billions.

Not as many as Wolf has, my mind unhelpfully reminded me.

Yeah, well, I'm not scamming people on insurance, I reminded myself petulantly.

Sure, I ran a hedge fund, but everyone knew insurance guys were the scum of the earth.

I kept pace with Wolf. I knew he hated the rest of us as bros-in-law as much as we hated him. Unfortunately, we had to kiss his ass because Van de Berg insurance insured our companies and was one of the only insurance companies big enough to do so.

"Terrible weather we're having." I said finally.

"At least it's not sleeting."

We ran for a few minutes in silence, real silence because the snow absorbed our footfalls.

“I take it they found the gift sacks,” Wolf said after a moment. “I’ve barely seen Sophie. She’s been in the kitchen all night. She sent me a text of multiple emojis. One of them was, I believe, a bag.”

“Yeah. Evan found them,” I said with a frown. “Not sure why they went missing. Grace said Ivy thinks it’s a language barrier issue.”

“Usually, the girls manage risk better than that,” Wolf said with a frown. “It could be sabotage.”

“The fuck? Sabotage. You insurance guys, I swear to God.”

We had taken the path around, and the lodge loomed in front of us.

Next to me, Wolf scowled. “Something doesn’t add up. Anomalies are suspicious.”

“And yet I pray nightly for black swan events.”

Wolf hissed, and I half expected him to make some sort of medieval sign against evil.

“We should keep an eye out all the same.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You do that.”

“You aren’t taking this seriously,” Wolf said sharply. Not surprising, of course.

“What does that mean?” I snarled at him as we took the large stone steps two at a time up to the lodge entrance.

“I’ve seen how you run your hedge fund, not that you can really call it that. It’s child’s play,” Wolf said.

“Fuck you.” I pulled the door open, not holding it for Wolf.

“Like I said.” He grabbed the handle. “Childish.”

“Hell yeah,” I said as we were greeted by a massive breakfast spread. “Score.”

“You’re not going to work?” he asked me.

“Fuck no, I’m not working. I’m eating breakfast,” I said.

Before I could grab a plate, we heard crying from one of the rooms off the great room. I set the plate down and hurried over, Wolf on my heels. Inside of the wood-paneled room warmed by a fireplace, Amy was crying on a sofa.

“Oh my gosh.” Amy was hyperventilating, and Sebastian was rubbing her back in concern. “It’s awful. I don’t know what to do. I’m fucked, Sebastian, fucked.”

“I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” her husband said.

“What happened?” I asked.

“A miscommunication about the confetti,” Sebastian explained.

“So? Order some on Amazon,” I replied.

Evan scowled at me.

“It’s custom-made confetti created from leaves,” he explained. “It’s biodegradable. The order was straight-up canceled at the last minute.”

“Uncancel it,” Wolf said. “Do they need extra money for the inconvenience?”

“They already sold my order,” Amy wailed. “I’m going to have to hole-punch it by hand.” She held up a small plastic hole puncher. “One at a time. I need bags and bags of this. I had an order placed.”

“No, you’re not.” Mark came in with a box. “Brea asked me to bring the hole punchers I designed for you with us as a backup.” He set the box down. “You can punch multiple leaves at once.”

“It’s still going to take days,” Wolf said matter-of-factly.

Sebastian shot him a death glare.

Amy gulped. “I don’t have days.”

Outside, a horn blared.

“Oh my gosh. The guests are here. We can’t let them see this,” Amy fretted.

I looked out the window. Dozens of identical blond-haired, gray-eyed males of varying sizes, from very little to very tall, were milling around the yard of the lodge.

“Those aren’t guests. Those are just the Svenssons,” I assured her.

“Greg *Svensson* is getting married,” Amy argued. “Those are guests.”

“He’s probably going to want his siblings occupied,” I said, heading to the door.

Josh and Eric were scolding two of their siblings when I met them outside.

“Bro!” Josh slapped my back.

“There’s breakfast inside,” I told him as I hugged him and Eric.

“Score!” Eric whooped. “I’m starving.”

“But,” I said, “we really need you to do a solid.” I explained about the leaf confetti. “We need to find nice-looking leaves and hole-punch them. Think you and your brothers could help?”

Josh shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

“Yeah. Hunter’s angry because people keep trying to weasel out of babysitting, so this will keep the kids occupied, at least.”

“It’s not babysitting if it’s your own family,” Remy boomed, climbing out of another bus that had just pulled up.

“All right. Let’s rally the troops.” Josh rubbed his hands together.

“Breakfast,” Remy announced. “Then I need volunteers to come find leaves outside.”

Amy groaned when I trooped back in with the Svensson brothers.

“Your slave labor, ma’am.”

The Svenssons ate while Mark demonstrated how the hole punchers worked. He got some ugly looks from some of the older Svenssons who hated the Holbrooks. But soon, bags of damp leaves were being dropped off, and the hole puncher sweatshop was chugging along.

“We’ll dry out the glitter in the oven,” I told Amy as I picked up a tray.

“Please make sure they don’t burn the place down,” she begged Sebastian before she left to go deal with some other wedding crisis.

“Disaster averted,” I said to Wolf once we had the operation running smoothly.

Wolf gave me a dark look. “This is a pattern. Someone is trying to sabotage the wedding.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of being right, but I was starting to believe that someone didn’t want this wedding to happen.

SOPHIE

“That was so nice of Chris to get the Svenssons to help,” Amy said as she gulped down the coffee I’d made.

“Have a spinach and sausage tart. You need the protein.” I handed her a pastry.

“What I need is for people to get it together. This wedding is a disaster,” my friend complained.

“Shhh. You can’t let the guests know.”

“It’s too late. I’m sure the Svenssons are going to blacklist us.”

“They’re not going to blacklist you,” Chris called cheerfully as he and Wolf sauntered into the kitchen area.

It wasn’t the greatest kitchen in the world. I’d actually say it was pretty middling, but I made do with what I had and had packed up half a plane’s worth of baking utensils.

“Josh says that he’s glad he has something for his brothers to do and keep them out of trouble,” Chris continued.

“Chris is right. It’s probably for the best, Sophie,” my husband said to me. “Otherwise, the Svenssons would be crawling up the walls.”

I tensed up as Chris and Wolf stood next to each other. It was no secret all our husbands barely tolerated and didn’t particularly like one another for the sake of my friends and me.

Wolf especially didn’t like Chris and Ryan, and I braced myself for some cutting remark from Wolf directed to Chris.

“We’re here to collect bribery snacks for the Svenssons,” Wolf said.

“I lied and told them they could only have snacks if they worked.” Chris

and Wolf smirked at each other like they were sharing an inside joke.

I was secretly thrilled.

It sucked when you couldn't all hang out as a group because your husbands all hated one another. Maybe this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship!

"We're here to see if we could steal more food to keep them going," Wolf told me.

"You can have as much as you want," I assured them. "You all really saved Amy."

"Did you make sausage rolls?" Chris asked.

I winced as Wolf turned on Grace's husband.

Spoke too soon.

"I have some freshly made," I told Chris, shoving trays of food into his arms.

"Take these out, and Wolf, you can grab the pinwheels. They're almost ready."

"How many bags of leaf confetti do you need, Amy?" Chris asked my friend. "We have two boxes already."

"Wow. Already? Let me come see." Amy dusted off her hands, grabbed her coffee, and followed Chris out.

I let out a breath.

"I guess you all are sort of getting along?" I winced.

"It's fine." Wolf paused then said, "Don't worry about it."

"I am worried."

"Everything is under control," Wolf said. "Right?"

Wrong.

"We've never done a destination wedding in this area before. It's just off to a rocky start."

"As long as there's music and cake, you'll be fine," Wolf said, wrapping me in his strong arms. "Belle Frost isn't picky. I've worked with her before. She's no-nonsense."

"I know, but Greg is particular," I said into his shirt.

Wolf tipped my head up and kissed me softly.

"If Greg comes after you, I'll deal with him," he assured me. "Also, I don't think he'll care if something doesn't quite go as planned. I assume he factors in a coefficient of chaos when his entire family gets together."

"I like things to be perfect. And this is not perfect."

Wolf tensed up.

“What?”

“Do you think...”

“What?” I pulled back to look up at him.

“Nothing. Never mind.” He kissed me again, heavier this time.

“You’re distracting me, and I have a cake to make.”

He kissed me again. “Distracting? Me?”

“Yes!” I giggled as he swung me around.

“Do you need anything heavy lifted?” he offered, setting me down.
“Before I return to my punishment?”

“Can you just try to get along with them?” I begged. “Maybe you guys could be friends?”

“I do business with these men. We’re friendly enough.”

I sighed. “Okay. Just don’t kill anyone, please?”

“When have I ever?” he said.

I rolled my eyes.

“If you could help me unpack these ingredients before you go...” I led him over to the walk-in fridge where my wedding cake ingredients were stacked.

“Dammit,” I swore. “What the hell is this? Ugh. I hate destination weddings.”

“What’s wrong?” Wolf asked in alarm as I peered into the box.

Regulations had said I wasn’t allowed to bring my own food into the country. We’d been careful to work with suppliers to secure high-quality ingredients. Except...

“Where are my fresh currants?” I practically screamed.

“Can you order some more?” Wolf asked as he picked up several boxes in the fridge, looking for the currants.

“It’s the middle of winter,” I said. “So no.”

“Here’s your pink icing, at least,” Wolf said.

“My what? I did not order pink icing,” I said in confusion. “Is Google Translate screwing me over? What the hell?”

The staff came running, and I explained the missing berries. Sigrid assured me they could order some more.

I tried to keep my cool. It wasn’t their fault, after all.

Or was it?

“I’m concerned about the timing. I need to start on the cake now.”

“We will have them put on the first plane tomorrow,” Sigrid promised.
My eye was twitching.

“Can we arrange for a private jet to pick them up today?” Wolf asked Sigrid.

“Yes, I don’t see why not.”

“I’ll ask Evan,” Wolf promised me.

“Ask me what?” Evan asked, walking into the kitchen. “I was looking to see if I could steal another tray for drying the leaves.”

Wolf handed him one. “That okay, Sophie?”

“Sure.” I rubbed my temples.

“Since you have your jet here, Sophie needs more berries, if that would be all right for the jet to pick them up.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll tell the pilot.”

“Thanks, Evan,” I told him.

Evan frowned, and he and Wolf exchanged a look. I wasn’t sure what it meant, but I was too concerned about the ticking clock and the nonstate of my cake to care.

They’ll just have to learn to play nice.

EVAN

I couldn't stand the rest of the husbands married to Ivy's friends. I was sure that since she was the lead wedding planner of her group, she expected me to fulfill the same circus ringmaster role with the rest of the bros-in-law.

Hard pass.

Wolf kept pace next to me as we headed back into the great room of the lodge.

I didn't particularly care for Wolf's holier-than-thou attitude. But he did insure my company, and I tried not to be too much of an asshole to him.

Also, I would bet money he thought something suspicious was going on.

"This is weird, right?" I asked him.

"Having to spend my valuable free time with you and the rest of the dog pound?" he asked dryly.

Fucker.

"I mean all these errors. Ivy keeps saying it's a destination wedding and things happen, but..."

"It's a pattern," Wolf concurred. "Someone is doing this. It's not a coincidence."

"Who do you think it is?"

"Old flame of Greg's?"

"Or Belle's?" I suggested.

"You're the tabloid owner. You must have a list of the gossip associated with those two and can put together a list of people they dated in the past," Wolf said pointedly.

I didn't take the bait.

Look at me, taking the high road.

"I'll do that, but," I added, "Belle did date one of the Richmond brothers. Since one of them works for you, maybe you should check closer to home."

When we were back in the leaf-punching room, I set down the extra trays, and Wolf passed around the rest of the food. While the Svensson brothers worked, I made a call to my assistant to pull information about Greg and Belle's dating history, then I rejoined the fray.

We didn't finish all the leaf punching until dinnertime. At that point, it was pitch-dark outside.

Ivy: Sorry, you'll have to eat without me. Now I'm double- and triple-checking everything to make sure we don't have more surprises.

I sighed. I had wanted to see her but understood she was busy.

In the great room, a buffet had been set out, courtesy of Sophie and Elsie. As much as I didn't like the husbands, I did have Sebastian, at least, which made any mandatory events tolerable.

Unfortunately, he had been co-opted by the Svenssons and was eating with them and his little brother Alfie. There were already extra chairs crowded around their table, so I couldn't join.

He gave me an apologetic smile.

Wolf and Mark had smartly snagged the only two lone wing chairs near the fire. They were on their laptops, pretending the other didn't exist.

There were three empty seats left, one next to three screaming, identical little blond boys, one surrounded by a handful of rambunctious teenage boys who were about two seconds away from throwing food at one another, and one across from Ryan James.

He was texting on his phone when I sat across from him.

Ryan did not like me. Partially because a few years ago, one of my magazines had written a pretty scathing write-up of the borderline scams he was making money off of. He'd fired back with a pretty nasty Instagram post about my shit show of a love life and how maybe I was just jealous and hurting and had offered me a free month's subscription to one of his shitty dating sites.

We periodically sniped at each other through proxies, and then Ivy's best

friend had up and married the bastard.

“You couldn’t have sat literally anywhere else or at least taken a tray in your room like a scorned Victorian wife?” Ryan asked.

“Just pretend I’m not here,” I said, stirring the fish stew.

“How could I? You’re the world’s loudest breather.”

“And you’re the world’s noisiest eater,” I retorted.

Ryan slurped loudly on his soup and smacked his lips.

“Man, I’m glad Elsie didn’t cook straight-up Norwegian food. She was trying to get me on board with boiled sheep’s head.”

“Geez.” I winced. “Especially with all these kids. I can’t imagine that would go over well with them.”

“They are eating the pickled herring sliders,” Ryan said, nodding his head toward the end of the table.

“This stew is really good, I think.” I took another big bite.

“My wife makes sure I eat well.” Ryan grinned.

“I can see that.”

“I’m working on my dad bod.” Ryan lifted up his shirt to reveal magazine-worthy abs.

I made a disgusted noise.

“Is Elsie pregnant?” I asked.

I had been subtly suggesting to Ivy that it sure would be nice to have a few kids, that my company essentially ran itself, and I could easily take over the bulk of the parenting work, hint, hint.

If Ryan got to have the first kid of the group, I was going to be pretty pissed.

“Ha. Hardly. I have my little sister I have to take care of, and my dad just knocked up the woman he was cheating on my stepmom with. She got really pissed and tried to run him over with a truck when she found out he was a broke-ass joke. They had to amputate his leg, and she’s on probation. Now that she got caught in her own baby trap, she’s trying to pawn the soon-to-be new baby onto me.”

“Damn. Are you going to take the kid?” I asked, shocked at the state of Ryan’s life. I had no idea.

And I thought my family was a shit show.

“Hell, I mean what can I do? That’s my sibling, right?” Ryan ran his hand through his hair. “Elsie said she doesn’t want kids, which, like I said, I already have my little sister, and it’s not like the world needs more of my

father's genetics, or my mom's for that matter. But it's one thing to have a tween living with you another if it's a newborn baby."

"What did she say when you talked to her?"

Ryan made a face. "Trying to find a good time to bring it up. She knows about the accident because my dad is now living with us while he recovers since my latest stepmother kicked him out. I expect her to dump the toddler on me any day now. The judge said that based on my dad's other child support payments, all he has to pay is twenty dollars a month. That is not enough money for Angela once she burns through the credit cards. I think, no, I *know* Elsie's pissed. She's going to be livid when I tell her that the baby is going to have to stay."

He rubbed his jaw.

I'd always thought Ryan was a self-absorbed playboy, a scam artist, a jerk, one of those billionaires with zero morals.

I hated being wrong.

"That sucks," I said.

"If Elsie doesn't decide to leave me when that baby shows up, I'll tell her to keep Ivy away so she doesn't get baby fever." Ryan gave me a crooked smile.

"I wouldn't mind it, honestly," I admitted, using my fork to cut into the fried potatoes on my plate.

"All those billions not doing it for you anymore?" Ryan quipped.

"I guess you could say that. Ivy didn't seem all that excited about a baby when I brought it up," I confessed.

"You have to seal the deal," Ryan told me. "Stay at the office less, cook, clean. I'll let you borrow the baby sibling. Once she sees you with a newborn, it's game over," he said confidently.

"Thanks, man."

Ryan grinned at me.

"I have ulterior motives. If Ivy's pregnant, Elsie might be more inclined to not completely flip out about my sibling because she won't be the odd one out."



WHEN THE SUN peaked above the tree line for the two and a half hours of

sunlight we were going to get that day, I was already on the trails on horseback. The lodge had horses. Not as swift as the ones Sebastian owned, these were bigger and hardier but had an easier time in the snow.

“Has Amy calmed down about the flowers?” I asked Sebastian.

“I think so?” He frowned. “She didn’t sleep at all. She’s been chugging coffee like a maniac.”

I laughed. “So has Ivy.” I hesitated. “I’m... I think something weird is going on.”

Sebastian didn’t seem convinced.

“Wolf says there’s a pattern,” I pressed.

“Wolf? He’s paranoid. Amy says this is just how weddings are. The girls don’t seem concerned. I think maybe you and Wolf are overreacting.”

Sebastian frowned.

“You think?”

“Yeah. I think we’re just not used to being this in the weeds with wedding planning.”

“Speak for yourself. Ivy has multiple weddings being prepped in my penthouse. Three of the guest rooms are out of commission.”

Sebastian snorted. “Ever the martyr. I just had five huge boxes of pink ribbons delivered to the hotel room.”

“Pink?” I frowned. “I thought Ivy said they weren’t doing pink...”

Sebastian didn’t answer because we were almost bowled over by a man in black on a big horse.

My horse neighed, and Sebastian’s snapped at the newcomer.

The man unwound the scarf from around his face, revealing blue eyes. Mark Holbrook scowled at us.

“Watch it,” I snapped at him.

Mark’s horse pranced in the snow.

“This isn’t your private trail,” Mark declared.

Behind us another horse snorted. A cloud of steam wafted around Wolf’s face as his horse neighed and stretched out its neck to its friends.

“I didn’t know you all rode,” he said, tilting his head slightly.

We stood there in silence.

I was sure Brea, Sophie, and Amy had probably read their respective husbands the riot act about playing nice. I knew Ivy certainly had to me. I had been tempted to half-jokingly tell her I would be best buddies with the whole egotistical crew if we could have a baby, but that seemed like a terrible start

to parenthood. So I'd kept my mouth shut.

"We're riding up to the ruins on the hill," Sebastian said finally.

"That's where they're having the rehearsal dinner," I added.

Another pause.

"We can join you," Wolf said finally.

"Speak for yourself," Mark muttered, tightening his hands on the reins.

"Off to look for clues?" Sebastian asked wryly.

"Clues?" Mark's expression darkened.

"You think that the wedding's being sabotaged too?" Wolf asked Sebastian.

My friend kind of rolled his eyes.

"I mean, not really, but Evan seems to think so."

"What do you think, Mark?" I asked.

"I think you're all insane," he said.

My horse didn't want to stand in the cold any longer, so I gave him the go-ahead to move down the trail.

Following behind me, Wolf argued with Sebastian.

"You can't deny that there is something suspicious about all of the mishaps."

"I think there's a perfectly logical explanation," Mark interjected.

"Maybe for the events as isolated incidents, but all together over a period of twenty-four hours? Probability is not on our side here," Wolf said.

"Agreed," I said.

"I think you're crazy." Sebastian was unconvinced.

Mark seemed thoughtful. "Just for the sake of argument, if someone was sabotaging the wedding, who would it be?"

"I pulled that data," I told Wolf. "I have a list of Belle and Greg's prior dates. Greg's ex Mags—"

"They weren't actually dating," Sebastian interjected.

"Yeah, which makes it even more likely that she could be behind this because she's a jealous stalker type."

"I think she would be more likely to burn down a building than..." Sebastian trailed off.

I winced and shot a wary glance at Mark. His ex had, in fact, gone crazy and tried to kill his family.

Maybe there's a reason he's so unlikable.

Mark's expression was perfectly neutral.

“The events over the past couple of days,” he said quietly, “have been more childish than harmful, which is what you would expect from a jilted lover. I posit that if, as Wolf says, these mishaps are not, in fact, chance occurrences, then one of the Svensson brothers may be responsible.”

“I don’t know,” Sebastian said as we made our way into the clearing, where the ruins of an old fortress lay scattered. “I think they all like Belle.”

“They don’t all like Greg,” Wolf countered.

“Aren’t they all terrified of him?” I asked as we walked the horses around the clearing. It was already being decorated for the rehearsal dinner. Several large chandeliers hung from the huge hardwoods, sparking in the minimal northern winter sunlight. Jagged walls and crumbling turrets were backdropped against a blustery sky. Moss-covered stone walls whispered sinister secrets.

“Yes, but the Svensson brothers are awful. I wouldn’t rule out one of them to be playing an elaborate prank,” Mark insisted.

The wind blew. The old trees creaked. It felt a little eerie out here.

My horse’s ears were laid back on his head. Wolf’s horse was very antsy.

“What I’m hearing is you all have no suspects, no clues, and nothing to one hundred percent point at a saboteur,” Mark said as his horse pranced around in an uneasy circle. “Just lots of baseless speculation.”

“This is getting out of hand,” I declared. “Let’s get Ryan and Chris. We need to have a meeting. They agree with us. Right, Wolf?”

“Chris does. Ryan, I’m not sure.”

“Ah, yes,” Sebastian said, “because I’m really going to be convinced by Chris.”

“You’re the one who—”

“Look out!” Wolf bellowed.

Mark cursed. His horse screamed and lurched, throwing them both out of the way as the huge crystal chandelier crashed into the table where the wedding party were supposed to sit.

“Holy shit,” Mark said after a moment. “I think you’re right. Someone isn’t just trying to ruin the wedding. They’re trying to kill the bride and groom.”

AMY

“I don’t understand,” Ivy said as we looked at the carnage of the chandelier. “We didn’t order any chandeliers. Why is this even here?”

She sipped her mint tea and nibbled nervously on the rim of the travel mug. Normally, my friend was a coffee drinker, but maybe the stress of this wedding was getting to her.

I was pretty sure it was getting to me. I had slept like an hour and a half on the sofa in the great room before waking up to decorate it with wintery floral arrangements. Luckily, there hadn’t been any mishaps with the flowers. I’d thought that our string of bad luck had finally run its course, and it would be smooth sailing. It had to be. The bride was about to arrive, and she needed to walk into a winter wonderland. One where the decorations weren’t trying to kill people.

“We’re going to go talk to the staff,” Ivy said, fanning herself. Her face looked a little bit flushed. She pressed a hand over her mouth.

“... and see if... they...” She doubled over and puked on the grass.

“Holy shit!”

“Ivy!” Evan ran over to her, followed by the rest of the guys.

“I don’t want you to see me like this. Amy, help.”

“Shoo,” I told the men. “I have held her hair back many a time after too many leftover post-wedding cocktails.”

Ivy swished her mouth out with the tea.

“You haven’t been drinking lately, have you, though?” I mused.

All the guys were grim faced.

“It’s fine,” I assured them.

Evan's fists were clenched. "Everything's fine? Someone tried to poison her."

"No, they didn't," I scoffed.

"It's a pattern," Wolf said emphatically.

"Sebastian..." I warned.

"I think they're"—he blinked—"overreacting."

The guys all glared at him.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

Wolf opened his mouth. Sebastian elbowed him.

"Nothing, Amy," Sebastian said hurriedly. He strode over and kissed me quickly. "Let's take Ivy back to the lodge."

"I'm fine," she said weakly. "The wedding must go on."

"You don't look fine." Evan was back by her side.

"What did you eat? It's probably food poisoning," Mark said.

"You didn't eat all day," I reminded her.

"Oh my god!" Brea exclaimed, hurrying into the clearing. "Ivy, you haven't eaten? Do you want some of my snack?"

"Ugh, Brea. That smells nasty. Why are you eating that?" I made a face.

"You're missing out. God damn, Norwegian food is fucking great," Brea said as she took a big bite of what looked like a mound of blubbery, watery meat.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Ivy groaned.

"When in Trondheim, do what the locals do," she said cheerfully. "Yum. Reindeer tendon."

"You're eating Rudolph?" I cried.

"I think it's his evil cousin..." Brea said.

"You've been hanging around Mark too much," Evan said.

"I don't make jokes about murdering and eating beloved childhood characters," Mark retorted.

"Try it before you pooh-pooh it." Brea shoved the bowl at me.

I gagged. Ivy retched.

Brea finally noticed the chandelier on the ground and the shards of crystal on Mark and ran over to him.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"He's fine, Brea," Sebastian said. "Wolf got him out of the way."

Brea hugged Wolf, who seemed taken aback.

“Thank you for saving him, Wolf.”

“He didn’t do that much,” Mark muttered.

Brea punched him lightly.

“I can’t have you squashed. Where would I get another husband like you?”

She looked up at him expectantly for a kiss. Mark seemed slightly hesitant.

Sebastian didn’t really like Mark, and yeah, he could be a little bit gruff, but I saw how tender he was with Brea. Though when someone was eating a bowl of fermented fish eyeballs, boundaries needed to be enforced, and I 100 percent supported that.

And I had no problem helping people reinforce boundaries.

“Brea, you’re really asking a lot of him as a husband and of me and Ivy as friends,” I said, holding her bowl as far away from me as I could.

“You’re free to eat what you want, but you know, choices have consequences.”

“Fine.” She felt Mark up between his legs, and he cursed.

Sebastian clapped a hand over his mouth.

Ivy physically doubled over and puked on the grass again.

“Holy shit, Ivy.” Evan grabbed her. “Let’s get you into bed.”

“No need,” Ivy croaked. “Just bury that roadkill.”

“I’ll get her home. Brea, you need to stay like twenty feet downwind,” I instructed, grabbing Ivy’s arm and taking her bag. “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure?” Evan was hovering.

“I can manage,” Ivy assured him. “You boys enjoy your ride.”

We left the guys talking quietly in the clearing. Though there was tension, mainly due to Brea’s food and Ivy’s illness, there wasn’t *tension* like there had been in the plane.

“We should stay and eavesdrop,” I whispered.

“They’re finally getting along. Just let them have their fun. It’s one less thing to stress about,” Ivy said.

“You sure you okay?” I asked my friend. “You are a worrywart, but you’re usually not making yourself sick from it.”

“I think it’s the jet lag and lack of sleep, maybe the new food,” she said.

“You can’t blame me for this!” Brea called. “I want to know what’s gotten into the guys.”

“Oh my god, did you see them? They were joking like they like each

other. It's like they're friends!"

"We can dream," Ivy said.

Ivy and I were lucky because we could do double dates since Evan and Sebastian were friends. Anyone else? Forget about it.

"Let's get you inside," I told Ivy.

Elsie was prepping lunch.

"She looks sick," Elsie said flatly. "She needs to stay in the corner. I don't want her contaminating my cooking space."

Ice water and saltines were placed in front of Ivy.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Ivy fretted.

"I hope you're not pregnant," Elsie joked.

"Aww... She can be pregnant," I said. "I want a little mini-Ivy."

"If she is, she cannot announce it at someone else's wedding," Brea warned.

"You need to go outside with that," Elsie told her, pointing at her bowl.

"I'm almost done!" Brea scarfed down the rest of it.

"That's probably why Ivy is sick," Elsie made a face.

"We can get some pregnancy tests from, well, somewhere. We are in the middle of nowhere."

"I have some in my bag," Ivy croaked.

"I didn't know you guys were trying," I remarked.

"Oh, I have everything," Ivy said, waving a hand. "Plan for all contingencies."

"You sound rough," Sophie said, walking into the kitchen with a huge tray of freshly baked bread.

"I need that," Brea said, practically salivating. "Gimme gimme."

"Ivy, are we off schedule?" Grace asked, coming into the kitchen.

"We are?" Ivy cried.

"The bride's here, and I thought that we had activities scheduled, but people are just milling around," Grace said.

"Oh my gosh."

"Maybe she is pregnant," I muttered. "This could be pregnancy brain."

"Or sleep deprivation," Grace suggested.

"I don't think I can be pregnant," Ivy fretted.

"Why not?" Brea asked as I tried to feed Ivy some bread.

"She looks feverish."

"Sick people get the eff out of my kitchen," Elsie warned.

“I don’t know if Evan wants kids or not,” Ivy croaked.

“You didn’t discuss it?” Grace and Elsie asked in unison.

“I mean, we did in abstract, but there’s no timetable.”

“Before you freak out, just take the test,” I said.

“I don’t know...”

“You better do it, and it better be positive,” Elsie warned. “Otherwise, I’m going to assume you’re sick, and you’re banished from within a one-hundred-foot radius of this kitchen.”

“Amen,” Sophie said.

MARK

“Sebastian, what the hell?” Evan demanded when we were back at the lodge to meet up with Ryan and Chris.

“We can’t spook them,” he argued. “If they think a murderer’s out there, then...”

“I finally think I’m going to be able to sleep,” Chris said, “and you pull this shit?”

“You need to take this seriously,” I snapped at him.

“I thought it was a saboteur,” Ryan stated.

Wolf filled him in on the latest developments.

“Here’s a map of the lodge,” Evan said, rolling out a set of floor plans, which he’d borrowed from Ivy, on the table.

I had found an out-of-the-way room with several chairs and a small table for our meeting so that we wouldn’t be overheard.

“We have had incidents here, here, here, and here,” he said.

“Whoever is doing this has inside information,” Wolf said, studying the floor plans.

“They also have some sort of sway with the staff,” I added. “You can’t just call up a company and cancel orders if you don’t have information about that order and a name that doesn’t sound suspicious.”

“It’s a woman,” Ryan said definitively.

I frowned. “How do you figure?”

“It has to be someone trustworthy”—Ryan ticked off his fingers—“who doesn’t set off alarm bells when calling a vendor about a wedding. Someone who knows what’s going on with the wedding and someone who doesn’t

want it to happen.”

“Pull up that list of old girlfriends again,” Wolf said to Evan.

Chris studied it.

“Greg’s hardly dated anyone. I know this girl. I dated her a while ago, prior to Grace,” he added hastily. “She never actually dated Greg. She photobombed him at a party and then started a social media campaign that fizzled out.”

“And it’s probably not Magdalena. I’m sure the Svenssons are keeping heavy tabs on her,” I said, arms crossed.

“The other person on the list is Belle, who he’s marrying.” Sebastian laughed. “So that’s not it.”

My stomach sank. I stood up.

“Cutting and running already?” Evan asked.

“I just remembered I had a meeting.”



“MARK!” Jack slapped me on the back and shook my hand. It was freezing out, but Belle’s little brother seemed completely unbothered by the cold. With his silvery-white hair and blue eyes, he looked like he’d been carved out of the winter landscape.

“Did you guys just get in?” I asked.

“Just in time for winter sport festivities, I’m told.” Jack frowned. “Though it seems like things are running behind.”

“There’s been a few issues,” I said diplomatically. “They’re being ironed out.”

Jack laughed. “With the Svenssons, I’m not surprised.”

“Is Belle excited for the wedding?” I asked him, wondering if there was a more delicate way to get information about my hunch.

“I guess so,” he said. “You know how she is, pretty closed off on personal topics.”

“She’s not wishing that she’s just had everyone go down to the courthouse?” I prodded.

“I don’t think so. Why?”

“No reason. Just Brea is really worried Belle won’t have a good time and especially won’t like her dress.”

Jack grimaced. “My sister will be fine. I think. She’s not going to go full-on bridezilla or anything. I don’t think she cares that much.”

Did she care enough to try to sabotage her own wedding, though? I wondered.

Belle was the bride. If any vendor was going to avoid question someone making wedding changes, Belle would be it.

Jack’s business partner, Liam Svensson, loped over.

“Mark! Jack’s favorite and most high-paying tenant,” he joked. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep Hunter and Greg away from you.”

“They invited Wes,” Jack told me, “and, of course, Dana, so you’ll have some Holbrook backup.”

“Right,” I said, mustering a smile, though I was going to stay as far away from Wes as I could.



THE WHOLE ROOM reeked of fermented cabbage and fish when I woke up in the morning. I opened a window.

“Sorry,” Brea said as she sipped a noxious-smelling tea. “I just can’t get enough of this Norwegian food. It’s amazing. The flavors are so complex. It’s my new favorite food.”

“You don’t want one of those abhorrent coffee concoctions piled with doughnuts and ice cream?” I asked desperately.

I’d been in the military; the food there had oftentimes been borderline unpleasant, but it was a five-star restaurant compared to this.

“Not really,” Brea said then looked a little upset.

“Don’t worry about it, Brea,” I said, holding my breath and kissing the top of her head.

She sniffled.

“You think I’m gross.” Suddenly, she was full-on sobbing.

I didn’t know what to do.

“I don’t think you’re gross,” I assured her.

“Great!” She brightened immediately. “I’m super-horny. Let’s have sex.” Jumping at me, she tore at my clothes.

“Holy shit,” I grunted as I fell back on the bed.

Bread straddled me. I barely got a condom on before I was sheathed in

her, her hips grinding against me. As she rode me, I half wished she would tell me she was ready to not be as careful with condoms.

I teased her tits as she rode me, her head tipped back, pussy clenching on my cock. Damn. I couldn't believe I'd married this woman.

She came quickly, me still hard inside her.

"Make me come again," Brea moaned, raking her nails down my chest.

"Don't worry. I'll fuck you 'til you scream."

"Fuck me hard," she moaned, stretching out on the bed like a cat, on her knees, her legs spread for me.

I angled myself then took her hard, letting out my frustration and my lust for her. I pounded into her, fucking her into the bed, quick and dirty, giving her every thick inch of my cock.

I felt her come around me, and I followed with a curse.

"Damn," she said. "I need to bring you to all my weddings. Nothing like my own personal stress relief machine."

She followed me into the bathroom and stepped into the shower with me. I helped her wash her hair, and she washed my back.

"You know," Brea said when I turned off the water, "some of the other guys are going to do curling on the lake today. It might be fun. A nice bonding experience, maybe?"

Brea desperately wanted me to be friends with all of her friends' husbands. That was about as likely as Greg asking me to be his best man at the wedding.

"No, thanks. I should catch up on work," I said.

"You're on vacation."

"I don't take vacations," I said as I toweled off. "And even if I did, this wedding would not count. It is torture."

Brea sighed. "You could try relaxing. It might do you some good. You're always super stressed-out."

"Not anything like Ivy." I frowned. "How's she doing?"

Brea gave me a pained smile. "Fine. Well, gotta go. Dresses to make, weddings to run. Bye!"

Though I should work, I wanted to look for clues. I still wasn't sure if Belle was a complete dead end. What if it was a disgruntled staff member? At the very least, I could try to find a good spot to hole up in away from everyone.

All the guests had arrived in time for the rehearsal dinner, which I was

told that everyone was invited to in order to keep the peace amongst the Svenssons.

The lodge was packed. There were lots of potential suspects with people crisscrossing, either carrying in bags or out skis, snowboards, or other winter gear.

Then I saw her.

Belle.

I pressed against a column to watch her.

She seemed happy; she was laughing. Not giddy like a usual bride but not miserable or anxious. She seemed like herself. At least, she seemed like she was all the other times I'd met her.

"Cousin Mark."

Dammit.

I should have been watching my six.

I steeled myself.

"Dana."

Shit.

"And Wes. How are you? How was the flight?" I asked politely.

A little girl ran up and clung to my cousin's legs. He picked her up.

"Say hi to Cousin Mark," he instructed.

"Hi, Mark." Aspen Marie, Wes's daughter, clambered down to give me a hug.

It hurt my heart.

Less now that I was happily married, though it felt like Wes and I would never be more than cautiously fine around each other, or maybe it was just me. I knew Wes wished he and I were closer. And we were closer, but it was still tense to be around him.

"We were about to grab something to eat," Wes said. "Do you want to come? Liz is off with some of the other bridesmaids, and so I've got the little girl for the day."

You can jump in front of a bullet or a speeding train.

"I actually have to go curling," I said quickly.

Dana's lip rose. "Curling."

"Like with the brooms. Brea wants me to bond with the other husbands, so duty calls."

"Oh, okay." Wes seemed disappointed.

I felt bad but not bad enough to stay.

The rest of the guys were already on the frozen pond. The curling sheet, a name just as dumb as the sport, was near a large section of cutout ice near the saunas, so you could heat up until your blood boiled then jump into freezing water—neither of which was my idea of a good time.

Wolf seemed disturbed; Chris and Ryan were really into it, doing the whole broom-sweeping thing and everything.

“Look who graced us with his presence,” Evan said when he saw me.

“I don’t think Belle did it,” I said, lowering my voice. “I talked to Jack and saw her half an hour ago.”

“Who thought she was sabotaging her own wedding?” Ryan scowled.

“Hunter did say there was some talk about her not really wanting a wedding,” Sebastian said, coming to my defense.

“She seems happy.” Evan nodded his head.

On the ice, we saw Belle skating around, delighted to be out in the snowy winter landscape. Her little daughter giggled happily nearby. Neither of them seemed all that warmly dressed.

“What do we do now?” Chris asked.

“Now that all the guests are here,” Evan said, “we should watch them, see if anyone acts suspicious. Maybe do some interviews and talk to people. We can split it up, get lists together, and compare notes tonight.”

I was half paying attention because I was still watching the little girl. I was skeptical of the Svenssons’ ability to properly monitor small children. Greg was arguing with his siblings, who were all suiting up in hockey gear to play a game with the Frosts. His little sisters were tearing around on the ice in skates and pink outfits. His little girl, Freya, was toddling around. Periodically, she would fall but always get back up. I was tense, but I wasn’t going to grab her up because I was pretty sure Greg would use the excuse to slit my throat and dump my body onto my uncle’s lawn.

“Mark?”

I turned back.

“Can you handle the Holbrooks? They’re your cousins,” Evan said.

“I don’t think they had anything to do with it,” I said automatically. “Dana is Belle’s friend, and Wes is their friend, well, sort of. Dana thinks it’s because he’s dumb and easily manipulated.”

“One, Dana is fire,” Ryan said, leaning on his broom. “And two, the Holbrooks are perfect as a suspect. They hate Greg and Hunter. What better way to get back at them than messing with the wedding?”

“I just don’t know if my uncle would do that.” I frowned.

But wouldn’t he? And my father might go along with it.

“It’s just so juvenile,” I said.

“Which kind of described your uncle Walter,” Evan prodded.

I sighed and looked back over the ice.

She was gone.

I dropped my broom and raced on the skates across the ice to the open water, hoping that someone had that little girl. I saw a small pile of clothes next to the edge of the ice and tiny skates. Without even thinking about it, I dove into the water. It was crystal blue and shockingly cold.

Above me in the water, I saw a tiny little swimmer. I surfaced, the little girl giggling in my arms. She was only wearing her thin T-shirt and diapers. My limbs felt sluggish as I tried to lift her up over the edge of the ice sheet.

There was a splash next to me.

“Why didn’t you take your clothes off before going for a swim?” Belle asked me brightly as she swam next to me in a bathing suit. No, not a wet suit—a bikini, like we were in the Caribbean and not slowly freezing to death.

My clothes were waterlogged. I was so cold my teeth couldn’t chatter.

Freya yelled and wriggled out of my numb grasp to dog-paddle over to Belle.

“I thought she had fallen in,” I said. My brain was sluggish. I wasn’t sure how to get back up to solid ground. Maybe I’d just stay here in the numbing cold and slowly sink into it.

Belle looked concerned.

“Oh dear. Let’s get you out before you freeze to death.”

“I’m just glad that little girl’s okay.” My breath was freezing on my face.

“That was sweet of you to worry, but Greg’s been doing swim lessons with Freya, and she’s fine in the water. She floats. You coming in?” She called up to Greg, who was scowling down from the edge of the ice.

Wolf and Evan reached down to help me out of the water. Ryan grabbed the back of my water-soaked jacket and pulled me into a heap on the ice.

“Let’s get you back to the lodge,” Evan said.

“Take the wet clothes off of him first,” Belle called.

“Cannonball!” her brother Jonathan yelled as he, clad only in swim trunks, jumped into the freezing water.

“Why did you jump in with your clothes on?” Jack asked me, peering at me as Chris and Sebastian struggled to remove the wet clothes.

“I thought Freya was drowning, but she wasn’t,” I said through frozen lips. “I’m so cold.”

Greg sneered, “I’m not giving you my coat.”



“I DON’T THINK I’ll ever be warm again,” I said through chattering teeth.

Evan shoved a mug of warm soup in my hands. Wolf put a hot-water bottle in my lap.

“You’ll burn his nuts off,” Ryan scolded, moving it.

“Tea,” Sebastian offered.

“No, brandy,” Chris said, tipping a glass in my mouth.

“Mark!” Wes cried, rushing into the small sitting room that the guys had commandeered.

My cousin patted my head.

“I’m fine.”

Dana strolled in behind him. “Marines always have to be heroes.”

Ryan gave me a pointed look. “We’re going to get you some more food and tea.”

Then the guys left, leaving me alone with my family members.

“So,” I said to Wes. “How’s Uncle Walter doing?”

“You could come home more often and see for yourself,” he said.

“Still an asshole is the answer,” Dana said with a snort. “Not to me, of course.”

“Has he said anything about the wedding?”

Wes shrugged, confused. “No? Why are you asking?”

Before I could make up an excuse, his phone rang.

“Sorry. It’s Liz. One second.”

When he was gone, Dana grabbed my ear, twisting it.

“Ow!”

“Shut up.” Dana put her face close to mine. “You’re hiding something. What is it? If you and that gaggle of morons ruin my best friend’s wedding, you’re going to wish you had drowned in the lake.”

BREA

“Oh my god, Mark, are you okay?”
Liz, Wes’s wife, had texted me and told me Mark had fallen into the lake and almost drowned.
“I’m fine,” my husband said.
I felt his forehead.
“Did someone push you in?” I demanded. “Was it one of the Svenssons?”
Mark and Evan glanced at each other, doing some sort of silent male communication thing... whiiiichhh had never happened before. I couldn’t wait to tell my friends that the guys were warming up to one another!
“No,” Mark said. “A kid fell in. Well, jumped in.”
I suddenly felt the urge to start sobbing.
“You tried to save a little kid?”
Mark huffed out a breath. “Turns out she was fine.”
“I can’t believe you jumped in a freezing-cold lake with all your clothes on to rescue a baby.”
“He’s fine, Brea,” Wolf said as he came into the small sitting room with a tray of soup, followed by Ryan with a pot of tea.
Mark batted their hands away as they tried to force-feed him hot liquids.
I tried to keep the manic grin off my face as I watched them interact.
No one looked like they were about to start yelling. A fight didn’t look like it was about to start. In fact, they seemed almost friendly?
I texted my friends.

Brea: I think the guys are starting to like each other!!!

Amy: I know, isn't it glorious?

Grace: Elsie, were you drugging their food?

Elsie: No comment.

“Oh, Brea, if you're looking for fabric, there's a ton that was dropped off at Amy's and my room. She hasn't been there lately,” Sebastian said, “so I just wanted to let you know.”

“Yeah, she's been knocking back the coffee,” I told him. “She's not leaving anything to chance and is basically sleeping next to the flowers after the confetti fiasco.”

Sebastian smiled. “I guess I know where I'm sleeping tonight.”

“We need the fabric for the draping at the ceremony,” I explained. “The clearing looks a little bare.”

“It's all the pink fabric you could want. I've been making sure no one has messed with it,” Sebastian promised me.

“It's all the—” My eye was twitching.

“It's not supposed to be pink,” Evan and I said at the same time.

“Dammit. Take me to this fabric,” I ordered.

When we arrived in Amy and Sebastian's room, there were boxes and boxes of pink fabric. Bright pink. Barbie pink.

I pawed through them, looking for an invoice or something to tell me where all this fabric had come from because I definitely didn't order it.

“It's going to be fine,” I said, trying to breathe. “Because it was just something extra I wanted...Wait, what am I saying? This is a disaster!”

The guys picked up the boxes and trooped behind me, down to the windowless storage room Ivy had co-opted for our wedding war room.

“Brea,” Ivy called, “you better not be bringing any of that fish spread in here...Oh, hi, Evan.”

He set one of the boxes down.

“Something's going on,” I said to Ivy. “These boxes are all filled with pink fabric.”

“Is that what those were?” Amy cried.

“You should have reviewed it yesterday,” Ivy snapped at Amy.

“I was busy trying to make sure that the rest of my flowers weren't destroyed.”

Grace said, “Ivy, you have been scattered lately. Are you sure you didn't drop the ball?”

“I didn’t drop the ball!” Ivy screeched.

“Ladies, let’s not fight in front of...” I jerked my head to the guys, who looked alarmed.

Normally, my friends and I did try to keep it together, but if you worked with someone day in and day out, sometimes people acted like right bitches.

Sophie shoved the guys out the door.

“Go play video games or something. We’re fine!” she trilled.

With the door firmly shut, Sophie turned back to us.

Elsie crossed her arms.

“This wedding has gotten completely out of hand. We need to get it back on the rails, ladies.”

I sat down, suddenly feeling exhausted. Usually, I could whip out an idea involving fabric, but for some reason, my brain was feeling sluggish.

It’s the jet lag. Or maybe I shouldn’t have eaten all that pickled fermented cod. Yum, fermented cod...

“Brea!” Elsie clapped her hands in front of my face.

I snorted awake.

“I’m here. I did the reading. I just have to find my... Oh my god, I was having this weird dream.”

“You just fell asleep,” Amy said in concern. “Are you feeling okay?”

I yawned and my jaw cracked. “I just need a nap, I think.”

“What are we going to do about the fabric drapes?” Grace asked.

“Bleach?” I said blearily.

“It’s just so pink.” Amy wrinkled her nose.

“We can save it for a baby shower,” I said, yawning again.

“Belle already had a baby.”

“Oh, right. Do you have anything fried and chocolate, Sophie?” I asked. “I need a sugar hit.”

“I just don’t understand,” Ivy fretted.

“Don’t you usually order fabric?” Elsie asked me. “Where is the receipt? Where did you order this from?”

“I don’t think I ordered this batch. Didn’t you order it, Amy? It was in your room,” I asked.

“No. I thought you did,” my friend replied.

“So no one ordered all this pink fabric,” Elsie stated.

“I usually bring extra-white fabric with me,” I said, trying to force my brain to think. “It should have been on the plane we flew in on.”

“Might be with my kitchen stuff,” Elsie suggested as we trooped back into the kitchen. “I didn’t open all of them because I heard that Amy had the fabric in her room.”

There were boxes stacked in a corner. We looked through them.

“Lots of kitchen supplies,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

Sophie handed me a croissant.

“Delicious,” I said around a mouthful.

Grace pulled a box out of the pile and opened it. “White fabric,” she said, holding up a sheet of satin. “Problem solved.”

“No. I mean, yes, but someone ordered pink fabric.” I ate the rest of the croissant.

Ivy blinked. “Why are you all looking at me? I didn’t order it.”

“You’ve been scattered,” I said, licking my fingers. The dark chocolate was making me feel much more alive. “I could eat a dozen of these.”

“I’m jet-lagged,” Ivy groaned.

“You need a croissant,” I said emphatically. “Shoot. I need a croissant. Croissants for everyone.”

“Did you take a pregnancy test yet?” Sophie asked Ivy as we all headed back into the wedding war room.

“I can’t be pregnant,” Ivy hissed as Sophie went and dug through her emergency medical kit and handed Ivy a small thin box.

“This is ridiculous! What are we even going to do if I am? It doesn’t change the fact that someone is ordering pink fabric.”

“It provides an explanation,” I said. “Then we can stop worrying about someone trying to ruin the wedding.”

“No one is trying to ruin the wedding. I swear,” Elsie complained. “If it wasn’t giving the guys something to bond over, I would have shut that shit down so fast when Ryan started in on the conspiracy theories.”

Ivy stomped off, test in hand.

I polished off another chocolate croissant.

“They’re going to be bummed when we tell them it was just because Ivy was pregnant,” I said with a laugh.

“Well, we can’t tell them now. You can’t announce a pregnancy at someone else’s wedding. Word would get around. We’d be blacklisted,” Grace hissed.

My friend stormed back into the room.

“I can’t believe this.” The test was in a plastic baggie.

“You’re going to be a mom!” Sophie squealed.

“Keep your voice down,” Grace hissed.

“We can’t say anything to anyone,” Amy agreed.

“Right. Just going to pretend like this didn’t happen.” I nodded.

“We’ll do a big announcement like three weeks from now,” Grace said.

“So mystery solved,” I said, stuffing the rest of the croissant in my mouth. “Ivy and her pregnancy brain were screwing up.”

Ivy glared at me. “You’re the one eating nasty concoctions. Maybe you’re pregnant and messing up.”

“Moi!” Though now that I thought about it, some pickled squid would go nicely with this croissant. “I have everything under control.”

“Take a test,” Ivy snapped. “I had to pee on a stick, and so should you.”

“Fine,” I said. “I will humor my dear pregnant friend.”



“FUCK,” I said ten minutes later when I was back in the war room. “How did this happen?”

Elsie gave me a Look.

“We used protection,” I protested. “Most of the time?” I winced.

“What are we going to do?” Amy fretted.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying not to hyperventilate. “The dress is fine, and I have all my fabric. Things are fine.”

“Right.” Amy nodded.

Except... Mark had seemed on edge lately. This news would probably push him right over.

SEBASTIAN

“Where’s Mark?” I asked.

We were all assembled in the dark study in the lodge. It was the middle of the night, and the lodge was mostly quiet, especially after Greg had cussed out his college-age brothers, who had been up partying earlier.

“Sorry,” Mark said, hurrying in. “I was trying to weasel information out of Brea. She knows something, I think.”

“Ivy was like that too,” Evan said.

“They couldn’t be sabotaging their own wedding, right?” Chris asked.

“No,” Ryan said slowly. “But I think they know something’s up. They just don’t want to admit it because it could affect their business.”

“Elsie practically bit my head off earlier when I tried to ask her about any unusual events happening,” Evan said. “She was all, ‘Oh there’s definitely not a saboteur loose!’ which means something is definitely up.”

“Let’s look at the facts,” I said. “There have been multiple incidents of things going missing, orders canceled, and then one flat-out potentially deadly event. Mark, you’re sure it’s not the Holbrooks?”

He shook his head. “Not from what Dana said. Belle is her friend, and my cousin would go ballistic if anything ruined this wedding.”

“Even if it was her own father?” Wolf asked.

“Especially if it was my uncle,” Mark stated. “My brother’s too lazy to do anything, while my cousins are too scared of Dana to do anything.”

“So no revenge plans from prior employers and no scorned lovers,” I said, crossing those off the list. “We’ve hit a dead end. I think we need to go

look for clues.”

“What the hell have you all been doing?” Mark demanded, crossing his arms.

“Eating, sleeping,” Chris drawled.

“Not working,” Wolf added with a snort, though there wasn’t a lot of bite in the words.

Chris grinned at him. “Hey, I took your advice and just bought thirty percent of that helium company you were telling me about.”

“Lovely, and now we’re all insider trading,” Evan muttered.

“Let’s get back on topic. We’re going to split up,” I told them. “And find evidence.”

“I’m with Mark because he was in the military,” Ryan said automatically.

“I don’t think some sort of military operative is trying to ruin this wedding,” I said as I handed out flashlights.

“You never know,” Ryan replied.

“Could be aliens,” Mark deadpanned.

“Yep,” Chris said. “Could be.”

“Just look for anything even remotely suspicious,” I told them. “We need a large dataset that we can then analyze.”

Mark and Ryan went down to the great room to start, Wolf and Chris headed to the east wing, and Evan and I went to the west wing.

The sconces in the corridor cast flickering light on the threadbare carpet. There had to be something, some clue, some small arrow to point us in the direction of a suspect. Most of the rooms we passed had been converted into guest rooms. A few of them had retained the original use, like the study we had just met in, and the library.

I eased open the door and used my phone flashlight to look around.

“Shit!” Evan cursed and grabbed my arm as the beam of light illuminated two identical blond girls in flowing white dresses, standing in the middle of the room.

“Good evening,” they chorused in creepy voices.

“Hell no.”

Evan and I backtracked out of the room. We were a few paces down the hall before I could stop myself.

“What the hell was that?” Evan demanded, pointing back the way we’d come. “Were those Greg’s sisters?”

“That was a goddamn clue,” I said. “We need to go back.”

“We need to ask them what they’re doing. Maybe they saw something, or they were lured out,” I said.

“Probably the Svenssons playing a prank,” Evan whispered as we crept back to the library.

I flicked on the light switch, but the two girls were gone.

I frowned. “I didn’t hear them come out behind us.”

“You were breathing so hard that I’m not surprised.”

“You were the one screaming,” I hissed at him.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the hallway. Evan and I readied ourselves for a fight then relaxed when Mark and Ryan appeared.

“What happened?”

“We heard yelling.”

“Just two little girls.” Evan laughed. “Sebastian was spooked.”

“You—”

Evan patted me on the shoulder.

“Find any clues?” I asked.

“Just some toys that I guess Greg’s little sisters left around. Cookbooks, dolls, makeup kits, hairstyling stuff, the like. I dumped them in front of his door,” Ryan said with a smirk as we headed back to the study.

Wolf and Chris were arriving when we got there.

“Find anything?” Wolf asked.

“Not much,” we said and all compared notes.

Wolf and Chris had found bags of pink and purple confetti hidden in a suit of armor.

“How did you find that?” Evan demanded.

“Yeah, we clearly hadn’t searched as thoroughly as Wolf.” Ryan made a face.

“Insurance.” Wolf shrugged. “You just go in assuming people are trying to commit fraud and hide things.”

“I’m not sure what all this means,” I said.

Chris crossed his arms. “The glitter, I would bet, is the Svensson brothers planning some prank.”

“Perhaps.” Wolf pulled out a small black notebook and jotted down a list of the offenses and then a list of the clues we’d found.

I looked over his shoulder as he tapped his pen on the cream-colored paper. It didn’t look like it added up to much to me.

“The rehearsal dinner is tomorrow,” I reminded them. “Maybe someone

will let something slip then.”

ELSIE

“I cannot believe we are going to have two people out pregnant,” Sophie said to me in concern the next morning. She and I both woke up early on the regular. That was just what you did in food service, especially if you had a big rehearsal dinner for six hundred people in eight hours to prep for.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” I said from where I was inspecting the produce.

“Ivy can plan from the couch,” Sophie said, chewing on her lip, “But Brea is pretty active with all that sewing. How are we going to make bridal dresses? That’s a big part of our offerings.” She set a tray of fresh croissants for the day’s breakfast on a cooling rack.

“I mean it’s, what, a few months,” I said, doing the math in my head, “of her being so pregnant she can’t be active. Then obviously the three months postpartum. Then she’d be back. She can sew part-time. That’s basically what she does anyway.”

“No one works as hard as the women who cook,” Sophie quipped.

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“So it won’t be that bad,” Sophie said, selecting a croissant from the rack.

“What if she’s out longer than that?” My stomach sank.

I did the company’s finances, and our team couldn’t afford to be out of commission for a year or longer.

“I’m pretty sure Mark really wants kids,” Sophie argued, “so I’m sure he’ll help, and he has money. They can always hire a nanny or three.”

“Mark Holbrook doesn’t seem like the type of man to be okay with a

nanny raising his kids,” I said to Sophie as I continued to wash the leeks for the grilled lamb I was making.

“Let’s just worry about today’s problems,” Sophie said blithely, slicing into the croissant.

“That attitude is how you ended up homeless and careening toward the cliff of financial ruin,” I reminded her.

My timer beeped, and I went over to check on the soup.

“What the hell?” I said as I took the lid off the pot.

“That’s a lovely shade of pink,” Sophie remarked.

“It can’t be pink,” I practically shouted. “Why is it pink?”

Sophie tasted it with her spoon and smacked her lips.

“It tastes a little bit like beets.”

I grabbed a large slotted spoon, fished around in the soup, and pulled out a large peeled ruby-red beet.

“Dammit. This soup is ruined.” I threw the beet in the sink and stood there, fists on my hips. “What the hell is going on?”

“You can’t blame Ivy or Brea for this one,” Sophie said as she smeared curried herring spread all over a fresh croissant.

I stared at her. “*You.*”

“What?”

“You!” I waved the spoon at her. “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? You put the beet in the soup!”

“I most certainly did not,” Sophie squawked.

“You’re eating weird food.”

“I am eating the herring spread *you made!*” she shrieked, croissant crumbs flying everywhere. “Besides.” She lowered her voice. “I took a test last night. I’m negative.”

I scowled. “At least there’s that. I don’t know what we’d do if the cake and dress were out of commission.”

“Aw, Elsie, you don’t want a little baby bundle of joy?”

“No,” I snapped, still mad about the soup. I didn’t think I was going to be able to salvage it, and it had been reducing since the night before. “I do not want a baby.”

“Am I interrupting?” Ryan said from the doorway.

“You make fresh croissants, and a man comes running.” Sophie giggled.

I was grumpy and really trying not to take it out on Ryan, but it was hard.

“You always have impeccable timing,” I said sarcastically.

Ryan was always unflappable and didn't seem fazed at all by my bad mood.

"I don't suppose you have any meat?" he asked, stealing a croissant.

"You can fish the pink-colored cod out of the pot," I spat.

Ryan winced.

"Another saboteur?"

"*Ryan.*"

"*Elsie,*" he said, mimicking my exasperated tone. Then he smiled at me and leaned down to kiss me.

"Sorry," I said to him. "Someone ruined my soup that I have spent the last twenty-four hours working on, and the rehearsal dinner is today."

Ryan took the lid off the pot and whistled. "Sure is pink."

"Yeah."

He spooned up some into his bowl and ate it with the croissant. "I think it's still tasty. Just serve it anyway."

"I can't serve that," I protested.

"It's going to be dark, *Elsie*, because it's always dark here. Just add some more cream. No one will notice. Everyone is going to be drunk." He took another bite.

"Greg was very specific that this could not be a pink wedding," Sophie warned. "There's no pink on the cake, and there's no pink in the decorations, only blues and muted tones. Belle isn't a girly girl, and we're trying to make sure she feels comfortable and herself at her own wedding."

"Ergo, we cannot roll up with pink soup and serve it to the bride," I added.

"Let's just ask her," Ryan said.

"No!" Sophie and I both shouted.

"Belle did not want to be involved," I hissed at him. "She just wanted to show up and have a good time."

"I've seen her. She is having a good time. But," he added, "she's also pretty no-nonsense, and the nonprofit fund she manages is investing in programs to eliminate food waste. Belle is going to be pissed if she finds out that you all dumped hundreds of gallons of nutritious, tasty soup because it was slightly pink. Food for thought," he said, scooping out more soup. He kissed me then left the kitchen.

I half-heartedly stirred the enormous pot of soup. I had to climb on a step stool to stir it. I hated that it was all ruined.

“Maybe you could just add some more cream and fish stock,” Sophie said.

“I just hate serving something that isn’t perfect. It goes against everything I believe in.”

“You’d think that someone who lived with a teenager would be more flexible,” Sophie said with a snort.

“Deliha knows that I don’t eff around with food,” I reminded her. “I have Deliha training up to be a chef. She’s manning the kitchen back in New York.” I smiled.

Ryan’s little sister was so proud when I told her that she was responsible for the Richmond puppy birthday party. I’d had to bring literally all of my staff with me to manage this wedding—it was definitely one of our bigger and more complicated ones—and Deliha had been so focused and eager to do a good job while I was away. Sure, I’d helped her plan the menu, and we’d prepped some items ahead of time and frozen them, but Deliha was responsible for the transportation, finishing, setup, and takedown.

She had been texting me every hour or so with updates. While I was manning the rehearsal dinner, she was going to be catering the puppy party.

“Do you think she has it under control?” Sophie said as she helped me ladle fish stock into the soup pot.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Sometimes she’s the typical teen, but then, like when she’s catering, I see the flashes of the adult she’s going to become—focused, competent, creative. It’s really, well, I don’t know, moving? Inspiring?”

“Aw! You’re such a mom.” Sophie hugged me.

“I mean, not really,” I said, shooing Sophie off me.

“You really don’t want a baby with Ryan?” Sophie asked.

I slowly stirred the stockpot.

“We sort of talked about it but not really. He was just like, ‘Whatever you want.’ Also, I’m old.”

“You’re not that old. Actresses have babies at your age,” she countered.

“Yeah, but I have my catering company and Ryan’s siblings, and I don’t know—I just never felt a burning desire to be pregnant and have an infant in the house. I like my life the way it is.”

“Isn’t your father-in-law living in your house?”

I sighed. “I try not to think about it.”

I added more heavy cream and then more spices to the soup.

Sophie tasted it. “Yummy!”

“It’s looking less pink,” I said.

“I’m sure people will think it’s delicious,” Sophie assured me.

“This is not up to my usual standard.”

“Let’s just try and get through this wedding. We’re all going to drink heavily when we get back.”

“Well, not all of us,” I reminded her.

WOLF

“I can’t believe they set us in the kids’ section,” Ryan hissed at me.

The guys who were in the wedding party, which included Sebastian and Evan, were seated up closer to where the chandelier had crashed a couple days ago.

“If we didn’t have Mark with us, I bet we’d be closer,” Ryan added.

“Chris got a good spot,” I replied.

Chris was sitting with some of the younger Svenssons. Well, I corrected myself, they were younger than Hunter but still technically grown men with careers.

I looked up at my sometime friend. Hunter had his newest baby daughter on his lap and was sitting up in the front of the open-air space lit by flickering torchlights. I felt slightly wistful, wishing I had a bubbly little baby girl.

Maybe after this wedding, I’d try to talk to Sophie about it, I decided, turning back to my dinner.

“Is this soup pink?” I said, frowning.

“Yeah,” Ryan said unhappily. “There was another incident.”

“Why are you just now telling us?” I asked.

Ryan shrugged.

“What?” Mark prodded.

“Nothing.”

“Ryan,” I snapped.

“Elsie said she doesn’t want a baby,” he said tensely.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I told him sincerely.

“You didn’t discuss kids before marriage?” Mark asked.

“Mark,” I barked.

“What?”

“Of course.” Ryan glared at Mark. “But I have a soon-to-be new baby sibling that I’d like to not have thrown to the whims of fortune,” he spat out. “It sounds like Elsie’s not going to want him to stay.”

I didn’t have siblings, but I was pretty sure I knew what that meant. Ryan wasn’t going to choose anyone over his siblings. He was like the Svenssons that way.

Chris pulled up a chair and squeezed in next to me.

“Did you see?” he said in excitement, “The soup is pink. Oh.” His face fell when he saw Ryan’s expression. “I guess you did.”

“Do you know if the Svensson brothers did it?” I asked him, trying to change the subject in case Ryan didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“Is Belle angry?” Mark asked.

“Dude, I’m only a few tables away from you and not anywhere near the head table,” Chris reminded him.

I saw Sebastian and Evan hurry over.

“The soup is pink,” Evan said.

“Is Belle pissed?” Chris asked.

We looked up. She was happily eating the soup.

“Doesn’t seem like it.” Sebastian shrugged.

“No fair. You all have extra champagne up there,” Chris complained.

Across from us, the little girls at the table were giggling as they ate their soup.

They had pink ribbons in their hair and were wearing pink jackets with fur-lined hoods. They were adorable. Suddenly, all I wanted was a baby with Sophie and me. Though maybe not exactly like those girls. The Svenssons, male and female, were a lot.

I frowned as the girls whispered to one another. I’d spent a lot of time around Hunter, and I could tell when he had a nefarious plot cooking. They had that same shit-eating grin on their faces, just like Hunter had when he was about to ruin your life.

I rubbed my jaw and lowered my voice.

“I think I know who’s been sabotaging the wedding.”

“Who?” Evan hissed.

I glanced over at Greg.

I was pretty sure Sophie might kill me for real if I went over there, took

him away from his soon-to-be bride, and thereby ruined the carefully orchestrated rehearsal dinner she and her friends had planned.

“We’ll catch Greg after the party.”



RYAN WAS NODDING off by the time the party was winding down.

“Can’t hang in your old age?” I teased him.

“Dude, I saw you yawning.”

Chris, younger than us, was dancing on the table with several of the Svenssons.

“Are we doing this or what?” Mark asked.

I looked around for Greg’s little sisters.

“They’re off in the woods somewhere playing,” Sebastian informed me.

“Svenssons have no sense.” I shook my head.

“Did Greg go to sleep?” Ryan asked Evan as he ambled over with more coffee.

“Ha! I don’t think he’s going to sleep the entire weekend, not with all his siblings running loose.”

We saw Greg stalk by with the collar of a younger brother in each hand as he dragged them toward the house.

“If you think you’re going to fly halfway around the world and act like that, you have been sorely misinformed,” he barked at them.

“Let’s go,” I said.

The six of us hurried after him.

“Greg,” I called.

“Fuck off,” he said over his shoulder.

“Tell him he’s supposed to be enjoying his wedding,” one of the younger Svenssons cried.

The kid was covered head to toe in cake.

“I’m not even going to ask. Greg, we need to talk with you when you’re done with them,” I said.

“About what?” he said, still cutting a path through the snow.

“About your sisters,” I stated carefully.

Greg’s hackles went up. He released his two younger brothers.

“Go back to the house shower and go to bed,” he ordered. “Do not let me

see you out here until tomorrow.”

“Yessir.”

“What about my sisters?” Greg asked, voice dangerously quiet.

Chris took a step back.

“Look,” Evan told him. “While Ivy and the girls don’t—”

“You mean the grown women running a wedding-planning business?”

His eyes narrowed.

“Er, yes. They like to make sure that the bride and groom don’t experience any stress on their wedding day. However, there have been a series of mishaps. The pink soup, incorrect gift bags, canceled orders...”

“Pink frosting and pink fabric that wasn’t supposed to be here,” Ryan added.

“We’ve been investigating,” I said, to Greg’s curled lip.

Sebastian interjected, “Wolf is in insurance. They investigate things.”

Mark wisely kept his mouth shut.

“I have a strong suspicion that your little sisters have been, shall we say, amending things in the wedding,” I told him.

“You think they’re trying to ruin it,” Greg said, voice cold.

“We’re not trying to ruin it!” several little-girl voices cried.

The gaggle of Greg’s little sisters ran up, followed by the two younger brothers who had apparently gone to gloat about their sisters being in trouble.

“We’re making it better!”

“The pink soup was awesome,” one girl whooped and high-fived her sister.

“I cannot believe you,” Greg thundered.

Mark sucked in a breath. The girls didn’t seem bothered at all.

“You can’t just go changing the wedding. It’s not your wedding, you all,” Greg said, kneeling down in front of them. “It’s Belle’s.”

Enola, the oldest, crossed her arms. “It’s too masculine and needs some pink and some glitter.”

“You don’t even like pink,” Greg argued with her.

“I don’t like *Barbie* pink. This is millennial pink. It’s just a touch,” Enola declared.

“You can’t have a blue wedding,” one girl, who looked to be about five, declared. “This doesn’t look like a wedding.”

“We did Belle a favor,” the little girl declared and stamped her foot, “And I will die on that hill.”

Greg opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. Before he could figure out what to say, we heard Ivy shout, “Evan, I can’t believe you’re bringing problems to the groom!”

GRACE

“**W**hat are they up to?”

Ivy was my very dear friend, but the closer we got to a wedding, the more stressed she got. Usually, she tempered that stress with snacks and treats that Elsie and Sophie would put aside for her, but today, she had consumed only three almonds, some seltzer water, and a few slivers of ginger, and she was—dare I say—a downright bitch.

She’s pregnant, I reminded myself, as I snapped a few more candid shots. *She can’t help it.*

I snapped a few pictures of Freya. She was in her uncle’s arms, giggling, laughing, and clapping her hands as the uncles on her dad’s side sang impromptu karaoke by the bonfire.

“They’re up to something,” Ivy hissed. She grabbed my arm and pointed at the group of six men trailing after Greg Svensson.

“I’m getting to the bottom of this,” she insisted.

She turned on her heel and stomped off after the guys.

“Ivy, Ivy, wait!”

I raced after her. My fellow wedding planners raced after her into the dark woods.

We stumbled around in the dark until we found the guys talking to Greg.

“Step away from the groom now!” Ivy yelled.

I shone my flashlight, illuminating the group of guys... and little girls.

“They’ve been sabotaging the wedding, Ivy,” Evan said to her.

“What?” I was shocked.

The little girls in their pretty dresses stared up at me innocently with big

gray eyes.

Greg was furious. "I can't believe you all."

"What's going on here? This wedding is just complete chaos."

Crap. It was the bride, and she didn't look happy.

"I am so sorry," Ivy said to Belle. "You are the bride, and this is not how your wedding should be going. This is not the type of product we like to deliver. We are so, so sorry."

"Oh, honestly," Belle said, sounding exasperated. "I'm not angry. This wedding has been amazing. With this many Svenssons, I expected this thing to go off the rails. You should have told me someone was causing problems. I would have gotten to the bottom of this. I hate that you're unnecessarily stressed."

She turned to the little girls. "You made their jobs harder," Belle scolded, "That's not nice. Please apologize."

The girls threw themselves at her, wailing.

"We wanted you to have a nice wedding."

"It is a nice wedding, and I'm very happy with it," Belle said.

"There's not enough pink."

"Or sparkles."

"The soup was pink." A smile played around Belle's mouth.

"She noticed," Elsie hissed.

Ryan grimaced.

Ivy made a gagging noise. "Yeah. It was pink."

"There was a beet in it," Enola said proudly.

Greg glared at her. Enola glared back.

Ivy clutched her stomach.

I looked at her in concern.

"Ivy, are you feeling okay?" Belle asked in concern. "Do you need to lie down? Why don't you go rest?"

"I will go down with the ship," she groaned. "This is a disaster."

"It's wonderful," Belle assured her.

"Pink pink pink!" the girls chanted.

Greg looked like he was about to lose it.

Belle shook her head.

"Why don't you all wear some pink sashes in the wedding?" she suggested.

"We ordered pink fabric and pink flowers for the decoration," the girls

complained.

“My flowers!” Amy shrieked.

“You can’t just mess with someone’s hard work,” Belle said to them. “You all are just as bad as Greg.”

“They’re *what?*” her fiancé snapped. “Why are you coming for me when these morons have been playing Nancy Drew during the wedding?” He pointed at the husbands.

“You all knew about this, and you didn’t tell us,” Ivy turned her anger, really more unhinged rage, on the guys.

I tried to blend into the background.

Evan held up his hands.

“I didn’t know anything, Ivy,” Chris promised.

“Liar,” Mark cried.

“We’re not having pink in the wedding,” Belle said to the girls. “If you wanted pink, you should have asked nicely instead of sabotaging. Look at poor Ivy. You made her sick.”

“That’s not... er...” Sophie clamped her mouth shut.

“Don’t you dare,” Ivy hissed at her.

“If the bride wants some pink in the wedding, I’m sure we can accommodate,” Brea said desperately.

“I am not making a pink cake. I was told not to do a pink cake,” Sophie said flatly. “I can’t redo the cake the night before the wedding. All of the flowers are on it. It’s already decorated.”

“You all don’t have to change anything,” Belle assured my friends and me. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

“You are marrying Greg,” Wolf muttered.

“Fuck you,” Greg snapped.

Ivy was making big gulping sobs.

Belle rested a hand on her back. “It’s going to be okay.” Belle peered at her. “Wait, you look really sick. Have you eaten? Elsie, is there leftover fish soup?”

Ivy retched. “Please no soup.”

“Maybe a gin and tonic?” Belle suggested.

Greg’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m not drinking,” Ivy said, covering her mouth. “Because I’m working,” she yelped, realizing the implication.

“You’re pregnant,” Greg said flatly.

“Oh my god.” Ivy moaned.

“Congratulations,” Belle hugged her.

“You can’t announce you’re pregnant at someone else’s wedding,” she sobbed, “I’m a terrible wedding planner. I’m so sorry, Belle. I resign. We’ll give you a refund.”

“You’re not going to do anything like that. Evan, take her inside and make her lie down,” Belle ordered.

Evan picked up Ivy.

“Girls,” Belle said to Greg’s sisters, “since you all want to plan a wedding so much, why don’t you ask the Wedding in the City ladies how you all can help make the wedding run smoothly. Especially since you have been part of the problem.”

“Can we put in some pink?” Annie, one of the middle-school-aged Svensson sisters, clasped her hands together.

“You’ll have to ask the wedding planner,” Belle chided.

“It’s up to the bride,” Ivy said weakly from Evan’s arms.

Belle pursed her mouth.

“Fine. You all can have one pink item, but Ivy and her team get the final say on what and where and when.”

“Yes. We win!” The girls whooped.

Belle threw up her hands.

“Freya better not turn out like the rest of you lot,” Belle warned Greg.

“Please,” he said smugly. “You know she will.”

“You’re all sore winners,” Belle complained.

Greg smirked and leaned in to kiss her. “You’re the best thing I won.”

Brea was hopping up and down next to me.

“Cool. So we have minions. Ivy’s going to bed, the boys are all friends, and I need to find a tree to pee on.”

“Brea!” Elsie was horrified.

“Don’t be mean. She’s having a baby,” one of the Svensson sisters declared, pointing at Brea.

“I heard you all in the kitchen,” the girl admitted as we all stared at her.

“Served you right for taking that beet out of the soup pot,” she hissed to Elsie.

“Cora,” Belle scolded.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Brea said, hopping from one foot to the other. “We do not announce pregnancies at weddings. Ever. I was even going to wait like a

month after this until I announced, just to make sure I didn't steal anyone's thunder."

Mark had his hand over his mouth. He looked like he was in shock.

Greg chuckled then held out his hand to Mark.

"You're going to be a father. Congratulations for you and Brea both are in order."

Mark shook his hand, seeming dumfounded.

"Welcome to the club," Greg said and slapped him on the back.

"Okay. Congrats, you're going to be a father. I'm going to go pee." Brea raced off.

"You better go make sure she doesn't get lost in the woods," I told Mark after a moment.

He nodded and wandered off.

"Any other pregnancy announcements before I put the whole dog pound on punishment?" Greg asked, amusement dancing around his mouth.

Belle was trying to peel off his sisters, who had wrapped their arms around her legs, begging for mercy.

Chris coughed.

"Yes," Greg said.

"Ryan has an announcement," Chris said, earning him a glare from Ryan.

"Ryan, you're pregnant?" Greg asked, eyebrow raised.

"What? No, that would be weird. Sebastian's company hasn't made that many advances in the biotech field."

"No, but society sure has made a lot of advancements in gold diggers who don't do research before they get knocked up by a seventy-year-old man," Ryan said.

He turned to my friend.

"Elsie, I have to take in my dad's mistress's baby."

"And I thought my family was fucked up," Greg said to Belle under his breath.

"I know you said you didn't want a baby," Ryan told her sadly. "But I can't just abandon this kid."

"Aw, Elsie," Belle said. "It's not so bad to take in your husband's baby siblings. It's all part of the adventure."

"Elsie, Ryan doesn't want to lose you, but he really needs to take his baby sibling when they're born," Evan said to her.

All the guys were grim-faced and serious.

“Elsie, please say something,” Ryan begged. “I know I’m springing this on you, and I know it’s not fair.”

I wondered if my friend was mad. She’d always said she didn’t want a baby, that she was happy with her pets and career.

I cringed. The guys had all finally started to get along, and now was it all over? Were sides going to be picked?

“Why are you all looking at me like that?” Elsie said, incredulous.

“You don’t want a baby,” I reminded her.

“I don’t want to be pregnant and pee behind a tree and puke and only eat saltines and slurp fermented fish eyeballs. Obviously, Ryan’s siblings are going to live with us. I mean, someone has to clean up other people’s messes. We can’t just throw that poor kid to the wolves. I already assumed the baby would be staying with us. I started a 529 plan account and took out some savings bonds,” she said with a shrug.

“Savings bonds,” Chris scoffed. “Crypto is where it’s at.”

“I’m not investing in those bullshit coins you’re shilling,” Elsie said. “Also, Ryan, your dad needs to be out of the house when he gets his prosthetic. And FYI, I already have a contract drawn up for you to gain custody of your younger sister. Lord knows she can’t grow up with your stepmother.”

“Yes! I love you, Elsie!” Ryan whooped and hugged her.

“Yeah, yeah.” She tried to push him off as he kissed her.

“Now that we have thoroughly ruined Belle’s wedding with our announcements, I need to get the midnight snacks ready.”

There was a very loud crash from the rehearsal dinner site and screaming. We all ran up the hill.

“Maybe there was a saboteur after all!” Ryan shouted.

“We didn’t do it,” the girls cried.

“Ah, shit,” one of Greg’s younger brothers, in his early twenties, said when we all ran up.

The table the brothers had been dancing on had collapsed, and they all lay there in a heap of drunk young men, cake, and champagne.

“The party is over,” Greg thundered. “All of you, go back to your rooms.”

“But...”

“Now.”

Greg turned to me. “Grace, please take their picture. I’m getting it framed and hung in my office.”

RYAN

“**M**an, I love weddings.”

“No, you don’t,” Elsie said with a smirk.

“I liked our wedding,” I reminded her. “And I liked this one. The food was amazing. Whoever the chef is married to must be a pretty lucky guy.”

I winked at her.

Greg had seemingly decided to turn a blind eye to his siblings’ antics for one night, and the Svenssons were out of control. The buffet had been eaten, and the cake had been cut. There was some pink after all on the cake in the form of candied pink flowers. Now one of the Svensson brothers who liked to think of himself as a DJ had hijacked the sound system and was playing his own brand of Nordic techno.

“I’m losing my hearing, and I’m going to have a splitting headache tomorrow,” I said as the noise echoed around the oversized barn where the reception was being held.

“What?” Elsie yelled over the music and took something out of her ear. “Secret earplug. You might say this isn’t my first wedding rodeo.” She winked at me.

I leaned down to kiss her.

“Are you sure you’re okay with taking my baby sibling?” I asked her, smoothing down a curl that had escaped from her no-nonsense bun.

“Of course,” she said. “Like I told you, that was always the plan. I hope your step-mistress—”

“Is that what we’re calling her?”

“That’s what Deliha calls her.”

“Man, teenaged girls,” I said with a grin.

“I hope the new baby is a girl because, you know, girls rule.”

I smiled softly at her.

“I know you’re a high-powered boss babe, but it does, I admit, warm my cold, cash-obsessed heart to see you excited about my illegitimate sibling. I know you don’t want to hear it, but you’re a really good mom,” I said. “Deliha adores you.”

Elsie shrugged but seemed pleased.

“I get up early and”—she waved an arm—“stay up late. So no sweat. Besides, I don’t have to grow it, and I can still drink.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She slapped my thigh affectionately. “You’re such a sappy romantic.”

“Ready for our next assignment, Captain!”

“Look sharp, girls,” Elsie said, saluting as the gaggle of Svensson sisters rushed over.

“We are at the point of the evening where we pass out snacks to drunks.”

“Snacks!” several of the girls cheered.

“You’re on punishment,” Belle said, sailing by. “No snacks unless Elsie tells you it’s okay.”

Brea had really outdone herself on the dress. Belle looked like a Nordic goddess.

“Since I’m here,” I told them, “I’ll take my snack now.”

One of the little girls looked me up and down.

“I thought you were the hired help.”

“They wound me. This is a very expensive suit. Brea hand-embroidered all these snowmen.”

“The trays of mini blini with caviar are in there on the counter. I need two of you to pass out vodka cocktail shots,” Elsie instructed the girls. “What?” she said to my horrified look.

“I take my compliments back,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“To be fair, we are in Europe,” Elsie countered. “Also, Enola makes a mean old-fashioned.”



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, many guests had gone back to their rooms, and the rest of the guests had migrated over to the after-party, which Elsie and her friends had set up in a clearing.

Ivy had insisted on staying until the bitter end and was stifling yawns as she gave orders for the party while Evan hovered nearby.

“Bros-in-law!” I called to the other guys who were parked nearby. “Anyone’s testicles frozen off yet? Do we need to huddle together like penguins to keep those who have not yet managed to procreate safe? As someone with a multitude of siblings, I’ll sacrifice myself to the outer layer of the huddle.”

Mark smirked.

Wolf scowled.

“Wolf, don’t look so concerned,” Sebastian said mildly. “My company has made several advancements in fertility technology. I’m fairly confident that we could extract sperm from a frozen body part.”

“And people think my company is weird.” I whistled.

Evan threw an arm around Wolf’s shoulders.

“He wishes Sophie had made a big life-changing announcement.”

“You’ll get it next year. You want to space these things out,” I told him. “Then we can have a whole decade of babies and young fatherhood.”

“Well, youngish,” Chris said with a snort.

“Hey, I still have all my hair,” I said lightly.

Evan glowered at Ivy, who was pacing around with her clipboard.

“I wish she would sit down,” he muttered.

“I can’t believe Brea has so much energy,” Mark remarked.

The seamstress was rushing around after Belle, trying to pin up the hem of her dress.

“White linen and outdoor weddings do not mix,” Brea stated, coming over to us.

Ivy came over, too, with the other girls.

“We have the after-party in an hour and a half,” Ivy said, tapping her clipboard, “and then there’s brunch.”

“Do you all ever sleep?” I asked.

“Not on a wedding like this,” Elsie said grimly.

“You guys should take a break and come dance.” Belle waved to Elsie and her friends. “Enjoy your hard work.”

Sophie checked her watch. “I need to start on the pastries in a little bit.”

“This is insane,” Wolf muttered.

“We have standards to uphold,” Amy said primly.

“You work harder than Chris,” Wolf joked.

Grace looked concerned.

“What?” Wolf said, throwing his arm around Chris. “This is my bro-in-law. Right, Ryan?”

Sophie held up her hands. “I’m glad you all are getting along.”

“It’s a wedding miracle,” Elsie joked.

“We are the real dream team here,” I said to Elsie. “We don’t want to pat ourselves on the back, but this wedding literally wouldn’t have happened without us, so I think you all owe us a dance. I kid, I kid.”

Elsie kept a very large and very pointy fork in her kitchen tool belt.

“I knew weddings were a lot, but I guess I didn’t know quite how hard you had to work,” Wolf remarked.

“This was probably one of the worst ones,” Evan said. “Right?”

“Um, actually, no. This was one of the easier ones,” Ivy said.

“No bridezillas,” Sophie concurred.

“Since this is a super-duper easy wedding, you can’t say no to a dance.” I bowed to Elsie.

“I’m wearing Crocs.”

“They’re your sexy wedding Crocs.”

“Fine,” Elsie said and handed the eldest Svensson sister a tray of shrimp puffs along with her tool belt. “Don’t lose that,” she warned.

All twelve of us—wedding planner and bro-in-law—joined the bride and groom on the dance floor.

Belle was dancing in the moonlight with her new husband.

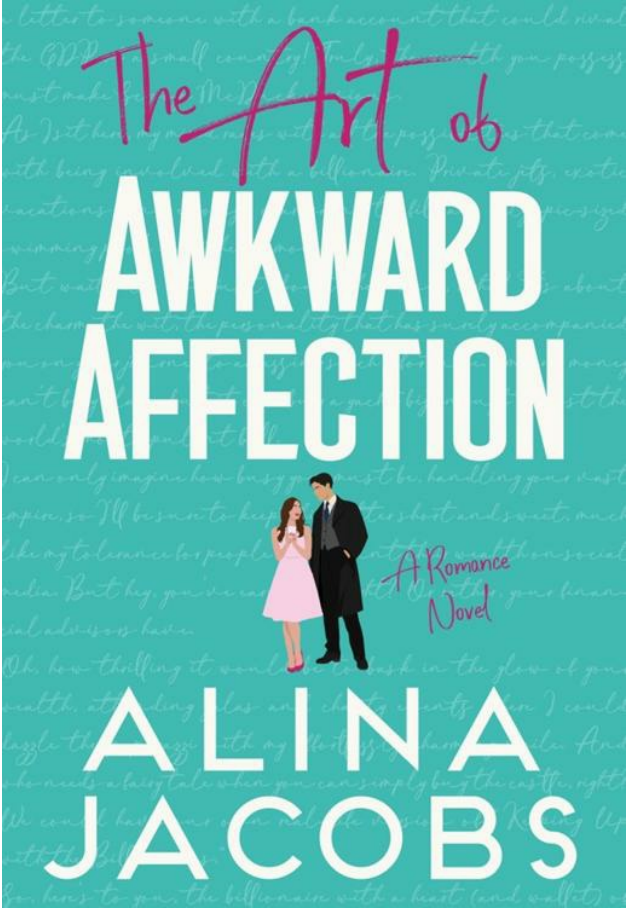
I nodded to them and spun Elsie around.

“A beautiful way to start the next chapter of your life,” I said.

Elsie smiled. “That’s why no matter how crazy they get, I’ll always love weddings.”

THE ART OF AWKWARD AFFECTION SNEAK PEAK

Remember Grayson, Hudson's friend and Gracie's new boss? Keep reading for a sneak peek of his book, *The Art of Awkward Affection*.



SYNOPSIS

I admit it was me who shouted, “Looking good, hot stuff!” at Mr. Richmond this morning, but I didn’t mean it like *that*.

Honest, I was paying him a compliment! That’s kind of what I do: I’m a proud, small-town Floridian, and Manhattan is craving some Florida sunshine—nothing like a sincere compliment to turn those New York frowns upside down!

Grayson Richmond needs some positivity.

Have you seen how grumpy he is?

Disgustingly wealthy and unfairly hot, the man wears an arrogant snarl almost as well as he wears a suit.

Drool!

The word tyrant doesn’t do him justice, though, when he has me dragged into his office to be reprimanded.

Just FYI, the exact wrong thing to do in that situation is to tell him you’re the one who’s been leaving notes of positive affirmation in his underwear drawer.

As the lowly assistant of the assistant to the secretary of Mr. Grumpy Pants himself, what else do you expect me to do while I’m in his swanky penthouse dropping off the dry cleaning and rehomeing Grayson’s food?

No, I am not making a mockery of this company or of him. Believe me, my credit card debt and I are *very* happy to have this job.

And to have a chance to sprinkle a little joy in Grayson's life.
I am a kindness fairy on a mission!

Cupcakes, corgi stickers, and surprise visit from my emotional support iguana? Only scowls.

But when he catches me in his penthouse with my blouse undone?
That earns me a genuine, panty-dropping smile.

However, as the cracks form in his carefully controlled life I realize...
Grayson has a dark secret.

And I don't know if there's enough sunshine in the world to save him.

This is an enemies-to-lovers, grumpy New York billionaire boss versus Florida-sunshine assistant, stand-alone romantic comedy! If you like cupcakes, sparkly stickers, and hot guys in suits whose rigid routines get a hilarious shake-up, this book is for you! Happily ever after guaranteed!

LEXI

There was something extremely demoralizing about running in the morning. I'd go home, but I was down to two work outfits I could reliably fit in, three if I didn't eat lunch.

The sweat froze in my snarled hair, my lungs were about to collapse, and my legs were threatening to give out. I'd been trudging down this path for what felt like an eternity, but really it had only been about thirty seconds, because based on past experience, that was the longest I was able to keep this pace without passing out.

"Look on the bright side. At least you're able to run," I reminded myself.

A woman who didn't look a day older than seventy-five jogged past me, pushing a little toy Maltese in a dog stroller.

"Keep up the good work," I wheezed.

She reacted like I was about to mug her.

"You're an inspiration!" I added as she fumbled in her pocket for pepper spray.

"Leave my dog alone!" she shrieked.

I was undeterred. Manhattan was nothing like Florida—no sunshine, no lazy beach days, and no nice people. Everyone was grumpy. Except yours truly!

A man in bright-orange work clothes was emptying the trash.

"Thank you for your dedication to keeping the park clean!" I called out.

He muttered something that sounded like "Why can't the city clean out all these crazy people" and ignored me.

"Your beard looks nice. Really accentuates your cheekbones." I flashed

him a thumbs-up.

“Lady, I don’t have any cash on me.”

“Compliments are free!” I chirped out.

I believed that you must be the change you want to see in the world. A random act of kindness could go a long way to making Manhattan a better place.

I slowed to a walk. Well, a limp. The most exercise I got on a normal basis was watching Henry Cavill’s Instagram workout vids.

When I moved to New York to start my glamorous life in the big city, everyone said that with all the walking, the pounds would just melt off. In anticipation, I had bought new clothes that were, let’s say, an aspirational size. However, no one said that the food would be amazing, or that there was so much of it. Everywhere. On every corner. Don’t tell Walt, but the food in Manhattan might even be better than the food at Disney World.

Yes, Florida girl here and unashamed Disney adult. It is the happiest place on Earth, after all.

I made sure my Minnie Mouse ears were still attached to my frizzy red hair. Did I look weird? Maybe, but if the sight brightened someone’s day, then wasn’t it worth it?

I waved to a homeless guy sitting on a bench.

“I like your pigeon’s sweater,” I called cheerfully. “Did you knit that yourself?”

“I did,” he said happily. “Thank you!”

I beamed.

See? Compliments make the world a better place.

“When you go back with all the other rat people in the sewer,” the guy continued, dropping his voice conspiratorially, “can you tell them to chew through the cables coming out of the UN? The messages to the aliens they’re sending out are messing with the airwaves, and I can’t get a good signal on the sports station.” He tapped the piece of wire duct-taped to his cheek.

“Will do!” I sang out and skipped off. Well, stumbled off. I had a megacrap in my leg.

“Just think happy, positive thoughts,” I told myself. “You get a sticker if you can run for fifteen minutes.” I had bought specialty stickers at a store that—get this—only sold stickers! Manhattan was awesome! We didn’t have anything like a specialty sticker store in my small Florida town.

“Thirty seconds down and fourteen and a half minutes to go,” I pep-

talked myself. “You can do it. You got this.”

I took off at an ineffective sprint. Last night McKenna and I had watched YouTube videos on running while eating frozen pizza. I wasn’t an expert by any means, but based on what I’d learned from the videos, my form was atrocious.

“It’s the thought that counts. A sticker for effort,” I huffed out, my breath a hazy cloud in front of me. My keys and phone, gripped in my hand, jingled as I ran.

Ahead of me, coming down a path that intersected mine at a diagonal, was a man who had perfect running form. Well, he had a perfect everything form—tall, broad shoulders, handsome face partially in shadow from his black hood, long muscular legs like springs propelling him forward—and he ran like an Olympian, body in perfect sync. The muscles under the tight workout jacket flexed as his torso twisted.

I swooned.

Then I sucked in a breath.

“Looking good, hot stuff!” I yelled out the compliment.

The man broke stride, and his head snapped toward me.

I flashed him a thumbs-up as I passed him and kept up my trudging pace.

“You. Can’t. Afford. New. Clothes,” I gasped out in time to my heavy footfalls.

Gravel crunched behind me. I moved aside to let whoever was behind me pass.

Instead a large hand grabbed the back of my sparkly green Tinker Bell jacket complete with fairy wings.

I yelped in surprise as the man I’d just passed spun me around to face him.

“Are you out of your mind?” His deep voice—rich, dark, baritone—rang out in the cold air.

I smiled up at him gamely. “Do you like this jacket? Bought it in a pop-up shop outside of Cinderella’s castle. It’s kind of expensive but worth it, if I do say so myself.”

The man’s face was in shadow, but I could see enough of his downturned mouth to know he was not amused.

“You are completely crazy.”

“Anyone out here running at cold-o’clock in the morning is crazy,” I joked.

“Look, lady, what you’re doing is dangerous. You can’t talk to strangers.” He pushed back the jacket hood to reveal dark-brown hair that fell rakishly over his forehead, piercing green eyes, and a strong jaw.

My eyes bugged out of my head. *Oh no. No, no, no.*

Don’t recognize me.

There are lots of people in this park. Just act normal. We’re being so totally normal.

I could feel my eyes flitting around in my head, trying to look anywhere except for at the guy who was my boss. Well, my boss’s boss’s boss. I was the assistant to the assistant to the secretary to Grayson Richmond.

The man who now stood here before me. All six foot five of him.

“Every stranger is a friend you haven’t met yet.”

Surely he didn’t recognize me, right? All those billionaires were so far up their own behind that they didn’t even know they had assistants.

I reached up to fuss with my Minnie Mouse ears, hoping that I looked disheveled enough that Mr. Richmond wouldn’t put two and two together and realize he’d seen me around his office.

His lip curled up into a sneer.

“Did you just move to this city?”

“No,” I said defiantly. “I’ve been here four months.”

“Small-town girl,” he mocked, “naïve, sheltered. You shouldn’t be out by yourself in the real world.”

“I’m an adult!” I shrieked.

“Who still believes in fairy tales and watches Disney movies.” He flicked one of the sparkly wings.

“Who doesn’t like Disney?” I shot back. “You insult the Mouse, I’m throwing hands.”

“So that explains why you’re waltzing around like some untouchable little princess, talking to strangers and feeding the local rat population.” A sneer on his perfect mouth.

“I’m doing good deeds. It’s telling that someone like you who just sits around all day in his fancy-pants penthouse and yells at his employees doesn’t see the power that positive affirmations have on society.”

When I was upset, angry, nervous, or scared, my voice got high-pitched—an unfortunate affliction which meant no one took me seriously at all. Now I was practically squeaking, I was so incensed.

Mr. Richmond’s eyes narrowed.

I babbled on, hoping he didn't realize that I'd actually been in said penthouse.

"People need compliments; people need human interaction, and I have to set the example."

"I don't give a shit about any of that. You cannot talk to strangers," he exploded.

"You're not my mom. I'll talk to whoever I want."

"You can't change the world with compliments and good deeds," he snapped. "The only thing you're going to do is get yourself hurt. You especially can't compliment strange men. One will kidnap you, and no one will ever see you again."

"News flash, *sir*, you're the only person who's come close to kidnapping me. Kidnapper!" I pointed at him.

He grabbed my wrist, his much larger hand now a vise.

I tugged my arm angrily.

My key ring, which was mostly composed of sparkly princess key chains, jangled noisily.

"I am not a kidnapper," he snarled, his deep, gravelly voice like a fairy-tale hero's. His eyes were dark, and his face was a mask of fury.

"Then let go of me." I tugged as hard as I could, but his arm didn't budge.

"Not until you promise me you'll stop talking to strange men."

His eyes flicked down to my wrist, then back to my face, then back to my wrist.

"Wait ..."

He twisted my arm. The key ring clanged.

Crap-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.

His gaze zeroed in on the key fob for Richmond Electric.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"Found it. Was taking it back to the police precinct. You know, good-deed fairy here." My voice sounded like I'd been huffing helium.

"Do you work for me?" he asked slowly.

"No ..."

"You do. I think I recognize you."

"Technically I work for your assistant." I held up a finger. "Therefore, you need to apologize for yelling at me about talking to strange men. You're not a stranger. You are perfectly safe—if a little sweaty and anxious. You should try eating some cheese."

“So you knew who I was when you ...” He faltered.

“Called you hot?” I gave him a pained smile.

“You catcalled me,” he said, horror slowly dawning on his unfairly symmetrical face.

I was indignant. “I most certainly did not.”

“I’m your boss.” He was incensed.

“Don’t act huffy. I’m the one who should be offended. I work for you, and you didn’t know who I was.” I jammed my finger in his muscular chest.

“Stop changing the subject.” He slapped my hand away.

“Stop falsely accusing people,” I retorted. “I wasn’t catcalling you. I said that you were looking good. I didn’t yell out, ‘Clap those cheeks’ or ‘Daddy, let me hit that.’ Now that’s a catcall.”

He sucked in a breath.

“I was complimenting your form,” I said, enunciating the words. “Your running form. But don’t worry, I take it back.”

“You can’t take it back.”

“I take back my compliment.” I did a pantomime of snatching something out of the air in front of his face.

“Fine, as long as you don’t catcall strangers anymore.” He wagged a finger in my face like he was scolding a child.

I batted at his hand.

“You’re not the boss of me.” I sounded like Alvin the Chipmunk.

“Yes, I literally am your boss.” His eyes were dark.

“You grouchy, depressing Manhattanites will not suppress my Florida sunshine,” I declared. “I will continue to bestow compliments. In fact, I’m giving you a new compliment right now.”

His lips thinned.

“You have a very lovely deep voice and nice eyes,” I said angrily. “Does anyone else here think he has beautiful eyes?”

Everyone in the park was studiously ignoring us.

“Well, you do. Beautiful green eyes. So there. And you’d look better if you smiled.”

GRAYSON

I watched the short, dumpy redhead—*your assistant*—trudge in a plodding jog down the path.

A woman screamed as my assistant told her she liked her sunglasses.

Who does she think she is?

I dug through my memories for a name. Lexi Collins. My secretary had mentioned hiring another assistant a few months ago. I hadn't realized it would be that glitter-covered girl.

A sea of freckles on her face, short—extremely short—easy for someone—a man—to pick her up and carry her away, Lexi Collins was a problem.

I fought an ugly battle with myself not to follow Lexi, to make sure she wasn't kidnapped.

Despite what Lexi claimed, I was right. She could get kidnapped. In true New York fashion, people had pretended like they didn't notice our argument. I could have picked her up, thrown her over my shoulder, and walked off with her, and no one would have stopped me.

Exhibit A on why she couldn't go around complimenting strange men. Who knew what could happen?

I knew.

I shook off the feeling of dread then glanced over my shoulder. I couldn't see Lexi through the trees anymore.

Maybe she's already gone.

It wouldn't do for me to follow her now.

She'll be fine, I tried to tell myself. But it was no use—my natural state was all systems at DEFCON 1, just waiting for something horrible to happen,

waiting for the ax to fall. Now that I had amassed my billions, situated my company as the leading energy conglomerate east of the Rockies, and just closed out the successful development of the tallest residential skyscraper in Manhattan, I had run out of distractions. All that was left to do was spiral into doomsday scenarios.

I needed to find balance and closure.

Except now I was adding one more concern to my plate—whether or not my oblivious assistant was going to end up on one of those unsolved-mystery reality TV shows.

Why didn't Ms. Collins have any sense of self-preservation?

I fumed while I took a cold shower, fumed while I drove to the office, and fumed while I stalked to the glass-enclosed corner office. Employees scattered out of the way, the new hires from the fall still on edge from being in my presence.

I stood in my office at the window, an expanse of glass that offered some of the most amazing views in Manhattan. Millions and millions of dollars of glass on a tower with my name on it. All these billions, and for what? It hadn't meant a damn thing, hadn't gotten me what I wanted more than anything in the world.

At least it meant I could fire that redhead.

I sent a message to legal and HR.

Then she could be someone else's problem, someone else's worry to obsess over.

And when Lexi was gone, I was going to figure out how I was going to survive the rest of my miserable existence.

LEXI

The scalding-hot water sluiced down my hair, plastering it to my neck. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine that I was still in Florida, standing on the beach in the humid rain, the ocean soothing in the background.

Someone banged on the door of the bathroom.

“You’ve been in there an hour!” a man complained.

“Women need time to get ready,” I shot back over the sound of the water and the ocean music playing from my phone.

I turned off the shower and wrung out my hair. Technically these shower rooms were for people who biked into the office. Richmond Electric had developed a new way to connect decentralized green energy to the electrical grid, and the shower rooms were both a perk and a marketing opportunity to promote how much they cared, as much as a soulless corporation headed by a self-absorbed, coldhearted billionaire could care.

I let myself fantasize briefly about running a PR campaign, heartwarming and funny, about the company’s commitment to the environment. Ha! Like I was ever going to get to use my communications degree. I was just the girl who collected the dry cleaning. I wasn’t allowed to so much as proof a marketing brochure, let alone run a PR campaign.

“You’re getting paid,” I reminded myself as I smeared the steam off the mirror. Well, not that much. Free hot water was free hot water, and if it was on Grayson Richmond’s dime, all the better. Not to mention I didn’t have anything like this water pressure in my apartment.

There was more banging on the door.

“There are other shower rooms,” I shrieked.

Calm down, Squeaky Mouse.

That's what my dad always affectionately called me.

I had really been trying to keep my voice from sounding like a sugar-high kindergartener's, and usually I had it together, but Grayson Richmond had thrown me off.

How dare he? Sure, not everyone was appreciative of my compliments, but I liked to think that even if they brushed me off, at least subconsciously my kind words might brighten their day. But no one had ever gotten in my face and yelled at me for complimenting them.

"It wasn't a catcall," I said stubbornly. There was no way I'd think Grayson Richmond was hot. He was not. I wasn't attracted to men just because they were good looking. I was in it for the personality. And Grayson Richmond had a terrible personality.

I gave my frizzy red hair one more twist with the towel then hung it on a hook on the wall and stared at my porcelain skin, highlighted by almost-glowing purple eyes ... *psych!*

My eyes were muddy brown, the color of a neglected pool that was actively breeding mutant mosquitos. I was insanely jealous of Grayson Richmond's eyes. He didn't deserve those green eyes. I was a redhead. Green eyes should be mine. To be fair, green eyes would go better with red hair like my mom's.

You couldn't buy my color red in a bottle because it was so ugly no one wanted it. Curly and frizzy, my hair only looks good the first ten minutes after a shower at which point it dries out and goes *floof*. Was I regretting getting a layer cut? Yes. Yes, I was.

I rubbed sunscreen over my freckled skin. Even though Manhattan was perpetually overcast, I did not need another freckle. I didn't have a sprinkling of freckles where you thought, *how adorable*. I had you're-going-to-have-skin-cancer-in-your-early-forties freckles.

I swiped on mascara so I didn't look like a naked mole rat. For me there would be no makeover moment where I'd dramatically pin my hair up, dust blush on my face, and turn into a bombshell. Been there, done that. Let's just say that all talk of senior prom is banned in my house.

A lean man in his bicycle gear and glasses was tapping his cycling shoe angrily when I waltzed out of the shower room in a cloud of steam.

I couldn't help but compare him to Grayson in his workout gear.

There was no comparison.

“I’m complaining to HR about this,” the cyclist told me in annoyance. “Showers are for bike riders only.” He adjusted his glasses.

Instead of taking the bait, I looked him up and down, flashed him a thumbs-up, and grinned. “I can tell you really do ride a lot. You got those biker buns.”

He blushed and puffed up. “Really? Well, yeah, biking’s actually kind of dangerous, but I love it. You know, good exercise and gets your heart rate up. Don’t worry. I won’t actually say anything to HR. Have a great day.”

See? The power of compliments. And most men liked it when you told them they looked good.

So there, Mr. Richmond.

I left my towel on the communal drying rack in the basement locker room then swiped my key fob up to the executive floor.

“Hi, Regan!” I waved to one of the HR employees as I passed her office. “How are your Spanish lessons coming?”

“Oh my gosh. Well, I have apparently been telling people I want to buy a pickle when I really was asking how their day was going. So you know. Not great.”

“But you’re trying,” I said encouragingly. “That’s more than me. Here.” I peeled off a sparkly fairy sticker from my sticker compact and handed it to her.

She beamed.

The assistant and the secretary to Mr. Richmond had their desks off to the side of a mezzanine that overlooked the accounting floor.

Notice I said the assistant and the secretary had desks. I, as the assistant to the assistant, had a stool next to the assistant’s desk.

McKenna was already working.

“You made it just in time,” she whispered to me out of the corner of her mouth. “Anthym has been complaining you weren’t in yet.”

“I do so much unpaid overtime it’s not even funny,” I said, opening up her bottom desk drawer and riffling through for the Oreos I had stashed there.

Don’t judge. I ran a whole sixteen minutes today, and on an empty stomach, no less.

“Anthym had me trekking all over town last night so I could pick up a set of very specific snack items for the fancy gift basket she’s putting together for one of Mr. Richmond’s clients.” I twisted the Oreo and licked the cream off.

“Like, why didn’t she know sooner what she needed? I had to go to one guy’s home to pick up this freaking wedge of cheese.” I dunked one of my Oreos in my specialty coffee mug that was shaped like Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage.

“So sue me if I come into work at eight instead of six thirty like she does. I don’t even get paid that much; I don’t even have a desk.”

“Don’t let her hear you complaining,” McKenna warned. “She read a text message I was writing to Grenadine and bitched me out about not being grateful to be in the presence of Mr. Richmond because I complained that this office was freezing cold and I wanted to use my space heater.”

Space heaters, blankets, and hot-water bottles were verboten in the office. Maybe on the lower floors people could sneak them in, but here on the executive floor? Don’t even think about it.

I balanced my laptop on my knees.

At least I could sit down. Anthym forced us to wear heels, skirts, and pantyhose. She said this was a conservative office and we represented Mr. Richmond, and therefore we needed to do the company proud.

My hose were from the dollar store and held together by prayers and clear nail polish. My feet were pinched in the knockoff heels.

My inbox pinged with an incoming message. It was one of those mass emails that goes out—you know the ones where they’re like, “Please make sure that all employees use a lidded microwave bowl when heating eggs,” but everyone knows it’s about microwave-abuser Albert.

Yeah, that’s this email.

And it’s about me.

FROM: Brittany Dawn, HR Director

TO: Ladies of Richmond Electric

It has come to our attention that some people have been seen catcalling men around town.

I just want to remind everyone at the Richmond Electric family that even during nonwork hours, you still represent the company and its values. Let’s keep it classy, ladies!

Brittany Dawn

“OH MY GOD!” McKenna was snickering behind her hand. “You catcalled him?”

“I told you on the phone, it wasn’t a catcall,” I hissed. “I was paying him a compliment. He’s just too much of an antisocial grump to appreciate it.”

“Did you tell him he had a nice ass?”

“No.” I took a swig from my coffee mug.

“Because Mr. Richmond does have a nice ass, doesn’t he?” My friend waggled her eyebrows.

“Anthym never keeps me here long enough to get more than a glimpse,” I reminded her.

We both looked across the floor of the minimalist office space to Grayson Richmond’s office.

He paced behind the glass, like a big jungle cat. Or the Beast.

McKenna sighed longingly. “He’s so hot.”

“He is not.” I cleared my throat. My voice was starting to squeak.

“Yes, he is.” McKenna poked me.

“Just because he has money, everyone thinks he’s attractive. I know the real Mr. Richmond.” I glowered.

Mr. Richmond was staring out one of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows, striking and imposing. His strong chiseled jaw and straight nose made him look like a Disney hero.

Or villain. Belle’s nemesis Gaston had a strong jaw, I reminded myself as I sorted through the day’s emails, twenty of which were from Anthym with various demands. I think it made her mad that I’d never failed to meet a request of securing an item.

The fancy aged Portuguese cheese almost did me in, but the doorman remembered me from when I’d spotted him two dollars at a bodega and let me up to the French cheese importer’s apartment.

My inbox pinged with an email. It was from Brittany Dawn.

Hi Lexi!

Please come see me in my office for a chat.

“GODSPEED,” McKenna whispered to me as I slowly stood up and pulled at my skirt.

Anthym, my manager, was sitting in one of the white chairs in Brittany Dawn’s office. The HR director had a glass-enclosed view over the

mezzanine to the floor below, all the better to look out over Grayson Richmond's subordinates and remind them that HR was always watching.

"Lexi, let's chat," she said, with all the false perkiness of a middle-school mean girl.

The HR director patted the desk in front of the empty chair. There was a copy of the employee handbook on her desk, mocking me.

I sat.

"I cannot believe you would embarrass me like this," Anthym snapped before Brittany Dawn could get a word in. "How dare you! Mr. Richmond is god here. Your actions make us all look bad."

Do not squeak, I warned my voice. *If you do, I'm going to be fired, and then I'll never be able to afford that fancy tea you like.*

"I didn't catcall Mr. Richmond," I explained, trying to sound calm and in control. "I was paying him a compliment. There was a misunderstanding, but we've worked it out. Believe me, I am very anti-catcalling. In fact, whenever I'm out and I hear a man actually catcall a woman, I always yell at him and tell him I'm going to tell his mom."

Brittany Dawn clasped her hands in front of her on the desk.

"Now Lexi, I understand that you're just out of college—"

"A master's degree," I interjected. "I'm twenty-three and have a master's in communication."

Her mouth curled up into an impression of a smile.

"Just out of a master's degree program," Brittany Dawn corrected, voice syrupy sweet. "But that doesn't mean you have real-world experience. You're basically a child. And as such I know that you don't understand how adults in a corporate environment behave. You can't sexually harass your boss."

"*The boss*," Anthym railed, unable to fake Brittany Dawn's calmly patronizing tone.

"I didn't know it was him," I insisted. "He wasn't in his suit, and I know Mr. Richmond's suits. I pick up his dry cleaning, after all. He was in workout clothes. Also, why does no one in this city appreciate the power of uplifting declarations?"

"You said he was hot," Brittany Dawn reminded me, drawing her finger down the text written on an incident report.

Minnie's tits. I'm getting fired, aren't I?

"I said he was looking good, but I didn't mean it like *that*. And I wouldn't

have said anything if I'd known who he was. This morning was the first time I'd ever met the man."

"Lexi's lying; she called him hot stuff," Anthym snapped. "She did it because she's trying to become the next Mrs. Richmond. But guess what? It backfired. You made him very uncomfortable. He felt threatened. You should have seen how upset he was when I talked to him."

"Are you kidding me?"

Stop squeaking.

I cleared my throat.

"Are you kidding me? Grayson—"

"Mr. Richmond," Anthym interjected.

"*Mr. Richmond,*" I seethed, "felt threatened? How dare he? I'm five feet tall when I stand up straight. I look like I'm twelve, and people constantly stop me and ask me if I lost my mommy. He's the richest man in Manhattan and literally owns multiple city blocks *and* one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city, which is totally a phallic calling card, by the way, if we're really going to get out the magnifying glass and suss out who's being sexually aggressive to whom."

"Mr. Richmond takes these matters very seriously," Brittany Dawn warned.

"Believe me, I am not making a mockery of this company or of him." I saluted the HR director. "Me and my credit cards are very happy to have this job. In the future, I will never talk to Mr. Richmond in a sexually aggressive or any other capacity ever again. If you can just let me off with a write-up, I will return to my duties as Mr. Richmond's lowly assistant of the assistant to the secretary forthwith."

Brittany Dawn's nose scrunched up like I'd dumped a wedge of that very pungent cheese from last night on her desk.

"You can't just write her up," Anthym insisted. "She needs to be fired."

Crap.

"Please," I begged, my voice threatening to go full chipmunk. "Please don't fire me."

Brittany Dawn's phone rang. She held up a finger as she answered it.

"Understood ... Yes, sir."

She pressed the end call button. "Mr. Richmond would like to see you."

"Uh, he would?"

"*He would?*" Anthym was shocked.

“When?” My stomach churned.

“Now,” Brittany Dawn said, picking up her key card.

“Like *now*, now?”

GRAYSON

The door opened then closed with a soft *click*. Marius stepped into my office.

“What did this girl do, exactly, where you had to get the legal department involved to fire her?” he asked, coming over to stand next to me at the window.

Marius and I went way back. We had been roommates at Harvard then had stayed in contact. I appreciated him tolerating my presence as his roommate and had offered him the position as head legal counsel when I had formed my company.

I always trusted Marius’s judgment, and he had been worth his weight in rare earth metals just in structuring the initial contracts with the venture capital firms all those years ago.

I was sure what he did now was probably beneath his skill level, and I expected him to leave any day.

People always did.

There was always a better opportunity.

And better assistants.

“I cannot have my assistant working for me anymore, and Ms. Collins seems like the type to cause trouble. Hence legal.”

“Uh-huh.” Marius crossed his arms. “This is technically an HR issue, but it’s been a slow morning. So sure, I’ll be your emotional support lawyer.”

I glanced at him.

A smirk played around his mouth.

“You didn’t hit on her, did you?”

The anger, always close to the surface of late, rose up.

“I would never.”

“Dude, you have to lighten up.” Marius clapped me on the shoulder. “Why don’t you come out for drinks tonight?”

“I have to work,” I lied.

I had plans, but not work. It was Tuesday, after all.

Marius sighed. “I thought after you built all this, you’d take a break.”

“I can never take a break.”

“The world won’t end.”

“It might.”

The door opened.

There she was. Taller now in those ridiculous heels, Lexi tottered in like a helpless baby foal.

Absolutely kidnapping bait. A liability.

She crossed her arms. The buttons on her blouse strained and the shirt fabric gaped.

Stop staring at her chest. What the hell is wrong with you?

I met her eyes. Brown. Defiant.

“Narc,” Lexi whispered.

My eyes widened.

“You wanted to see her?” Brittany Dawn asked expectantly.

“I—”

Lexi’s curly red hair was sticking straight out of her head, like a cartoon character’s.

“Can’t you see?” Lexi said, spreading her arms dramatically and talking a mile a minute. “Mr. Richmond called me in here to chew me out. Finally thought of a good comeback from this morning?” She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, that happens to me too. You can’t think of the really good zingers until you’re in the shower. Come on, lay it on me. Chop-chop!” She snapped her fingers.

“I have to go dig up a discontinued brand of cigars from the eighties along with finding an exact match of the custom wool fabric for that hole you put in your suit, not to mention have your riding boots resoled, which really, Anthym, that one’s a little too easy.”

Anthym gasped. “Don’t talk about Mr. Richmond in the shower.”

“What did you want to discuss?” Brittany Dawn asked pointedly.

I blinked and realized I had made a grievous error. I just needed Lexi

fired; I didn't need to do it myself.

It's because you haven't slept in days. You can't make important decisions on such little sleep.

I picked up the mug of black tea and tried not to stare at the buttons that were threatening to pop on Lexi's blouse and let her breasts spill out.

I took a large swallow of the scalding-hot water.

"You two are harshing his snarly, self-important, condescending vibes. It's the gestapo up in here. A man can't even cuss out his own assistant in peace. Shoo!" Lexi waved away the two older women. "Can't you see you're smothering him? Some people," she said to me, cupping a hand to the side of her mouth.

"Can we please fire her?" Anthym shrieked.

"But then who will sort our dear leader's underwear?" Lexi asked magnanimously.

"You're not supposed to be touching his underwear." Brittany Dawn was appalled.

"I was folding them Marie Kondo style, to bring joy to Mr. Richmond's life," Lexi said primly.

"Oh my god, you left the note," I said before I could stop myself.

The office was dead quiet.

I snapped my mouth shut.

Anthym slowly swiveled to face Lexi. "You're leaving him notes?"

Beside me, Marius strangled a laugh.

"Some of us are trying to make the world a better place." Lexi's hands were on her hips. "Besides, Mr. Richmond liked the notes, even though he won't admit it in his cold, dead, sunlight-starved heart," she added loudly, raising her voice.

"You're the one who's going to be trapped in a sunlight-starved basement if you keep catcalling strange men in dark parks," I growled at her, forcing myself to unclench my fists.

"Why do you care so much?" Lexi cocked her head. "Is this some sort of weird way of hitting on me? Do you want to drag me back to your sex dungeon?"

Marius sucked in a breath.

"Now I'm the one feeling threatened. He's catcalling me." Lexi pointed at me and turned to Brittany Dawn. "I want to file an incident report."

"I think we're done with this conversation," Brittany Dawn said,

snapping the employee handbook closed.

“Agreed,” Marius said.

The women filed out.

“Why did Anthym hire someone so unhinged and sulky?” I complained, glaring through the glass as my secretary and the HR director argued with Lexi.

She finally sat down on a chair, crossing her arms and kicking her feet.

Like a child. An annoying, whiny child. Why is she so short?

“I guess we need to give her a severance.”

“Dude, are you kidding me? You can’t fire her.” Marius was appalled. “Not after that. That was a complete shit show. What’s wrong with you? Normally you have it more together than this.”

“It wasn’t that bad, was it?” I said.

My lawyer barked out a laugh. “I wish I’d recorded it. Actually wait, no, I don’t. She could sue or talk.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes ...” Marius hesitated then plowed on. “But it might look ... well ... with your family history,” he said delicately.

I let out another strangled growl.

“Fine.”

“Lexi fetches your lunch and runs errands. You won’t see her; she answers to Anthym. Just forget she exists,” Marius advised me.

I took another swallow of scalding tea, my hand burning as I gripped the hot mug.

“All right. She stays. For now.”

LEXI

Should I have back-talked in the meeting?

No, but if I was going to be fired, I was taking Mr. Richmond down with me.

The door to the CEO's office opened, and the lawyer stepped out then walked over to my chair of shame.

When Mr. Richmond had this office designed, he must have wanted everything to be made for tall people. It was like working in the land of the giants. Sure, the chairs might be comfortable for someone almost seven feet tall, but for me, the chairs were way too big.

Stop swinging your feet.

One of my heels slipped off and fell to the floor with a loud *thunk*.

Marius gave me a curious look then turned to Brittany Dawn.

"We aren't going to fire her."

"Obviously," the HR director said, disgusted. They both looked over to Mr. Richmond, still pacing in his office.

Marius sighed.

"I'll just give her a write-up," Brittany Dawn said finally.

"I don't know why they didn't just fire you," Anthym railed when Brittany Dawn went back to her office to add a note to my permanent record. "You're a mess, your clothes are undone, and you wore this shirt twice last week. You need to go shopping."

I hastily buttoned up my shirt.

At my six-month review, I had been planning on asking for a raise, but that clearly wasn't going to happen. A part of me wished I actually had been

fired, just so I wouldn't have to endure Grayson Richmond breathing down my neck, insulting me, calling me into his office to yell at me, and then siccing his lawyer on me.

"Are you being fired?" McKenna asked me, eyes wide, when I returned to my stool.

"Stay of execution."

She squealed and hugged me. "You should be happy; that's great news!"

"I know, I know." I took a breath. "Unfortunately, I can't—literally can't—afford to lose this job, so I'm stuck with him."

"We're going to do drinks to celebrate," McKenna said firmly.

"Drinks?" Anthym slammed her agenda on the desk. "You're not doing drinks. You're going back to Mr. Richmond's penthouse to do your job." She clapped her hands. "Go. And stay out of his underwear drawer."



"HAPPY TUESDAY!" I greeted Nasr, the concierge at the tallest, fanciest residential tower in Manhattan.

He offered me a steaming mug of spiced chai tea along with some cookies.

"What a treat! You're extra chipper today. I hope that means your son did well on his exams."

The concierge's face lit up. "Top of his class," Nasr bragged.

"You must be so proud." I gave him a hug.

"He just has to figure out which college to go to. Oh, this is such a weight off my chest," the concierge said with a breathless laugh.

"It's because he has such an awesome father."

"My son appreciated your positive notes," he told me then scooped more cookies on my plate.

"I don't need all of those; we should leave some for other people."

Nasr dropped his voice.

"Hardly anyone is in residence, and when they are, they don't want cookies because sweets mess up their diet. Most people who bought these condos are only in New York a few days a month. Mr. Richmond is the only resident I see regularly."

"I can't imagine spending tens of millions of dollars on a condo I'm not

going to live in.” I shook my head.

When I had decided to move to Manhattan, I sort of had an idea of how billionaires lived that was mainly compiled from all the romance books I read. However, books hadn’t given me the up-close-and-personal view of what it really meant to be a billionaire.

You could have anything you wanted. Literally anything.

And Grayson Richmond wanted to lord over us peons in a penthouse located at the very top of a tower.

The private elevator dinged when it let me off at the penthouse level. I walked through the mostly empty space. It was devoid of personality. It didn’t even look like a staged home; it looked like a half-empty museum. In one vast room, called the grand salon, was a single gray bench that looked at a white-on-white giant canvas that hung on one wall. The casual living room didn’t even have a TV.

The study was the only room that had somewhat of a personality. It had a view over the city and a glass door leading out to the terrace. One wall held a bookcase filled with books. There wasn’t anything fun or spicy, just a lot of the literary classics, all bound in leather, along with a number of historical biographies, several antique busts, and other knickknacks.

I climbed up the curving wood staircase in the center of the empty penthouse, pretending like I was a princess floating up to her castle in the clouds, Mr. Richmond’s freshly dry-cleaned suit over my shoulder. The two-story floor-to-ceiling glass offered the most expensive view in the city. The tower was so tall that we were practically in the clouds. On a particularly overcast day, it really did feel like I was in a crystal palace in the sky.

The dry-cleaned suit was transferred to one of the identical wood hangers in the closet. I would let it air out for twenty-four hours in the airing vestibule of the master closet, because when you had a closet the size of someone’s house—and really, what man needed a closet that size?—why not have a vestibule for your closet? Then I would transfer the suit into the large closet with the rest of the identical suits.

I stroked the luxurious fabric. Normally I liked my men like I liked my Disney princes—silent and wearing fancy military dress. A suit was close enough, especially the way Grayson wore it. If only he didn’t have such a terrible personality, I might actually fantasize about him falling in love with me.

“Like I want anything to do with you,” I said to his closet.

I scowled at the row of identical dark suits hanging in the rich-mahogany-paneled closet. Then I took out my notepad.

Lightly perfumed, the champagne-colored paper had pink flowers pressed in it. In a sparkly pink gel pen, I wrote:

You have amazing style. A man who knows how to wear a suit is a gift.

So there.

I added smiley faces and hearts on it just for good measure then stuck the note in with his cuff links.

I wasn't going to hide my light under a bushel just because Mr. Richmond couldn't handle people doing nice things for him.

I put on the soundtrack to *The Little Mermaid* and twirled through his bedroom, which held only a bed, a dresser, and a single nightstand. Mr. Richmond didn't even have any fancy throw pillows on his bed. Just a dark-wood headboard and a dark comforter. Strangest of all, there were no curtains anywhere in the bedroom. Shoot, there weren't any curtains on any of the windows in the soulless penthouse. I supposed if your penthouse was located higher than everyone else's, you didn't really need curtains.

Or maybe Mr. Richmond was just an exhibitionist.

Or a narcissist.

Or just a weirdo. The man didn't have any carpet. Anywhere. Just cold, hard slate floors.

"His feet must be freezing in the morning when he gets up," I sang over the music. I twirled through the master bedroom and out into the wide hallway that overlooked the floor below.

"My beautiful subjects," I announced to the empty penthouse as I descended the staircase, pretending like I was wearing a big ball gown.

Was this professional behavior for the assistant to the assistant to the secretary?

Nope. Anthym would have a fit if she knew what I was doing when I was alone in Mr. Richmond's penthouse.

I dipped into a slightly shaky curtsey in front of the fireplace. It was gas, not wood burning, but you could still roast a marshmallow in it. Not that I had. I was tempted though.

I missed beach bonfires, and I missed the ocean.

I pulled the massive glass sliding door open and slipped out onto the terrace. The Brazilian hardwood decking was as empty and as devoid of

furniture as the living room. One single sad teak lounge chair huddled at the edge of the pool.

The pool water rippled with the breeze. It wasn't super windy though. The terrace was protected all around by ten-foot-tall panes of glass. Twice a month the window cleaners came out to make sure they were extra clean.

I went to one corner of the terrace and looked out.

I wasn't admiring the skyline. I was looking out at the ocean. We were so high up you could see the Atlantic, an expanse of blue past the gray of the city.

I closed my eyes, imagining that I was back in Florida, my toes digging in the hot sand instead of pinched in cheap plastic heels. It was warm there, and the sounds of the sea soothed me.

I opened my eyes before I could start crying from homesickness.

"At least you can see the ocean," I reminded myself. "Let's think positive and count our blessings."

Maybe I would feel better when it was warmer.

Winter in Manhattan had been, well, extremely unpleasant actually.

During the summer, when Mr. Richmond was off on a business trip, I was so buying an inflatable unicorn and using that pool.

"Speaking of blessings," I reminded myself when I walked into the kitchen that was literally bigger than my parents' house and in which I had never seen a single scrap of evidence that Mr. Richmond had ever cooked anything ever.

I opened the large fridge and regarded the bounty within.

It was Tuesday, and on Tuesdays I cleaned out the fridge.

I grabbed my backpack. Out came multiple reinforced reusable grocery bags and three insulated bags. Yesterday I had pre-stashed ice packs in Mr. Richmond's freezer. He hadn't noticed them in the past three months, so I felt safe with my plan.

Remember what I said about billionaires getting whatever they wanted?

Mr. Richmond wanted his fridge stocked with food—veggies, fancy cuts of meat, fruit, organic yogurt, milk, cheese, and other goods from those fancy imported food stores that make you wonder if they're some sort of money laundering front, because who in their right mind could afford to shop there? Then every single Tuesday afternoon, he would have it all thrown away and new food brought in Wednesday morning.

My boss never ate this food. In fact, he had a chef who cooked. Sure,

sometimes the chef would use ingredients in the fridge, but I always did an inventory on Wednesday, and a week later, ninety percent of the food would still be there.

“And he wants to throw all of this food away,” I said indignantly as I cleaned out the fridge.

Anthym had been very clear when I started that I was not to let anyone take this food home. Mr. Richmond wasn’t going to use it but also didn’t want anyone to have it.

“Dingleberry. Like there aren’t needy people in this city.”

Anthym had even said that Mr. Richmond expressly wanted one of his assistants to throw out the food because he thought the cleaners would take it home.

“You can’t trust the cleaners,” Anthym had lectured me on my first day on the job. “They’re shiftless. Just like that concierge. They’re all in cahoots.”

Well, they couldn’t trust me either.

“Oh my goodness, he has scallops,” I said, swooning as I pulled all of the groceries out of the fridge. “It’s a crime to throw these away.” I sniffed a huge slab of smoked salmon. “Delectable.”

The fancy cuts of meat went into one of the freezer bags. The herbs were carefully packed in a canvas grocery sack, and the fancy cheese and dairy went into another cold storage sack.

“Be still my heart,” I cried when I saw several familiar red boxes.

They were from Alessio, the premier, most expensive and exclusive restaurant in the city. In the largest box was handmade pasta in a rich cream sauce. The next held a duck confit and roasted potatoes that would crisp up nicely in my oven. The third held a slightly limp Caesar salad, and the fourth held a slice of my favorite dessert—ten-layer cake with chocolate ganache, hazelnut mousse, raspberry glaze, and raspberry mousse.

I wanted to sit there on the floor right then and take a huge bite of the cake.

“You’re on the clock,” I reminded myself.

I wouldn’t put it past Anthym to perform a surprise checkup now that she had me in her crosshairs.

I hastily stashed the takeout boxes in one of the canvas sacks and then set to work wiping out the fridge, prepping it for the next round of expensive groceries that Grayson Richmond wouldn’t touch.

GRAYSON

I dreaded and looked forward to Tuesdays, though with Lexi it was more on the dread side today.

I waited around after the nonfiring, watching as the hour hand moved to one thirty. Then I headed across town.

It was after the lunch rush, and Alessio wasn't crowded. I nodded to the hostess and headed to the bar to place my lunch order.

There was one specific spot I liked to stand at, because at that spot the mirror was perfectly angled to offer a clear view of the round booth by the corner window.

She was there. She was always there on Tuesdays.

No, not the redhead, thank god.

I scowled, thinking of Lexi—her messy clothes, her unruly red hair, leaving me notes in my underwear drawer.

“Good to see you again, sir,” the bartender greeted me.

Behind me, I heard her laugh.

“Could I have today's menu?” I asked in a low voice.

He slipped the embossed cardstock across the bar to me.

“Take your time.”

I didn't actually study the menu. I wasn't going to eat what I'd order anyway.

Isn't this the mark of insanity, to do the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result?

“I'll have the spinach salad,” I said when the bartender came back over, “the baked chicken, and the risotto.”

“You know,” the bartender said, “you can call ahead to order, and we can have it waiting for your assistant. You must be a busy man.”

He seemed slightly apprehensive when I frowned, thinking of Lexi at the restaurant, with her toxic positivity, glitter, and the slightly too-tight clothes.

I relaxed my features.

“I never know what I want to order until I arrive,” I murmured, not wanting to draw attention to myself. “But thank you for the suggestion.”

I waited and watched the mirror while the chef prepared the food, twisting a glass of water around on the coaster.

“COULD you add dessert to the order?” I asked the server when he came out with the food.

At the table behind me, the children were laughing as the grandfather told a silly joke.

“Yes, sir. Any preference?”

“Whatever is on hand.”

“Cake? Cannoli?”

“Cake is fine.” Anything was fine. This was just an excuse to remain a little longer in the sumptuous space.

The clock ticked as one of the servers carefully cut a slice of chocolate cake for me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Oh, and could you add desserts for that table over there? Put it on my card.” I inclined my head slightly. “Just please tell them that it was compliments of the chef, not me.”

“Of course, sir.”

I lingered as I pretended to calculate the tip in my head and signed the receipt. Then I collected the bag of food I wasn’t going to eat and exited the restaurant.

“See you next week!” the hostess chirped.

The experience had left me drained. I set the food in the back of my car and sat there in silence.

“You still have more items on your list,” I said aloud. I wanted to go home. I was exhausted. But it wasn’t like I’d be able to sleep.

I turned on the car and wrapped a navy scarf around my neck and jaw.

The women’s shelter was a few blocks away on a narrow street. Outside several children were playing with Pokémon cards. I shifted the box I was

carrying.

“You guys like Pokémon?”

The kids were immediately suspicious of me.

Good.

“I’ve got some here,” I told them, “to donate. You can ask the staff if you can have first pick.”

The kids perked up and raced ahead of me inside the shelter, talking excitedly about the cards they hoped they’d get.

“Just here with a donation,” I told the harried staff member who was trying to calm a sobbing woman. I set the box on the counter. “Some toys and games for the kids.”

Small ones that a child could keep safe in a modest bag and protect so the toys wouldn’t get left behind or broken.

“Also have Visa gift cards,” I said gruffly, “for anyone who needs one.” I handed her another, smaller box filled with plastic cards.

“Look at all of this!” the staff member exclaimed as she opened the larger box for the bouncing kids.

They dug in the box while the younger woman lifted the lid off of the smaller box and pulled out one of the prepaid Visa cards, five hundred dollars each, and sucked in a breath.

“This is... this is very generous. Are you sure?”

Her eyes searched mine, probably wondering why anyone would randomly donate that much money outside of Christmas or Thanksgiving.

“I just like to give back,” I said with a shrug.

“Can I get your name so I can give you a receipt for taxes?” she called. “If you wait a minute, I can get the form filled out.”

“I don’t need it,” I said, already leaving, scarf still in place obscuring my features.

The children were laughing in delight behind me as I left the building.

The car smelled like chocolate when I climbed back in. I cruised through the narrow city streets, taking the long way back to my penthouse, feeling like I was having to return to prison, wishing something, anything, would happen to keep me from having to go back to that glass cage.

“Better than a concrete cell,” I reminded myself. “Turn that frown upside down.”

I waited a beat then snarled.

That was what had been written on one of the notes I had found over the

last few months in my penthouse. They were festooned with stickers, covered in glitter that got all over my clothes, and smelled like a teenage girl's perfume.

Figures that the messy, obnoxious redhead on my payroll had written them.

I needed to make her quit. It was too much for a man to have to endure. Anyone who had that positive of an outlook on life could not be trusted. Life was endless suffering. At least for people like me.

I swung the black sedan around a corner then cursed the distracting thoughts. I had turned on Colonial Street, where people sold all sorts of knockoff goods, like clothes, purses, and hats. It was teeming with people even though it was quickly getting dark.

Most people were dressed like true New Yorkers in blacks, charcoals, and navy jackets, heads down, steely eyes, wary body language. Except for one young woman wearing a bright-yellow jacket, chunky pink sneakers, and a sparkly blue sequined purse.

I slowed the car to a crawl, scowl setting in my face, tensing my forehead, the back of my shoulders tight.

She had no sense of self-preservation.

And yet, I couldn't stop staring at Lexi, the bright yellow of her coat like a flower poking through the ashes of a wildfire. I was very aware that I was in dangerous territory, especially since she worked for me. But it was like when my father first took me outside. Before then, my whole world had been underground—crowded and smelly, rotting plywood boards over clerestory windows—then one day, I'd seen the sun, so bright my eyes watered. I could still remember the way it had warmed my pale skin. It hurt to look at it, but I couldn't turn away.

I wasn't the only one.

There was a man hovering near one of the stalls, and he seemed too interested in Lexi.

LEXI

“**Y**ou are a godsend!” my downstairs neighbor cried when she opened the door to see me standing there.

Maria and her sister, her elderly mother, and her sister’s disabled twin boys shared a small one-bedroom apartment in my apartment building. I knew that money was tight for them since Maria’s sister couldn’t work and the boys needed a lot of medical care. The food I brought by every week was a big help for their family.

“Bless you, bless you, and bless your boss. What a wonderful man, that Mr. Richmond.” Maria’s mother hobbled over to me balancing on her cane.

I grimaced. “That’s a reach. My boss doesn’t know I’m giving this food away. He’d be pretty angry if he knew.”

“He would be happy if he knew how much this helped us,” the elderly woman insisted.

Maria started crying when I handed her the package of steak.

“And butter! We don’t need to go grocery shopping this week.”

Every week when I made my delivery, they were effusive with thanks. Nothing warmed the soul more than doing a good deed. Not that I needed any extra incentive to steal-slash-rehome food from Grayson Richmond.

“I can’t give you all the eggs,” I said apologetically. “Sheila’s husband isn’t supposed to eat meat, and I was going to let her have some eggs for him.”

“Of course, take all these eggs.” Maria handed me the carton. “The steak is plenty for us.”

“Take some chicken too,” I said, stuffing the package in her hands. “I

know the boys like it.”

While all the food Mr. Richmond ordered was way too much for one person, it didn't go as far as I would like for the residents in the narrow, dark 1920s apartment building.

It was much cooler on paper than in reality. The hex-tile mosaic in the foyer was blackened with soot from the decades when Manhattan was heated by coal. The wall covering was grungy, and the elevator hadn't worked since the nineties. McKenna and I regularly had to assist elderly residents up and down the stairs.

“I better go take these up while they're still cold. You all enjoy!”

The lights in the narrow stairwell flickered as I headed upstairs to pass out free food to several elderly neighbors. Manhattan was expensive, and everyone was appreciative of the food, as it would help them make ends meet.

“I hoped you save some of that booty for us!” Grenadine called as I used my shoulder to push into the small studio apartment I shared with McKenna and her grandmother.

“Scallops, cheese, some chicken thighs,” I said as she and McKenna unpacked the now mostly empty bags.

“Any booze?” asked Grenadine, who did not want to be referred to as Grandma, because she wasn't old goddamn it, and we could just call her Grenadine, so named on account of her father being a bartender.

“Mr. Richmond's going to notice if one of his eight-hundred-dollar bottles of wine walks off. Not to mention, Anthym already has it out for me,” I said as I unpacked the bags. “I keep expecting her to pop out of the toilet to yell at me about not curtsying low enough to our esteemed CEO.”

Reptilian nails scratched on the linoleum floor, and Gizzy, my rescue iguana, trudged out from under the bunk bed, his five-foot-long body swaying with each giant step.

“How is mommy's big boy?” I cooed at the iguana. I'd saved him during a hurricane when I was younger, and we had been best friends ever since. We both loved to eat, we both liked to chill with a Disney movie, and neither of us liked Manhattan all that much—Gizzy because it was cold, and me because I had the worst boss in the world.

“Do you want a treat?” The large blue iguana tipped his head back, and I scratched his throat.

“I swear every time I see that thing, he gets bigger and bigger,” McKenna

remarked.

“It’s like having my own dragon,” I said gleefully.

Gizzy nuzzled me, seeking warmth.

I grabbed a knife and cut up a zucchini for him while he paced around my feet, tail thumping against the peeling cabinet doors.

“You need to start sucking up to whoever is doing Mr. Richmond’s shopping,” Grenadine said, inspecting the shrimp. “You know, give him one of those emotional blow jobs.”

“My compliments are wholesome,” I protested.

“McKenna told me all about how you sexually propositioned the big boss in the park. I’m a terrible influence on you.” Grenadine cackled. “Don’t make that face. I’m the one who’s going to sleep with the building owner to keep them from raising the rents.”

“This is a rent-controlled apartment building,” I said automatically. “They can’t raise rents above city-prescribed levels.”

“Just you wait; they’ll find a way.”

“Let’s try to think positively,” I said. “You sound like our boss.”

“I’d do your boss,” Grenadine hollered.

“I wouldn’t,” I muttered.

I set the leftovers down on the cot that I used as a bed.

“I can’t believe Anthym is still letting you clean out the fridge,” McKenna marveled as she scooped the potatoes onto a metal tray, dropping one down for Gizzy, who was basically a walking garbage disposal. “She never let me clean out his fridge.”

“I can’t believe he doesn’t eat any of this,” I said, taking a bite of the cake because, hey, I’d had a hard day and I’d walked up all those stairs. “A meal at Alessio costs more than my rent.”

“One man’s trash is another woman’s treasure,” McKenna quipped, stealing a bite.

“I think Anthym is trying to show Mr. Richmond”—I spat out the name—“that she’s more than just a gopher. I think she’s trying to make him think that she’s totally wife material, that she can be a good corporate spouse.”

“You think?”

Grenadine scoffed as she started washing the arugula. “Women like her? I bet the only reason she took that job was to get her shot at snagging Grayson Richmond. I used to work with girls like that back in the secretary pool. Always angling for one of the men in upper management. They would time it

with their fertility so they'd get pregnant on date number three."

"Yikes."

"Can't imagine anything would be worth carrying the spawn of Satan." I scooped the duck confit into a pan on the stove and the pasta in another.

The studio apartment was too small for a microwave. I'd found one in a dumpster, but the electrical circuit had blown out when I'd tried to plug it in, so we heated food the old-school way, according to Grenadine, like they did in the seventies using a plate with tinfoil on top.

The steam keeps the food nice and moist, I told myself. Every cloud has a silver lining. Every single cloud.

Even the depressing cloud named Grayson Richmond?

Even him.

"Who wants a corporate robot?" Grenadine added as the apartment filled with the mouthwatering smell of duck-fat-fried potatoes. "Me? I'm angling for a hockey player. You know, one of those big dumb brutes with a cock the size of an eggplant."

I crossed my legs and winced.

Grenadine patted me. "You're making that face because you're still a virgin. Just you wait."

"Grenadine, you're not going to find a hockey player," McKenna said with a groan.

"She might. She just has to believe in herself," I reminded my friend.

"Damn right. Dream big. You'd be surprised. Older women are very popular on porn right now."

"La la la!" I stuck my fingers in my ears.

"Branch out, Lexi. You can't get off on a Disney movie," Grenadine lectured me.

The potatoes were sizzling in the oven, and the duck confit was steaming on the stove. The studio apartment was cozy and warm. Who cared about having a huge penthouse with a pool? Mr. Richmond's penthouse would never feel homey, even if he did lose his mind and have all the fireplaces lit.

McKenna cleared off the card table and dished out the leftovers.

"Damn," Grenadine said after taking a bite. "I think I just orgasmed."

Alessio's food was amazing—salty, fatty, melt-in-your-mouth bombs of deliciousness.

"I don't know why anyone would want to be a billionaire if they can order food like this every week—shoot every day—but be so desensitized to

the joys of life that they can't even appreciate it," I mused. "What kind of way is that to live?"

"I don't mind being desensitized if I get to live in a fancy-schmancy penthouse and have people bring me anything I want when I snap my fingers," Grenadine argued.

"I would just be glad not to have to wear business casual clothes ever again." McKenna sighed.

"You'd think if Mr. Richmond wanted us to look like cute little Barbie dolls, he'd give us a clothing allowance," I complained.

I ate my last potato then scraped the gravy off the plate with my fork.

"I can't believe Anthym had the nerve to call me out about repeating outfits. I wash them—well, sometimes," I said to McKenna's expression. "And it's cold right now anyway, so that means you don't sweat as much."

"Maybe you could buy a few more outfits," McKenna said delicately.

"I have clothes."

And I did.

"That was how this whole mess started. I could be flying under the radar right now repeating outfits and leaving anonymous notes in my boss's underwear drawer. But oh no, I needed to try to tempt fate and buy pants a size too small."

"Pants especially," Grenadine said sagely. "That's just asking for trouble."

"Not that Anthym would allow us to wear them," McKenna complained.

"Instead I have Grayson Richmond convinced I'm going to single-handedly destroy the sanctity of Richmond Electric and Anthym convinced that all the ovaries on Manhattan are going to implode if I don't do my feminine duty and pay more attention to my appearance."

"This is why body positivity is so important," McKenna said, tapping her fork on her empty plate for emphasis. "If you loved the skin you were in, you wouldn't have been out there running at the butt crack of dawn."

I checked my Minnie Mouse watch.

"Hot date?" Grenadine waggled her eyebrows.

"As if. I need to not lose my job, and that means I need a shirt that stays closed."



WHILE MANHATTAN WAS NO FLORIDA, and especially no Disney World, I firmly believed that anywhere you went had something special to offer; you just had to find the inherent good in the place. Then you were home.

Colonial Street was where I felt at home. It wasn't just that you could buy anything there at a price that would make Dollar General blush, and I do mean anything. That's where I got my laundry detergent and toys for Gizzy, not to mention work clothes. If you went at a certain time, locals would be selling homemade snacks for a little extra income. Tamales, Jamaican patties, lángos, any street food that was served quick and piping hot could be had on Colonial Street for a fraction of restaurant prices.

"You can't really count Alessio as dinner," I told myself as I bit into a piping-hot roll filled with smoked brisket. "We all split a meal, so it was more of an appetizer. Besides, you're not supposed to go shopping on an empty stomach."

I bought a hot spiced chai from a couple of teenage girls out with their mom and sipped it as I wandered down the street. Cars crawled by, sometimes stopping to call out to a vendor to make a purchase.

This was pure New York City. Everyone in my small Florida town had been aghast when I'd announced I was moving to Manhattan, but this here was community. It didn't feel like being in a big anonymous city at all.

It was unbelievable that Grayson Richmond was missing all of this sitting in his fancy penthouse.

I suddenly felt guilty.

This wasn't who I was. Mr. Richmond clearly needed someone to help bolster his spirit. I shouldn't leave him to wallow in his grumpiness. I needed to bring him out of his shell. That was the type of good deed Lexi Collins liked to pride herself in.

But he was just such a drag.

I'll just leave him some extra motivational notes, I decided.

Then thought, *And I'll buy him samosas.*

One samosa. Uno. Even if he didn't deserve it.

I doubled back through the crowd. The streetlights were on, and I wove through the shoppers, trying to find the samosa seller.

I peeked down one of the alleys, thinking I heard the seller's music. Colonial Street was located in one of the older areas of New York where the grid was a nest of alleys and back passages squeezed between buildings.

The air in the alley was chilly and damp.

Maybe this was a sign from the universe that Mr. Richmond hasn't yet earned a samosa.

"You looking for something?"

I turned. A man was blocking my exit.

"Just the samosa stand, but I think I changed my mind," I told him with a smile.

He didn't move.

"It's a great night out, isn't it?" I said, feeling slightly apprehensive.

Mr. Richmond's negative attitude is rubbing off on you. This isn't the 1980s. New York is perfectly safe.

The man took a step toward me.

GRAYSON

The man was approaching Lexi.

I knew it.

I knew she was going to get hurt or assaulted or kidnapped.

I looked for a place to pull over the car. I finally said fuck it and double-parked in the middle of the street. Horns honked as I stopped the car abruptly, threw open the door, and jumped out.

An angry man in a van yelled at me out the passenger window, but I ignored him, only having eyes for Lexi.

“Love that color orange on you,” Lexi was saying to the guy who was so obviously dangerous, so clearly someone who meant to do her harm.

She is insane, and you are insane to involve yourself.

But what could I do? This was what I’d vowed to prevent. Now was my chance to actually make amends, fix something.

“Come out with me,” the guy was saying.

If she agreed, I was going to lose it, not in an, I’ll-say-something-snarky way but in an I’m-going-to-jail sort of way.

“I’m busy,” Lexi chirped. “Thank you for the offer. I’m sure you’ll find the right person. You have a beautiful soul.”

No sense of self-preservation.

“You can’t dis me.” The guy lunged at her.

“You fucking piece of shit!” I shouted.

The crowd scattered, sensing a fight about to go down.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” Lexi yelled. Well, it sounded more like a squeak from one of those novelty rubber chickens.

“You better not be talking to my girl,” I said laser focused on the creep. I was going to kill him for touching her.

“Oh shit, man. I’m sorry.” The guy held up his hands.

“I am not his girl,” Lexi argued, trying to push around me.

I grabbed the back of her yellow jacket.

“And you, sir, need to respect a woman when she says no!” Lexi yelled at the creep.

“You better get her under control,” the guy demanded.

“No one is getting me under control.” Lexi pulled out a Taser, brandishing it.

Her attacker raised his arm like he was going to slap her.

I moved toward him, grabbed him by the throat, and lifted him up. His legs kicked as he squirmed.

I brought him to my face and slowed down my movement, channeling my father when he was at his most frightening, when he had us all cowering in a sludge of fear and self-loathing in front of him.

“If I ever see you again, I will skin you.”

I dropped him, and the guy scrambled along the dirty ground away from me.

“I was just playin’. I didn’t mean anything,” he choked out, face still red.

I didn’t say a word.

The creep swallowed hard then scrambled to his feet to stumble off.

I turned slowly to Lexi.

“I told you,” I said softly. I could still feel my father’s anger wrapped around me. I expected to see the same fear I knew all too well from my mother’s face, my brothers’ faces, my own.

Lexi didn’t seem fazed or scared. Instead she seemed pissed.

“I don’t need you to white knight in here swinging your hot dog around with both hands, trying to prove a point.”

“A hot dog?”

“I can take care of myself. I’m not some dumb small-town girl; I have a Taser.”

“It’s covered in stickers.”

“No reason it can’t have a little flair,” she said. “See, look, there’s Cinderella. Oops!” She yelped when the Taser shocked me.

I strangled a curse then slapped the pink Taser out of her hand.

“This isn’t even charged.”

“Jiminy Cricket. I knew I forgot something,” she muttered.

“I’m taking you home right now.”

“I’m here working.”

“I’m literally your boss,” I exploded, the cold, quiet anger giving way to the safer, hotter fury. “I never told you to be out here in the middle of the night wandering around dark alleys.” I grabbed her hand.

“I have pepper spray,” she warned, twisting in my grasp.

“And yet somehow I am not intimidated,” I replied as I hauled her toward my car.

“I’m supposed to be shopping; I need to find a new shirt.”

One that closed over her giant tits?

Stop it.

I mentally slapped myself.

“It’s dark and dangerous. You can’t handle yourself alone.”

“Guess you’re my new shopping buddy, because I was ordered to buy new clothes that are befitting the assistant of the assistant of the secretary of Manhattan’s most stuck-up, negative-Nancy billionaire,” she shot at me.

“I am not shopping with you.”

I picked Lexi up around the waist and hauled her the final few feet to my car.

“I’m telling HR on you,” she threatened as I practically threw her in the back seat and slammed the door shut. She brightened when she saw the paper sack. “Yum, is that cake?”

“You can’t have any,” I said automatically as she reached over the passenger seat.

“I won’t tell HR or hot-stuff McLawyer that you were manhandling me if you let me have the cake.”

Her backside was practically in my face as she rummaged for the food in the bag.

I let out a breath, trying to ease my grip on the steering wheel.

What if I hadn’t been there? What if I had arrived too late? What if—

She’s safe now.

“Just take the whole bag,” I told her with a sigh.

“Score!” Lexi and the bag retreated to the back seat.

“Best deal ever.” The paper sack rustled as she dug around for the cake.

“No, a better deal would be if you had extorted me for money.”

She wrinkled her nose.

“That’s mean. You shouldn’t blackmail people.”

“You just blackmailed me,” I reminded her. “So that makes you a hypocrite.”

“No, that makes me someone who just got her free cake early,” she said happily.

“Your what?”

“Er ... never mind. Dang, the fanciest restaurant in Manhattan, and they can’t even give you so much as a plastic fork.”

She leaned down and took a big bite out of the top of the slice of cake.

I was so startled I almost ran into a parked car, earning me a litany of curses from said car’s owner and horn honks from the cars behind me.

“Don’t do that,” I said sharply.

“Then keep your eyes on the road. Honestly, you rich guys you spend all your money on fancy cars and then don’t know how to drive them.”

I ground my teeth together.

“Where do you live?”

“You can just take me back to the office.”

“I will not. I’m taking you home.”

“The office.”

“Your apartment.”

I glared at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She had chocolate frosting all over her freckled cheeks.

Her tongue darted out to lick at it.

I swallowed. I did not find her attractive one iota.

You have to logically admit that it is the slightest bit sexy.

Thought killed, assassinated, nuked from orbit,

“Can you turn on the radio? It’s going to be a long drive ... back to the office.”

“I like the silence.”

“You can’t drive in silence. That’s sacrilegious.”

“It’s my car.”

“I’m your captive prisoner here in the back seat.”

My stomach clenched. I suddenly felt like I was going to throw up.

“Is this one of those fancy cars where I can connect my phone?” Lexi asked.

“No.”

“Yes, it is. I can see the logo right there.”

She leaned over to point.

“Don’t unbuckle your seatbelt.”

There was blessed silence in the back seat.

Then the car radio made a beeping noise I’d never heard before. Suddenly the sound of singing African wildlife blared at an eardrum-rupturing volume from the car speakers.

I banged on the dashboard, cursing whoever had decided it was a good idea to swap out honest-to-god physical buttons with a touch screen.

“I have the app on my phone, so I’m controlling the music,” Lexi yelled over the cacophony.

“Turn it off.”

The song ended. Then another equally oppressive song began, and Lexi sang along, not in key, and not very well.

This is hell. I’m in hell.

“Sometimes if you’re having a bad day, you can sing and it all goes away.”

“Just tell me where your apartment is,” I said slowing down as traffic stopped.

“Take a left here,” she said.

I put on my blinker to try to merge.

As soon as she saw I was distracted, Lexi shoved the door open.

“You didn’t put the child locks on!” She took off in that same awkward run down the street, disappearing in the crowd. Her phone was still connected to my car stereo, and singing circus animals mocked me.

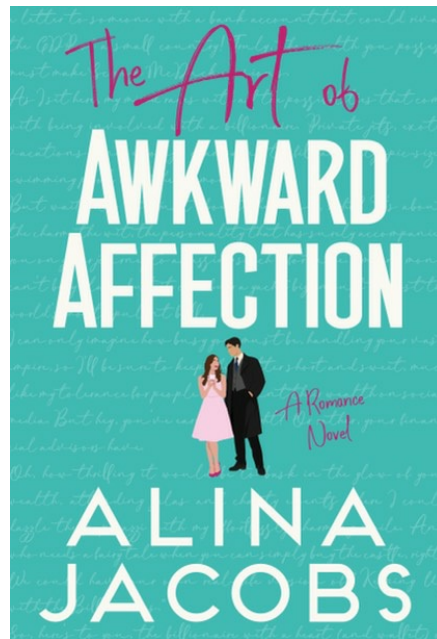
“Don’t follow her,” I told myself firmly, finally figuring how to turn off the radio. “Sometimes we have to let nature take its course.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I write the kind of books I love—romantic comedies featuring snarly guys with hearts of gold, kick-ass heroines, and a swoon-worthy happily ever after! Also wine. And cupcakes.

When I'm not writing I can be found drinking tea, surrounded by my massive to-be-read pile! So many books...

You can connect with me on social media or find information on my books here → [www.
AlinaJacobs.com](http://www.AlinaJacobs.com)

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