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*The One
Night*



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MEGHAN
QUINN

*The One
Night*

 Montlake

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CONTENTS

[Chapter One COOPER](#)

[Chapter Two NORA](#)

[Chapter Three COOPER](#)

[Chapter Four NORA](#)

[Chapter Five COOPER](#)

[Chapter Six NORA](#)

[Chapter Seven COOPER](#)

[Preview: *The Reunion*](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

Chapter One

COOPER

“You have a hole in your sock,” Dad says, pointing to my foot, which is currently resting on my parents’ twenty-year-old coffee table.

I sigh, folding my arms across my chest and sinking lower into the couch. “I know.”

“If you know there’s a hole in your sock, then why are you wearing it?”

“I don’t know, Dad. Maybe for the same reason you still wear your shorts, even though they all have holes in the crotch.”

Dad shifts and turns his attention back to his coloring book. “More room to air things out.”

“Gross, Dad. Jesus.”

“What are my two favorite guys doing tonight?” Mom asks in a chipper tone, strutting into the living room with a trayful of warm cider.

The house is decorated to the nines, as my mom does every year around the holidays. Green garland is strung around the crown moldings, and dripping lights are sprinkled through the faux greenery. Stockings hang by the chimney, one for each member of this family, which includes me, Mom, Dad, and my sister, Palmer, and brother, Ford. Doubt they’ll be home for the holidays, though—it’s rare. But Mom still represents them during Christmastime.

The tree is perfectly placed in front of the bay window in the living room, shining for all the neighbors to see, just the way Mom likes it. She is quite particular when it comes to her tree, so when we decorated it this year, instead of hanging ornaments, Dad and I sat patiently and waited for direction while listening to Christmas music.

“Ford is going to develop a complex, you know, if he finds out you don’t include him in your bundle of favorite guys. Since, you know, he’s the

oldest and is always trying to please.”

Mom scoffs. “That boy wears the crown for favorite. You know that, Coop.” She winks.

“Thanks a lot. Guess I won’t be taking the ferry all the way to Marina Island from Seattle almost every day to help you out anymore.” I reach for a cider, but Mom swats my hand away.

“Take this one.” She hands me a mug and smiles.

“What’s in this?” I ask her, suddenly wary.

“Cider. What do you think is in there?”

“I don’t know, arsenic?”

Mom laughs and then reaches down to pat me on the cheek. “Oh, honey, why would I kill off our little YouTube handyman?”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“I like the ring of it,” Dad says, still focusing on intently coloring. He has a coloring book of swear words that he thinks is the “bee’s knees,” and he’s currently coloring a purple *F*.

“I’m an editor, not a handyman.” An editor who hates his job immensely and wishes for nothing more than to never read another nonfiction book ever again.

Mom touches the bottom of my mug and guides it to my lips. “Drink up, sweetie. I really think you need it.” She then snaps her fingers at Dad and shoots him a pointed look. As if I’m not in the room, sitting between them, watching them wage some silent argument through mouth quirks and eyebrow raises.

Finally, my dad relents—though God knows what conversation they just shared—and turns toward me. “Let’s have fun tonight.”

I glance between my parents, feeling uneasy. “Let’s have fun tonight?”

“Yeah. You know, fun. Have you heard of it?” Dad asks, full of snark.

“Yes, I’ve heard of fun before. I’m just wondering why you want to have fun tonight when I know you’d rather fall asleep in your chair, your hand halfway down the collar of your shirt.”

“We are in the mood for a good time, Cooper,” Mom butts in.

I sit up now. Eyeing them warily, I ask, “What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing,” Mom answers, exasperated, and guides my mug up to my lips again. “Just drink up.”

“Mom, I suggest you stop trying to get me to drink whatever is in this cup. You’re being too weird.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Dad says, getting out of his recliner and taking a seat next to me on the couch. He grabs the drink from my hands, and before Mom can say anything, he takes a swig. His eyes immediately roll up, and his cheeks pucker. “Good Christ, woman. Yowza! How much rum did you put in that thing?”

“Half a cup. Too much?”

Dad hands the drink back to me. “Good luck with that.”

“Why is there a half a cup of rum in my cider?”

Heaving a heavy sigh, Mom leans back on the couch and dramatically drapes her arm over her eyes. “I’m attempting to loosen you up, Cooper. But your dad ruined it.”

“Any person with working taste buds would know that drink is flammable,” Dad says.

“Why do you want to loosen me up?”

Mom turns toward me and takes my hand in hers. “Honey, we need to talk.”

Shoot me now.

We need to talk. Nothing good comes from those words in any situation.

Not in a relationship.

Not with work.

And especially not with your parents.

Because with your parents, you’re about to get a lecture about how they think your life should be different, and what they think you should do to change it.

“You know what, it’s getting late.” I pat my legs. “I should really get going.”

I go to stand, but Dad’s booming parental voice springs into action. “Sit down, Cooper, and listen to what your mother has to say.”

Even though the man wears shorts with holes in the crotch, I still tend to listen to him.

I press my back against the couch and prepare myself to be annoyed.

Mom takes my hand in hers and gently pats it. “Cooper, we are concerned.”

Yup, here it comes.

“It’s been a year since you and Dealia decided to get a divorce, and now that the entire thing is final, we believe you need to get back out there, test the waters.”

Could have bet money that this is what they'd want to talk about.

Yes, just like Ross Geller, I'm part of the divorced man's club. I married Dealia young—we had big plans to travel the world, but those plans changed as my parents got older and needed more help from me. Because I owe them everything, I stayed close while my two siblings went off to live their lives. Am I bitter about it? Maybe a little, but even though I'd never admit it, I take pride in making sure my parents are okay. They gave me a home when I needed it and brought my brother and me into the kind of family we could only dream of. I'll do pretty much anything for them.

Well, almost anything. Whatever they have up their sleeves right now . . . I'm probably going to turn it down immediately.

"As much fun as this conversation is, I'm very certain I don't want to hear it." I go to get up again, but Mom places her hand on my leg.

"I don't want you to die alone," she says, her voice choked up and tight. Wow.

Okay, we have a flair for the dramatic tonight.

I turn to my mom and give her a questioning brow. She sighs. "Okay, that might have been an over-the-top statement, but I do worry that you're going to end up alone."

"Why do you think I'm going to end up alone? Your other two kids aren't currently attached to anyone."

"But their hearts haven't been broken. A broken heart tends to not want to venture out into love again. Different circumstances."

"My heart isn't broken, Mom. Dealia and I just wanted different things from life."

"And what exactly do you want from your life?" Dad asks, his voice serious. "Because from where I'm sitting, you're not happy with your job, you're a recently divorced man who sits at his parents' house on a Friday night rather than going out, and from the status of your sock you've apparently let yourself go."

"It's one pair—Jesus, Dad. You're not even wearing matching socks."

"And I am in a committed, almost fifty-year marriage with the love of my life. Unfortunately for her, I'm allowed to let myself go, and she just has to deal with it." He gives my mom an apologetic look, but she just beams right back at him. "You, my son, don't have that luxury. You need to figure out what you plan on doing with your life."

I drag my hand down my face. Why is that something parents always

want for their kids? For them to “figure” out their life? Why can’t we just go through trial and error as the years pass, never really figuring out anything, but just going with the ebbs and flows of life?

And who’s to say I’m not content right now.

Maybe I don’t want to “figure” things out.

Maybe I want to stay permanently in the rut that I’m living in.

Perhaps I am content . . .

I think we all know that’s a bald-faced lie. Divorced in my twenties, working a job I hate, spending Friday nights with my aging parents . . . not sure many would be content with that kind of life.

But I can’t possibly understand what my parents mean by “have fun,” or what that entails.

“So, what do you want to do? Take me out? Be my wingmen?” I ask sarcastically.

My mom’s eyes light up.

Oh fuck.

That was a mistake.

“I didn’t mean—”

“That’s a wonderful idea.” Mom claps her hands. “We should take him out, help him score with the ladies.” The sincerity in my mom’s voice is the most startling part about what she said. We’re the type of family where teasing is the norm. We joke around, lay down light jabs in a loving manner here and there, and my mom is an enthusiastic participant from time to time.

But she’s being serious. She actually wants to help me “score with the ladies.”

“Okay, no, that’s not—”

“Martin, go put on your conversational Christmas sweater and those plaid pants you love wearing with it.”

“God, no, Mom.”

Mom stands from the couch, hands clutched in front of her. All sanity was washed away with one sip of her cider. “I shall go and retrieve my Christmas vest, the one with the bells that you know I enjoy jingling.” She checks her watch. “Oooh, we will need to pack an overnight bag to stay at Cooper’s for the night, because the ferry won’t run again until the morning. Don’t worry though, sweetie—if you decide to bring a woman home, we can figure something out so you have privacy.”

Fucking . . . hell.

“Chop-chop, Martin.”

For some godforsaken reason, Dad must think this is a good idea, because without another word, he rises from his seat on the couch and heads up the stairs, Mom trailing after him.

“Wait . . . Mom.” But it’s too late; they ignore me as they retreat to their room to put on their Christmas garb.

What in the hell just happened?

How did I go from peacefully sitting on my parents’ couch to going out with them? I think they’ve lost their minds, because there is no way in hell I’m letting this happen. I’m putting a stop to it before they set foot outside this house. My parents will *not* be attempting to take me out so they can act as my wingmen.

Over my dead body.

“I think I’m having heart palpitations from excitement,” Mom says, giving my hand a squeeze as the ferry pulls into Elliott Bay.

“You know, I’m never one to insert myself into my children’s lives”—insert sarcastic cough here—“but I would have to agree with you, Peggy. I’m quite excited about scouting out a nice girl for our Cooper.”

Sandwiched between my parents on the ferry’s blue fiberglass bench, I stare at the dark water in front of me rolling and dipping just like my stomach. But unlike nausea that can be tamped down by some Dramamine, there unfortunately isn’t a sedative big enough to tamp down the wild ideas coming from Peggy and Martin Chance.

I hate to admit it, because I prefer to say I have control over most situations, but my parents’ little plan came together fast, too fast—there was no controlling it.

Before I knew it, Dad had on his “Christmas conversational sweater” and plaid pants, and Mom was jingling her “bells” at me as we headed out the door. I attempted to dig my feet into the ground as they pulled on my arms, but one trip on the sidewalk from my dad, saved by their carry-on suitcase, had me easing up.

Now I’m dreading what this evening has in store. They asked for some bar suggestions, and instead of giving them the bars I actually like to frequent, I told them the Dirty Beaver was a top-notch choice. I was kidding.

But guess who looks past sarcasm when they're too excited?

My mother.

She said the Dirty Beaver sounded like the perfect place to find a "companion."

I beg to differ.

No one finds companionship at the Dirty Beaver, just some questionable nachos and a possible staph infection.

"Oh, honey, this could be it—this night could change your life," Mom coos.

"Yup, it will change it all right, into deeply emotionally scarred memories I won't ever be able to get over."

"I see that you've picked up your mother's flair for dramatics," Dad says. "How about this—instead of focusing on what could possibly go wrong with this night, tell us something positive, something else that's happening in your life that brings you joy. We need to get you in the right frame of mind."

Something positive . . . well, I do have something to tell them, something I've been working on for a bit now and that I haven't told anyone. Maybe my news will make them think I'm not a total loser.

"I signed up for some classes at the local community college."

"What?" they say at the same time, turning toward me.

I nod, staring down at my hands. "I've been tinkering around with Procreate on my tablet at night, just something mindless to do, and I started to realize that I'm pretty good at it. I thought that digital art might be something I could, you know, get into."

"Seriously?" Dad asks, completely facing me now. "Do you have any of your work with you that we can see?"

Excitement blooms in my stomach as I grab my phone from my pocket and flip through my photos until I find some of the simple mountain designs that I've been working on. I'm surprised at how excited I am as I hand my phone over to Dad. He holds the phone an arm's length away, just enough to be able to see it without his glasses.

"Wow, Cooper, you drew this?" When I nod, he blows out a low whistle. "This is really good, son."

A sense of pride rushes through me. "Thanks, Dad."

Mom takes the phone from Dad and peers at the screen. "Would you look at that. Oh, these are lovely, Cooper. Are there more?" She starts scrolling through the pictures on my phone.

“Mom, you’re not supposed to scroll through someone’s pictures.” I reach for the phone, but it’s too late.

“Cooper Chance, why are there nudes on your phone?”

“There’s nudes?” Dad asks. “Nudes of our son?”

“I’m not nude,” I say, snatching the phone away and stuffing it back in my pants. There goes that momentary joy I felt. The ferry is docking, and I’m happy to get off this vessel and end the conversation, even though it means “chick hunting” with my parents. “I’m wearing a towel. It’s a progress picture. I’ve been working out.”

“I’ve noticed,” Mom says while adjusting the buttons of her vest. “You have quite a few muscles.”

Please . . . please let someone end this.

“Either way, nudes or not,” Dad says, “those drawings are really good, Cooper. I’m glad you’re pursuing something in another field, especially since it seems to bring you joy.” Dad claps me on the back. “Maybe you can draw some pictures for me to color in.”

“Oooh,” Mom sighs happily. “How delightful would that be? Your dad can color something other than swear words.”

Oddly, I think his coloring swear words is endearing.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I reach for it while the captain’s voice crackles over the sound system, offering us directions on how to get off the ferry.

I glance at my phone screen to catch a text from Palmer. Texts from her are sporadic at best, but they always have something to do with her travels.

Because I need the distraction, I unlock my phone to see she texted my brother and me.

Palmer: [picture] In Australia, swam with sharks and a guy who looked like a long-lost Hemsworth brother. See him in the background? He asked me out. We’re getting drinks later tonight. Should I ask him if he’s a Hemsworth?

Keeping the distraction going, I text her back.

Cooper: There are only three Hemsworth brothers. Maybe a cousin. Either way, don’t embarrass yourself.

Mom and Dad both stand with their small overnight suitcase, which I try to take from Dad, but he refuses to let me carry it. He tells me I can't look like a "bag man" because it would be a turnoff to the ladies. Whatever that means. We work our way off the ferry as my phone buzzes again.

Palmer: Oh, do you mean don't embarrass myself—like the time you spilled your drink all over your date and instead of apologizing or asking to buy a new shirt, you just got up and left . . . without another word?

Cooper: It was a bad night, a bad date, I did her a favor.

"Which way do we go?" Mom asks when we make it onto the dock.

"Well, straight right now," I deadpan, "unless you want to end up in Elliott Bay. But after this, we're going to grab an Uber. Rideshare is past the dock and down the street on the right. I already have a car coming."

"He's so efficient," Mom says as my phone buzzes.

I usher my parents in the direction we need to go, feeling like a sheepdog with a daunting task of herding a couple of geriatrics while I read the text.

Palmer: What's it like to not care about how anyone perceives you?

Cooper: Freeing. Try it.

Palmer: You didn't say anything about the sharks.

Cooper: Because you see the end of a tail and that's it. The picture is mostly you with the guy in the background and you're not even swimming. You're on a boat, outside of the water. Did you even get in?

Palmer: [picture] Yes, see. We were in a cage for safety. It's adventurous. Try it.

Cooper: As a matter of fact, I'm doing something rather adventurous right now.

Ford chimes in, finally. He probably lifted his head up from his desk for a brief second. The guy never stops working, even late at night.

Ford: Great pictures, Palmer. And what are you doing, Cooper?

Palmer: Thank you. And yeah, what are you doing, Cooper?

Cooper: If you must know . . . I'm currently grabbing an Uber to the Dirty Beaver where our parents are going to attempt to be my wingmen because they feel it's a necessity to insert themselves into every aspect of my life.

Palmer: WHAT? Oh my God, I'm going to need updates.

Ford: Uh . . . your wingmen? We're going to need more of an explanation.

And they won't be getting one, because I love dropping a bomb like that on my siblings and just walking away. I like to see them leaning in, getting involved, stepping away from their lives for a second and bringing their attention back to Marina Island—well, Seattle at the moment. But you get it. I like getting them all riled up. I stuff my phone in my pocket just as our Uber arrives.

Here's hoping my night ends soon and I'm back at my place with my parents in the guest room, sleeping comfortably.

Chapter Two

NORA

“You look like you had a rough day,” Earl says as I take a seat at the bar.

I drop my wristlet on the bar top along with my phone and let out a deep breath, my eyes connecting with the grouchy but sweet bartender. “IPA, Earl.”

He chuckles. “I take that as a yes.”

I prop my elbow up on the bar and rest my head in my hand as I stare at all the glass bottles lining the wall, some full, some halfway empty, and a lot at the end of their rope. I can relate. I’ve ended enough rough days—spent baking endless cakes—at the Dirty Beaver that Earl can read my mood by now.

He plops an ice-cold beer in front of me, and I lift it to my lips. I take a grateful sip and then set it down on the coaster he provided me. “Brides are probably my least favorite people to work with.”

“Isn’t that the biggest percentage of your clientele?” He laughs while he flings his towel over his shoulder and props his hands on the bar top. Earl is an older gentleman, a retired veteran who bought the Dirty Beaver and did absolutely nothing to improve it. He claims that because the word “dirty” is in the title of the bar, people should know what to expect. And he’s right, but it’s also led to this place’s chill vibe—with the bonus that not one single bride I’ve ever worked with would step foot in a place like this.

“It is.” I nod and then take another sip of my beer.

“Then it seems like you might be in the wrong line of work there, darling.”

“But I like baking. I just don’t like dealing with the customers.” I pause to take another sip. “I’m damn good at it, though. I can smile my way through any conversation, but I don’t like dealing with them.”

“Have someone else do it,” he suggests. “Don’t you have an assistant or two you can dump it on?”

I shake my head. “It’s my bakery, passed down from my family. It’s my responsibility to deal with the clients, or at least until I can properly train someone to handle customer relations. Until then, it’s all me.”

“Well, what was it this time?”

“Cake testing. The bride wanted every flavor, but she didn’t want to pay for the additional flavors. For cake tastings, we have a set sample amount, because I’m not here to make free cakes for people, and she was pissed that I couldn’t just ‘whip up some more’ in the back for her.” I sip my beer, still fuming. “And then she asked if I know how to properly stack cakes so they don’t fall over. Apparently, at one of her friends’ weddings, the baker didn’t put enough support in the cake. They were at an old venue with shaky floors, and while they were dancing, the cake plopped right over. She pointed her fork at me and demanded to know if I’d ever let that happen.”

“What did you say to her?”

I take another swig just as the door to the bar opens, sending in a gust of the winter wind. “Told her I have a list of over five hundred clients she can call to see how I never let that happen.” I take a deep breath. “She asked for the list.”

Earl lets out a howl before he walks over to the other side of the bar to help a customer.

I’m sitting at the far end of the bar, in a dark corner, just the way I like it. I thought about asking my friend Dealia to join me for a drink, but she’s been a little off ever since her divorce. I don’t think she misses her ex per se, because she doesn’t seem to harbor any regrets, but I think she is having trouble grasping the concept of being alone. I kind of want to say, “It’s been a year,” but I tread the line of making sure I’m being sensitive. Either way, she’s not here.

And I kind of like the peace, the ability to not have to chat—

Buzz. Buzz.

I glance down at my phone on the bar top and see my mom’s face appear on the screen. I wince, not wanting to talk but knowing I’ve ignored her all day. If I don’t answer, she’s going to keep calling.

Nothing like talking to your mom on the phone . . . in a bar . . . called the Dirty Beaver.

I pick up my phone. “Hey, Mom.”

“Well, there you are. I’ve been trying to call you all day.”

“I know. It’s been a busy day at the bakery.” She should know this—she used to work there. There is never a slow day, especially after we were named one of the top bakeries in Seattle. A great honor that has helped grow the family business tremendously, but it’s reached the point that I can barely breathe. I really need to hire some more people.

“Well, I’m glad I caught you,” she says.

“Oh, something important to say?”

“I need your advice.”

“Uh, okay.” Not sure my mom has ever called me looking for advice—it’s always the other way around.

“I’m texting you a few pictures right now. I need your help deciding on a few outfits I picked out for the cruise your dad and I are going on.”

“That’s . . . that’s why you’ve been calling all day? Outfit advice?”

“Of course, Nora. Diane and her husband will be there, and you know how judgmental she is when it comes to clothes. I don’t need her ruining my vacation with her little jabs.”

“Then maybe don’t let her—it’s an outfit, after all—or better yet, don’t hang out with her.”

“Oh, you know we’re bound to run into each other. They love shuffleboard just as much as we do.”

How could I forget? My phone buzzes with incoming photos.

“Did you get the pictures?”

“Yes,” I answer. “One second while I look at them.”

Stifling an annoyed sigh, I flip to her text messages and peruse outfits she picked out. Honestly, I have no idea what you’re supposed to wear on a cruise. I’m not sure why she thinks I’m the one to ask.

White shorts, floaty tropical tops, and a straw hat with a black ribbon.

They look cute.

But what has me almost giggling are the poses my mom has tried to pull off.

Hand on her hip, side jutted out.

One of the pictures is blurry.

In one, she has her leg up on a chair in the corner.

Another is of her in a tropical patterned bathing suit with a sarong. Her hand is behind her head, and I feel like she’s trying to kiss the camera . . .

Ooof, you just can’t unsee that.

“What do you think?” I hear her distantly ask.

I bring the phone back up to my ear. “They seem fine, Mom.”

“Fine?” she shouts. “*Fine?* That’s not the type of description I was going for. Can I get a little more enthusiasm?”

I can’t hold back a sigh this time. “Sorry, Mom. It’s just been a really long day. They’re all great options. I like the bold prints, the vibrant colors paired with the white shorts, and the bathing suit is flattering.” That was painful to get out, given my mental state, but that should be good enough.

“Your father thought the same thing.” Then why the hell is she asking me?

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Then it’s settled.”

“You know, honey, I hate to hear you sound so annoyed. I remember when the bakery used to run your dad’s life. He was miserable, never took days off, and he wound up almost working himself into an early grave. I know how much the family business means to you, but I don’t want you stressed out like your father. You can ask for help.”

“You’re retired,” I say. “I’m not going to ask you guys to help me when I should be able to handle it.”

“You are quite a phenomenal lady, Nora. We raised you to be a strong, independent, and confident woman. But I will tell you right now: your dad never ran the bakery on his own—I was by his side helping him. I love you, but I know you can’t do it on your own either. You need assistance. Let us help you.”

“You’re not coming back to work, Mom. You have your cruise.”

“We can help you find someone qualified to assist you,” Mom says in an exasperated tone.

“Oh,” I say. “Well, I could actually use that kind of help.”

Mom chuckles on the other end of the phone. “Well, I’m glad you can admit that. How about this: when we get back from our cruise, Dad and I will help put out inquiries for bakers. Dad knows some recruiters that might be able to help. We can find someone we all trust. Does that work?”

“Yeah, it does. Thanks, Mom.”

It actually helps a lot. I know my parents said they would step in whenever I needed the help, but I’m stubborn, and a small part of me wants to prove I can succeed completely on my own. Besides, I’ve never wanted to bother them. But with the influx of business, I’m very grateful for the offered help. Not sure I would have asked for it, but I can’t ignore the relief flooding

through me now that my mom has offered to step in.

“No need to thank me, sweetie. That’s what family’s for—to annoy you with cruise outfit questions and then come swooping in with all the help.”

“I’m glad I answered the phone this time.”

“Oooh, I knew you were ignoring my phone calls.”

I chuckle. “Not on purpose. It really was a busy day. The brides are gearing up for their summer weddings next year. Word of mouth is spreading, and we’re becoming a hot commodity, which means we are booking up fast—”

“Which means more tastings.”

“Exactly. I don’t mind working with the nice brides, the ones who are just happy to get married, but the other brides—”

“I believe society has deemed them bridezillas.”

“Yes, that type of bride—they are the absolute pits.”

Mom laughs. “I can only imagine how they’ve transformed over the years since I worked hand in hand with them. Well, have no fear. We’ll make sure you get some help when we get back—until then try to loosen up, have some fun. What are you doing tonight? Hanging out with Dealia, possibly?”

“No, she’s still acting a little weird. I’m at a bar . . . drinking a beer.”

“Sounds . . . earthy.”

“Earthy?” I ask with a laugh.

“Not sure that’s the right term, but it’s the only thing that I could think of. Are you by yourself?”

“Yes, but I prefer it that way. I’m decompressing.”

“You know, it might not hurt you to go talk to someone, you know, maybe—”

“Don’t say it, Mom.”

“Someone of the opposite sex.”

I groan. “I love you, but I’m not getting into this with you.”

“It never hurts to put yourself out there. Marge was telling me her daughter found a lovely man on a dating app. They’ve been on a few dates and things are looking promising. That could be you, Nora.”

“I don’t have time for a dating app. Nor do I want to be having this conversation with you . . . again.”

“I just don’t want to see you so alone all the time.”

I sigh heavily.

I swear, like clockwork, once a month, my mom gets into it about

needing to find someone to spend my time with. First of all, what time? Second of all, why do I need someone in my life to spend time with? Why isn't my company good enough? Why can't I just enjoy being with myself? And why does the mere mention of a relationship throw me down a pit of rhetorical questions?

“What is it with your generation that thinks since we're alone, we're miserable? I don't need a man in my life to be happy.”

“No, you don't, but it might not hurt to have a companion. Just think about it. If perhaps some gentleman walks up to you tonight, before you turn him down, at least give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Fine,” I lie, knowing I will do nothing of the sort.

“Thank you, sweetie. Now I'll let you go, so you look free and available to talk to. Love you.”

“Love you, Mom.”

I hang up the phone and then pick up my beer so I can take a nice, long swig.

The last thing I need right now in life is a complication like a “companion.”

Chapter Three

COOPER

“Well, it’s rather cozy in here, isn’t it?” Mom looks around while she sets her purse down on the table.

Cozy is being kind. I’ve been here a few times, and there is nothing cozy about the place, besides the low ceilings and tight space. The maple wood floors are caked in grime, ranging from yesterday’s rainstorm to spilled drinks, and they offer a steadily sticky surface for any wobbly leg. The establishment lacks pretty much any character. The tables are generic four-person tops with metal chairs. The barstools’ black leather upholstery is cracked—some have busted open—and any free poster the owner has received from beer companies is plastered on the wall in a haphazard way, offering a kaleidoscope of bikini-clad models and dewy bottles as wallpaper. The Dirty Beaver holds true to its name.

Dad tucked their suitcase into the corner, so it’s out of the way. He said he didn’t want to draw attention—apparently, he didn’t remember his holiday-tastic outfit of red-and-green-plaid bell-bottom pants paired with a hideous red Christmas sweater that’s far too ugly to actually pass off as cool with its embroidered baby Jesus on the front. Baby Jesus that’s missing an eye . . .

“The table is quite a bit sticky,” Mom whispers. “Should I ask for a rag to clean it?”

“No,” I say before she can even attempt to get up. “That’s the ambiance here, Mom. Cozy with sticky tables.”

“I can’t see how that’s any way to run your business, but I guess to each their own. Now, who do we ask for a menu?”

This is painful, so painful, and we’ve been here for only one minute.

“There is no menu—it’s a bar. You just put your order in to the

bartender.”

“Oh, right.” She chuckles, gripping my arm. “It’s been some time since I’ve been in one of these establishments. I’ve forgotten all protocol.”

“I can grab you a drink—what do you want?”

“Hmm.” Mom taps her chin. “Do you think they can make me a Shirley Temple?”

“Do they have root beer floats here?” Dad asks, glancing over toward the bar.

“No, Dad. They don’t—”

His arm flies across my chest. “Look, Cooper . . . a girl. Over there in the corner.”

“Where?” Mom says, head perked up, frantically looking around. “Is she pretty? Oh, it honestly doesn’t matter. We’ll take whatever we can get, right, honey?”

“Exactly,” Dad says, “we can’t possibly be picky. Not sure many women will walk into a bar like this.”

“Very true. But we do need to check for a ring—no son of mine will have an illicit affair.”

“Can you two please, for the love of God, keep your voices down?” I hiss. “I don’t need you drawing any more attention than you already are with those ridiculous outfits.”

“If you must know, Beverly, our Uber driver, thought my vest was quite fetching,” Mom says, tugging on the lapels of said vest.

She was being polite, but I keep that to myself.

“You should go talk to the girl,” Dad says, his eyes still focused on the bar. “She has black hair. Black hair means she’s probably coy and mysterious.”

“Where the hell did you come up with that? Coy and mysterious? Never met anyone with black hair who’s like that,” I say.

“Probably wasn’t natural,” Mom chimes in. “I heard black is the new blonde. But I agree with your father—you should go talk to her. If you’re nervous, we can swoop in, talk you up, and then you can join the conversation. Is that what you were hoping to happen?”

“I was hoping for none of this to happen.”

“You know, with an attitude like that, you’re never going to meet anyone,” Dad says. “Now tell us how we can help you meet this nice girl.”

“How do you know she’s a nice girl?” I ask. “For all you know, she

could be a real psycho.”

“He’s right,” Mom says. “I really think we should do some scouting.” She stands from her chair, the legs squeaking along the predictably sticky floor. My stomach plummets.

I tug on her hand. “Sit down. What are you doing?” Dad stands as well, and my worst fears become a reality. “Dad, stop. Sit down.”

Mom pats me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, honey. We got this.”

“Got what? What are you going to do?”

“Shhh.” She presses her finger to her lips. “Let Mommy and Daddy take care of this.”

“I never call you that. Why are you acting like this?” Panic sears through me. This was a really bad idea. I let this get too far. I should have never left the house with them.

“Son,” Dad announces, tucking his holiday sweater into his pants, “there comes a time in a parent’s life when they need to intervene. This is that moment. Sit back, relax, and let us do our work.” Dad bends his fingers back, cracking them, and takes my mom’s hand. Together they walk toward the bar, and in that very moment, as they approach the lady in the corner, I can feel my actual scrotum shrivel up into nothing.

In horror, I watch Dad walk right up to the woman, tap her on the shoulder—actually tap her—and then hold his arms out and hug her when she turns around.

Wait . . . hug her?

Why is he hugging her?

There should be no hugging. We don’t hug strangers. Am I really at that point in my life where the child becomes the parent and I have to teach my parents how to be normal human beings again?

When Dad lets go of the girl, Mom swoops in for a hug as well.

What the hell is wrong with them?

If I wasn’t so worried about them finding their way around Seattle, I’d ditch this bar and go find a bucket to stick my head in, drown out this nightmare.

“It’s so great to see you,” I hear Mom coo while she hugs the woman, swaying her back and forth.

Does Mom know her? Hopefully she’s a friend of theirs and I can be let off the hook. That would be the most ideal scenario—they run into an old friend and are so distracted that they completely forget why they came out in

the first place.

“Cooper, come here,” Dad says, waving to me.

And just like that, the ideal scenario dies. It was only a matter of time.

Reluctantly, I stand from my chair and head toward the dark corner, where I’m probably going to meet one of their bocce ball friends, or someone they had a game night with once. My parents are very social humans. Unlike me, they have an extensive Rolodex of friends they can call up on any given night.

“Over here, Cooper. Come. Come.” Mom motions for me to join them as well.

Trying not to look like the dud of a son that I feel like, I plaster on a smile and step up to the bar. Dad grips my shoulder. “Cooper, look who it is.”

The woman sets her drink down, turns in her seat and . . . holy shit.

“It’s Nora!” Mom claps her hands. “What are the chances?”

Uh, yeah . . . you could say that.

What are the chances that Nora McHale would be at the same bar as my parents and me?

Those deep-brown eyes of hers offer me a slow perusal, starting at my chest and working up to my face. When our eyes connect, a small smirk pulls at the corner of her mouth.

“Cooper Chance, funny running into you here . . . with your parents.”

I hold back my disgruntled snort. “Just showing them around town—thought I’d give them some local culture, dive bars.”

“That’s not what your dad said.”

Christ.

Dad squeezes my shoulder. “Yup, told her we were cruising the streets for nice girls.”

Why is this my life?

Humor flits across Nora’s face as she casually crosses one leg over the other. “Have any success?”

“We haven’t *really* been looking for nice girls.” I motion to my parents. “Delusional in their old age. Actually, I think it’s time for you two to go take your medications. We should get going.”

“Always joking, this one,” Mom says, wrapping her arm around my waist and resting her head on my chest. “Hard to imagine he’s single, don’t you think?”

“It’s just incredible,” Nora says, finding too much joy in what’s

unfolding in front of her.

“You know, wouldn’t it be fun if you two had a moment to catch up with each other?” Mom gestures between me and Nora.

I truly believe, in this moment, that my mom has lost touch with reality.

“Great idea,” Dad says. He taps the bar, and the bartender steps up. “Dear sir, would we be able to get two waters?”

“Coming right up,” the gruff man behind the bar says. He sets two glasses full of ice on the bar top and then sprays water into them. My dad places a five-dollar bill on the bar top and grabs the water. “Peggy, care to join me in the back? I feel like a little romance myself.” He waggles his brows and nods toward the corner we occupied.

“Oh, Mr. Chance, how romantic of you.” She slips her arm through my dad’s and then turns to me. “Go ahead, honey. Talk with Nora. Catch up. Have a little romance yourself.”

I clench down on my jaw so hard that I fear I might crack a tooth. How could they possibly think that I want to catch up with Nora McHale, let alone “have a little romance” with her?

Before they can fully make it to their table, I stop them midway, giving us just enough distance from Nora that she can’t overhear.

“You two can’t be serious about this,” I whisper.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Mom asks, completely confused. “You know Nora. She’s a friend of the family.”

“You’re missing a big piece of this puzzle.” When they stare at me blankly, I groan. “She’s my ex-wife’s best friend. What makes you think I want to have any *romance* with her?”

Mom dismissively waves her hand. “Oh, that’s nothing you need to worry about. You’re all adults, not petty teenagers. Go on. Go have some fun.”

“Yes, go have fun,” Dad encourages. “You only live once, son.”

With that, they turn their backs on me, huddling together and cutting me out completely.

I glance over my shoulder to where Nora is sitting patiently, watching everything unfold.

As I see it, I have two options. I can bolt out of here and sprint all the way to my apartment, where I’ll lock myself away from the world forever, or I can go sit at the bar near Nora and drown myself in some whiskey.

Option one is humiliating.

Option two . . . also humiliating, but will hopefully offer the possible chance to forget everything in the morning.

Hmm . . . guess there's a clear-cut choice.

Bottoms up.

Chapter Four

NORA

Never in a million years would I have ever thought I'd run into Cooper Chance at the Dirty Beaver, let alone run into his parents acting as his wingmen.

And I thought this night was going to be a complete bust.

Looks like things just got interesting.

But what's even more interesting? Cooper is not the man I remember from a year ago. He's stacked on some muscles he never had before. He changed out his glasses from a round silver frame to a more stylish square black frame. And instead of the clean-shaven man I've seen in many pictures, he's now sporting a solid scruff, which toes the line of full beard.

Someone had a bit of a glow up after their divorce, and it's doing him good.

Really good.

And you probably shouldn't be looking at him in that way . . . *Nora*.

Sighing heavily, he flops onto a stool and drapes his large arms on the bar top. "Whiskey, please," he says to Earl, head turned down.

When he took a seat, he left a stool between us, which is telling me two things—he's willing to have a conversation, but he also doesn't want to be completely open to talking.

But this is too much fun for me not to have a conversation with the man.

"So . . . your parents as wingmen. That's a first," I say.

Slowly, he tilts his head to the side until our eyes meet. "Not by my choice."

"I gathered that by your ever-present sulking. You know, some might feel quite lucky that their parents care so much about their love lives."

"Mine are too involved."

I shrug. “I think it’s cute. Trolling the streets for nice girls—feels like a YouTube series. I can see the opening credits. You three, linked arm in arm, skipping down the sidewalk together.”

Cooper scrubs his hand over his face. “I should have gone with option number one.”

“Huh?” I ask.

Earl places a glass of whiskey in front of Cooper, and with one swift motion, he tilts his head back and downs the entire glass. When he sets it back on the bar top, he clears his throat. “Could I have another? Thanks.”

“Oh, that kind of night, huh?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re looking at this all wrong.”

He turns on his stool to face me, his expression suddenly intent. “Oh yeah, please tell me how exactly I’m looking at this all wrong.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” I lift my beer and finish it off before holding up the empty bottle to Earl. “Could I get another?” He nods with a wink and quickly delivers. Such a good man. I twist the cap off the bottle. “Your parents are taking the hard work out of your hands. Not sure how far you are into the dating scene, but it’s rather unpleasant, trying to meet people. You spend all this time talking to them, trying to gauge if they’re a decent enough person, only to find out that they collect toenail clippings in their spare time.” He cringes at that. “But your parents are taking that work away from you,” I continue. “They’re doing the dirty work, and you’re reaping the benefits. I think that’s a pretty decent deal if you ask me.”

“But they’re my parents.”

“Yes, there seems to be a certain stigma to that, but any intelligent woman would be able to look past such a thing.” I fluff my hair with a smirk.

“Are you saying you’re intelligent?” he asks, lifting his glass to his lips.

“Are you saying I’m not?” I quirk a brow at him.

“I don’t know enough about you to make an honest assessment.”

“And whose fault is that?” I ask. “You know, you were married to my best friend, but we’ve also known each other for years, since our parents are good friends and all. You’ve had plenty of time to assess my intelligence.”

“Never noticed.”

Not surprised. Cooper has always had a one-track mind. It’s one of the things I find fascinating about him. He gets so incredibly fixated on something that nothing else around him exists. I know it’s one of the things

that bothered Dealia. She wanted Cooper to multitask, to focus on more than one thing at a time. But that's not how his mind works. When he's set on something, he's set in stone. I've never seen such undivided attention . . . it's quite captivating, actually.

"I'd take that as an insult if I didn't know as much as I know about you."

That makes him sit taller. "What do you know about me?"

I playfully tap my chin. "Well, I know you have a hard time focusing on anything but the task that's set in your mind. I know you have a tendency to not notice the things around you when you're zeroed in. And I know that you once jumped into my parents' pool and lost your swim trunks because you forgot to tie them, and Josie Gregory saw your bare butt."

"I borrowed Ford's swim trunks. Big mistake." He sips his whiskey. "Not sure about the other things, though. I notice what's going on around me."

I smile. "Is that so?"

He nods. "Yeah, I'm not as tunnel visioned as you make me out to be."

"I see." I bring my beer to my lips. "So, you're telling me you knew your parents left the bar about three minutes ago?"

"What?" he says, spinning around to find that his parents and their bag are very much gone. "What the actual fuck?"

I chuckle. "Yup, not tunnel visioned at all."

His razor-sharp gaze lands on me. "My back was toward them. That doesn't count."

"Okay." I smile.

He pulls his phone from his pocket, presses some buttons, and then holds the phone up to his ear. After a few seconds, he says, "Mom, where the hell are you two?" Silence. "What? Do you even know how to get to my apartment? I know you're not invalids, but it's dark. Do you have your glasses? What about a key?" He pats his pocket. "When did you take it from my pocket? Mom, I don't—can you—okay, yeah. Text me when you get there safely." Another moment of silence and then through gritted teeth, "She's my ex-wife's best friend. That's not happening." I feel my cheeks heat up. I can only imagine what Peggy just said to him. "I'm not talking about this. I love you. Text me when you're there. Bye." He hangs up the phone, places it on the bar top, and then slouches into the hold he has on his tumbler. He lifts the glass to his lips and slowly drains it again.

From the pace he's set, he's probably going to wish his parents had stayed so he'd have someone to help him back to his place.

"Are your parents good?" I ask.

"Yeah. They say bye, by the way. Mom said it was a pleasure seeing you again."

"Aw, I love your parents. They've always been so kind. Apple fell pretty far from the tree, huh?"

His eyes flash to mine. "I'm having a night."

"I see." I twist my lips to the side. "You know, you could turn that around. Instead of focusing on the negative, you can choose to make fun of the given situation."

He thinks on that and turns in his seat again, facing me. "All right, Nora, how exactly would you make fun of the situation I'm in?"

"Glad you asked." I smile and turn to Earl. "Earl, would I be able to borrow a piece of paper and a pen from you?"

"Of course, darlin'," he says before grabbing from the register a pencil with teeth marks in the wood and a pad of paper that's full of scribbled-on pages flipped over the binding.

With a smile of thanks, I flip over to a brand-new sheet.

"What do you plan on writing?" Cooper asks. "My biography?"

"Would you edit it?" I ask, knowing Cooper edits nonfiction for a living.

"After tonight, that might be more of a riveting read than what I'm currently working on."

I chuckle. "Working on something bland?"

"I fell asleep three times in an hour the last time I opened my computer."

"What are you editing?"

"A memoir featuring blimps."

"What?" I laugh. "From whose point of view? If you say the blimps', I can't possibly see how that would be boring."

"If it was from the blimps' point of view, I would be absolutely captivated. Unfortunately, it's from an avid viewer and observer."

"Ah, well, everyone has something they're passionate about. But no, I'm not writing your biography—I want to assess your situation so I can show you how to make it more fun." Pen poised, I say, "Please describe your problematic situation in great detail."

“Great detail seems extreme.”

“Okay, then do the best you can.”

Sighing, he moves his hand over the back of his neck. “It’s the holidays.”

“Yes, I was reminded of that by the Christmas plaid on your dad’s pants and the way your mom jingled her bells in my face.”

The smallest of smirks crosses his face. Oooh, look at that—he does have a sense of humor.

“There’s a romanticism to the holidays that I feel is projected onto us.”

“I can agree to that. It’s like the holidays roll around, and all of a sudden single people morph into neon signs for all their coupled-up friends. They take it upon themselves to either try to hook you up so you’re not alone on the holidays, or make you feel about two feet tall because you’re alone.”

“Exactly,” Cooper says, some life popping into his expression. “Why can’t a single person just be . . . single? Can’t that be good enough? Why do they have to be coupled up during the holidays?”

“Very valid point. So, is that what the situation is? You’re single around the holidays?”

“I don’t have a problem with it, but my parents are the ones who are starting to freak out. It’s been over a year since Dealia and I were even together. Apparently, that’s too long. Mom and Dad are worried, which led to tonight’s events.”

“Your parents taking it upon themselves to find you a nice girl on the streets of Seattle.”

“Exactly. And are they doing it out of the kindness of their hearts? Sure. Do they think they’re actually helping? I think they do. I truly think they don’t see how the entire situation is so humiliating.”

“And why precisely is it humiliating?” I ask, tapping my pen on my piece of paper. When he doesn’t answer, I roll my eyes. “You know, Cooper, I can’t possibly figure out how to make this a fun night if you don’t dive deep into the situation. I’m going to need a little more from you.”

He lets out a heavy sigh, drains the rest of his drink, and asks for another. “You want honesty?”

“I would love honesty.” I sip my beer.

When Earl drops off the drink, I’m surprised when Cooper closes the space between us, climbing to the stool next to mine. Instead of facing the bar, he turns toward me, knocking our knees slightly. It’s in this moment that

I get a close-up look at his steel-gray eyes. I remember the first time I noticed his eyes—I was just a kid visiting Watchful Wanderers, his family’s outdoor goods store on Marina Island. He was chasing his sister, Palmer, around the hiking boots display. I was watching them curiously as they laughed, knocking over boots. It was the booming, chastising voice of Martin Chance that startled Cooper, freezing him in his tracks and making his eyes wide. I can still vividly see the look on his face, and I remember being . . . mesmerized by the color.

A color so light that his eyes almost felt unreal.

Now that he’s a grown man, his hair has darkened, and his symmetrical face is lined with thick scruff. His eyes have slightly aged, probably from the worry he carries, but it only heightens the intensity in his gaze. And his face has thinned out, carving his jaw in a more prominent line, any portrait artist’s dream. Even though I probably shouldn’t, I can honestly say he’s probably one of the most handsome men I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Pair his looks with the gruff attitude, the grumpy disposition and . . . hell, what am I even saying? I shouldn’t be internally commenting on any of this, on his looks, on his raw sexual magnetism.

Did I say “sexual magnetism”?

Wow, okay.

Deep breaths, Nora.

You can’t possibly be breaking out in a light sweat.

There is no way your heart is pounding a little faster with one glance from him.

And there is no way his voice feels like a warm blanket wrapping around you during a chilly night.

Nope.

Mentally nibbles on lip

Oh God.

I find Cooper Chance attractive—dangerously so.

As this realization sinks in, I force myself back to the matter at hand and focus on the man beside me. With his hand gripping his new glass of whiskey, Cooper twists it against the bar top as his gaze falls to the paper I’ve been writing on.

“My siblings are single. Did you know that?”

“Haven’t really kept tabs on them. All I know is Ford is leading the charge with the family business, and Palmer spends most of her time

overseas, blogging about it.”

“That’s incredibly accurate,” he answers. “But my parents never bother to ask them why they’re not with anyone.”

“Do you think it’s because they don’t spend Friday nights in dive bars with Peggy and Martin?” I joke.

He chuckles. “Possibly.” He sips his drink, this time not downing it. “But what’s humiliating is that I think my parents believe I’ve got nothing going for me, that since I’m divorced, there’s no future for me. And they’re trying to make up for that.” He moves his hand across his jaw. “I think they see me as the loser son.”

“Oh my God, Cooper, you can’t possibly think that. I’ve known your parents for a good deal of my life, and they would never ever consider any of their children losers—despite the trials and tribulations they’ve been through.”

“Hearing you say that makes sense, but in here”—he taps his heart—“it doesn’t feel like that. They’re worried about me. They think the only thing that’s going to make me happy is being with someone.”

“Is it?”

He shakes his head. “No one, single individual should ever be responsible for someone else’s happiness. Your happiness is all dependent on you, no one else. Being with someone is not going to bring me happiness. Even if it’s the right person.”

“Well, that’s very enlightened,” I tease. “So, what will bring you happiness?”

He scratches his cheek. “Still trying to figure that out.”

“But you’re trying to figure it out . . .”

He nods. “I have some thoughts on the matter.”

“Then it seems like you’re not as bad off as you’re claiming to be, like maybe you’re just playing the Debbie Downer card for attention.”

“Excuse me?” he asks, brows raised, humor in his eyes. “You think I’m playing the Debbie Downer card?”

He’s playful. I always thought he was stiff, possibly unapproachable, when he was with Dealia. But seeing him here in the bar, whiskey in hand, a light tug on those sexy lips . . . I’m totally into this right now.

I uncross my legs and lean forward. Holding my hand out, I tick reasons off with my fingers. “You’re acting like, ‘Woe is me, my parents wanted to hang out with me tonight.’ You’re saying you’re humiliated. You say you

think your parents think of you as a loser, but . . . lo and behold, you have a solution to all of that—you claim you're creating your own happiness. So tell me, Cooper, which is it? Are you playing morose so you can pick up the ladies? Or are you truly in a devastated slump and attempting to get out of it? If it's the former, I will tell you right now, any woman would find it more enticing to be set up by a pair of meddling parents than offer pity to a man who just wants some attention." I fold my arms over my chest and hold back a smirk as he sits taller in his seat and blinks a few times.

God, that look, right there . . . he has no idea what to do with me, and I'm totally loving it.

Tonight is turning out to be so much more fun than I anticipated.

Chapter Five

COOPER

I'm not sure I've been this speechless . . . ever.

I always have a retort, a comeback. I pride myself on being quick on my feet.

But Nora just stumped me. I think she read me like a book—a book I had no idea I was even writing.

She's fucking right.

I'm playing the morose asshole, the one that people get sick of rather quickly.

The Debbie Downer.

And that's even more depressing than the idea of my parents acting as my wingmen.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Nora presses. I can see she's trying to hold back her smile—it's evident in the twitching of her lips and the devious glint in her eye.

How could I not remember this about Nora, her up-front personality? Her ability to tell it like it is. I don't recall any instance where I've been subjected to such brutal honesty, and yet, it doesn't bother me.

I actually find it thrilling, the way she's calling me out. Dealia would always bottle everything up, until one day the bottle would burst and a litany of my faults would pour out of her mouth. It was a vicious cycle that only made me defensive, unable to listen to what she was trying to tell me.

But Nora . . . within the first few minutes of speaking to me, she has no problem pointing out my misbehavior.

It's intriguing.

Do you know what else is intriguing?

The way the red of her lips almost exactly matches the red of her shirt.

Or the way her thick, black lashes highlight with a beautiful intensity the dark abyss of her eyes. Or how even in the dim light of this dingy bar, I can still catch the lightest of blushes that cross her cheeks when she speaks with such honesty.

I've known Nora for a while, but since she was Dealia's best friend, I never gave Nora a second look. Why would I? But now, with the proverbial marriage veil tossed aside once I ventured into the land of divorce, I'm seeing Nora differently. She is, in all honesty, quite beautiful.

Shifting on my stool, I tear my gaze from her. "You're right," I say quietly.

She leans forward, pressing her hand to her ear, making a show of it. "I'm sorry. I didn't quite hear you. Could you repeat that?"

I roll my eyes. "You're right. I was playing the Debbie Downer card." I point at her. "But not on purpose. I was unconsciously playing it."

"I'm not sure that's possible. You're always conscious of your actions."

"Not true," I counter. "It's human nature to react a certain way. We're influenced by the world around us and the narrative set by media and outside sources, which means that sometimes our reactions are totally unconscious—in our minds, it's nothing more than how we perceive we should react."

"Are you saying if someone else was in your situation, they would react the same way?"

"Guaranteed. The general consensus, if you polled a few people—they'd have doubled over in humiliation if their parents acted as wingmen to score them a nice girl."

"Interesting theory. Shall we put it to the test?"

Well. Now I'm intrigued. "What's your plan?"

She glances around the bar, her eyes evaluating, assessing. "Do we believe this theory would be geared more toward men or women?"

"I say we keep it gender neutral. I don't know if there should be a baseline bias."

"Fair enough, equality for all." She throws back her beer, draining the rest of it before setting the empty bottle on the bar. "I think we walk around the bar, take a poll, see how people would react. I think it would help us decide if your Debbie Downer card was conscious or unconscious, a card you knowingly played, or influenced by outside sources and out of your hands."

"I believe that's fair."

"And if we do conclude that, in fact, you had no control over your

emotions, it will be my duty to change the evening for you, reminding you that it's not society that controls the way you feel, but you who does so . . . you know, taking a page out of your own book."

"And what if we conclude that my emotions regarding the situation are entirely of my own making? What happens then?"

She pauses, giving it some thought. "Well, if that's the case, then you should probably retreat to the men's room, where you should give yourself a deafening swirl by plunging your head in the toilet, because frankly, Cooper, no one has time for your petty man feelings."

That makes me laugh out loud. I take one more sip of my whiskey and set it on the bar top. As I stand from my stool, I say, "I've never in my life wished to be right about one single thing."

"Afraid of the toilet plunging?" she asks, amusement in her voice.

"Judging by the fact that my feet stick to the floor when I take a small step, I'm horrified to see what the toilet is like."

"I assure you, it's not up to your standards." She pats me on the back. "Good luck. I hope your theory prevails. But if not, I'll be sure to capture your demise on my phone so I can text a video to your entire family."

"You're truly a pioneer."

She chuckles and presses her hand to my back, shuffling to the front of the bar, where a group of four men are laughing over a pitcher of what I'm assuming is a generic beer. When we step up, their eyes immediately shoot past me and straight to Nora. I glance back at her, hoping she takes the lead, and that's when I notice the skintight jeans she's wearing, showing the length of toned legs, and the red long-sleeve crop top that reveals a few good inches of her midriff.

I was so caught up in her eyes that I failed to realize she was showing so much skin.

"Hey, boys," she says casually. "We have a question to ask. You see, my friend and I are taking a poll and want to gauge your reaction to a certain situation. Are you up for it?"

"What's the situation?" one of the men says, getting right to the point.

"Are any of you single?" They all raise their hands. "Perfect. Okay, so what if your parents decided to come out with you tonight, and their main goal was to act as your wingmen—would you be humiliated or grateful?"

The men all look at each other with confusion.

"You mean, try to find me someone to hook up with?" the guy asks.

“Not just hook up with, but, you know, be a life partner.”

His nose scrunches. “No way in hell would I let that happen.”

Satisfaction fills my chest.

“Although,” another guy says, “it would be easier if someone else did the work for me.” No, man, not the answer I’m looking for. But he finishes with a shake of his head. “I can’t imagine a moment where a girl wouldn’t think I was a loser if my parents stepped in.”

Validated.

Did you see that? Validation in that very sentence.

The other two men agree with them, and after polling a few more tables, we find only one person in the entire bar who says they would love their parents to find them a match, and it’s because they’re a nurse and don’t have time for any dating bullshit.

Satisfied, I move back to our spot at the bar, pick up a new glass of whiskey that Earl delivers to me, and bring it up to my smiling lips.

“Your grin is obnoxious,” Nora says.

“Are you . . . no, it can’t be . . . are you irritated that I was right?”

“No, I’m totally content with our research findings.”

“Uh-huh, but the stiff set of your shoulders and the agitated tone of your voice tells me differently.”

“I’m not agitated about the findings—I’m mourning the loss of seeing you flush your head in a toilet. The thought of it positively excited me.”

I roll my eyes as she chuckles and pushes at my leg. “I’m afraid to say, even if you were right, I’m not sure I’d have been able to go through with flushing myself.”

“Don’t worry, I’d have helped you.”

“Somehow I don’t doubt that.” I tilt my head at her, curiosity filling me as I wonder where this night will lead us. “So now what? Aren’t you supposed to take charge now?”

“As if I haven’t been taking charge this entire time.” She lets out a deep breath. “First things first. I need some food. Are you interested in ditching the Dirty Beaver and going to another establishment where the nachos aren’t made from a can of cheese from twenty years ago?”

“That would be preferred,” I answer before I can even think about it.

“Great. Earl,” she calls over my shoulder, “we’re heading out. Can we settle up?”

“Each of you leave a twenty, and you’re good to go.”

“A twenty?” I ask. I drank more than twenty dollars.

Nora smiles. “It’s why the toilets are never clean. Be glad the patrons of this bar saved you tonight.” From the wallet thing around her wrist, she pulls out two twenties and sets them on the bar top. When I go to protest, she says, “You got dinner.”

She hops off her stool and takes me by the arm, guiding me toward the door. When we step outside into the cold winter air, she clings to me tightly. I can’t remember the last time Dealia clung to me like this. Toward the end of our marriage, she didn’t even hold my hand, so having another human’s touch, even if it’s just for warmth, feels nice. Comforting.

With us close to the water, the wind whips off the bay, adding a certain chill to the Seattle air that only enhances the holiday ambiance as we head down the lit-up sidewalk. Besides the black hole that is the Dirty Beaver, the shops lining the streets are illuminated with twinkling lights in a neutral white color. Green garland lines the window displays, and large wreaths with red bows decorate the streetlamps, making the large industrial city feel like a quaint small town.

“I always forget a jacket.” Nora shivers. “I hope you can walk fast.”

I stuff my hands in my pockets. “You’d better keep up. Where are we going?”

“Three blocks up and to the right. There’s a bar that has the best nachos I’ve ever had.”

We take off in that direction. “Why didn’t you go there instead?” I ask, hoping for a distraction from the cold.

“I went to the Dirty Beaver to not be bothered. I had no idea Peggy and Martin Chance were going to show up and try to set me up with their son.”

“Lucky you,” I say.

“Some might say that, but I’m still wavering on the verdict.”

“Any way I can float you toward the lucky side?”

“Don’t lay down the Debbie Downer card for the rest of the night, and then I very well might consider myself lucky.”

“Seeing that I most likely won’t be influenced by outside sources, I feel pretty good about my chances.”

“Hmm . . .” She glances over, and the warmth in her gaze is enough to make me forget the frigid night. “We shall see . . .”

Chapter Six

NORA

“Admit it, come on, let me hear it from your nacho cheese–filled mouth.”

Cooper dips his head in defeat and slowly nods. “Yup, best nachos I’ve ever had.”

You wouldn’t think an Irish pub would excel at making nachos, but here we are, hovering over a large serving plate, fingers covered in cheese, munching away. The Potato with Red Eyes is one of my absolute favorite places in the city. Not only is the ambiance perfect during the holiday season, with Celtic Christmas music playing in the background and putting you in the mood, but the booths are carved mahogany in deep rich tones that make you think you’re grabbing a pint in the Irish countryside.

“Told you,” I say, so incredibly giddy over the prospect of introducing someone to one of my favorite foods at one of my favorite bars. I don’t get out much, and when I do, it’s usually at random times, when my friends are home for the night or already have plans, so more often than not, I’m alone, trying new foods as I eat my way around Seattle. Sharing this experience with someone other than my Yelp rating actually excites me.

Cooper nods thoughtfully. “There’s something about the homemade salsa mixed into the cheese that’s actually making me salivate.”

“And the chicken has that charred taste to it.”

“The added lime salt.”

“And then with just the right amount of sour cream it’s positively orgasmic.”

“Haven’t experienced an orgasm in a bit, but I’d have to agree.” Cooper winces at that. “I mean, I have orgasms all the time.” Even though he’s wincing, he’s also smiling, clueing me in that his whiskeys have kicked in.

“All the time? Wow, that’s impressive.”

“Yup.” He pops a cheese-and-chicken-laden chip into his mouth and crunches down. “All the time, multiple a day.”

“Now, would these orgasms be brought on by others, or by yourself?” I cock an eyebrow, unable to resist the question.

He chuckles. “What do you think?”

I smirk. “I think self-love is a major component in your everyday life.”

He holds his hands out, as if to say, “What are you going to do?”

“If you’re not loving yourself, then how can you give love to others?” he asks.

“Very valid point. I happen to participate in self-love as well.”

Huh . . . why did I say that? Maybe the beers are getting to my head too.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. You seem as though you really enjoy loving yourself.”

I snort. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

He shrugs and puts another chip in his mouth. “Honestly, I have no clue. I think words are just falling out of my mouth at this point.”

“An honest occurrence after a few tumblers of whiskey and half a beer.”

We each ordered a local IPA when we arrived, but while Cooper nursed his, I’m on my second. Not quite sure why—maybe because I’m nervous. Nervous that I’m going to do something stupid, like . . . touch Cooper on the arm, like I did when I told him about the nachos. Or stare at him longer than I should, like I did while we waited for the nachos. Or feed him a damn chip, like when the nachos arrived. I mean, Cooper is my best friend’s ex-husband. I probably shouldn’t even be hanging out with him right now, which really hit me only when we arrived at this bar, but . . . the nachos were calling me, and now the more time I spend with him, the more I want this evening to continue. I want to get to know him more. I want to tease him some more. I want him to tease me . . .

But my conscience makes an appearance from time to time, reminding me who he is, which then brings on the nerves again. It’s a vicious cycle.

Maybe I do need another beer.

“I have a question,” Cooper says while picking at a black olive.

“Maybe I have an answer.”

“Dessert. Are you in or are you out?”

“Ohhh, good question.” I tap my chin. “I have a question for your question.”

He braces his hand on the table and takes a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

“I’m very glad you prepared yourself, because this is going to be a doozy.”

“Hit me with it.”

“Dessert. Will it be consumed here, or would we be able to relocate?”

“That is quite the solid question.” He squints at me from behind his glasses. “I’m going to assume your question has experience behind it. Since you know the nachos so well, maybe you know the dessert menu too.” I nod. “Which means you’re either in favor of the desserts or are very likely to order one here. Perhaps this bar has a secret ability to make fantastic desserts that I don’t know about.” He glances around the room. “But I don’t see anyone with a dessert, which gives me pause.” He pushes his hand over his hair. “I don’t think this place is known for their desserts, and even though it’s human nature to try to be perfect at everything, perfection is very rarely attainable. So I’m going to answer relocate.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. “Great answer. I know just the place we can go. It’s the best.”

“I shall look forward to it. In the meantime, I’m going to eat these nachos.”

“Did your parents ever text you to let you know they made it safely to your apartment?”

“Yes.” Cooper shakes his head, chuckling. “They took a picture together. Mom was wearing one of my shirts, and Dad borrowed a pair of my socks. They thought it was hilarious that they were playing around in my closet. I don’t understand them sometimes.”

“Not sure my parents would do the same. They would raid my kitchen, though, only to sadly realize I don’t have anything in there but salt, pepper, and ketchup.”

“You mean to tell me your parents don’t go grocery shopping for you?” he asks.

My eyes shoot open in surprise. “Wait, your parents go grocery shopping for you?”

“Yeah,” he says in a serious tone. “They go grocery shopping, and then I go grocery shopping in their cabinets.”

My face falls flat. “What are you, in college still?”

He laughs. “I do a lot of shit for them around the house. I don’t mind taking the occasional bundle of bananas from them. But for a large load of groceries, I do that on my own so I can write up my schedule. My parents’

are just supplemental groceries.”

“Schedule? Do tell me more about this. Do you have a food schedule?”

He pauses, giving it some thought. “More like a menu.”

“Stop, really?” I stifle a laugh. Cooper Chance is just full of surprises. “Do you write it out on a whiteboard or something?”

“I do. That way, I know what I have to take out of the freezer meat-wise the night before. And when I make a menu, I don’t nearly have as much food waste as I do when I wing it. Did you know it takes lettuce twenty-five years to decompose in a landfill?”

“What?” I ask in outrage. “But it’s a vegetable.”

“But it’s combined with all the other trash out there. It’s why you should compost. Do you compost?”

“I don’t have time to make myself dinner. Do you think I have time to compost?”

“That’s not very PNW of you.”

I chuckle. “There’s a lot about me that’s not very PNW. Do you know I’ve never paddleboarded?”

“You mean to tell me you don’t do that on the weekends?”

“Not so much.” I glance down at the plate between us. There are two chips left. We each take one and tap them together in a mock toast. The flow between us feels easy, as if I don’t even need to try. And that should add on to the nerves I had at the beginning of this sit-down, but for some reason, it washes them away. Because being with Cooper feels right. “I did jump through a sprinkling hydrant once to cool off. Does that count for water activity?” I crunch into my chip, almost groaning over the final taste of cheesy goodness.

“I would like to say yes, you know, to win points with you, but although running through water can be quite impressive, I’m afraid it doesn’t qualify as PNW water activity. More like . . . NYC.”

“All I got out of that is you want to win points with me.” I lean my elbow on the table and prop my chin up. “Tell me about that.”

“Well, doesn’t everyone want to win points with everyone?” he asks, almost confused.

“Depends. Are you trying to impress me or build our friendship or . . . ?” I wiggle my eyebrows. “Get lucky?” Part of me can’t believe the words that just came out of my mouth, but a bigger part loves that I’m going there.

He chuckles. “Whenever a girl is involved, probably all three.”

“Even friendship?”

“Isn’t it more fun if there’s friendship?” he asks.

“Valid question. And if I look back at all of my failed romantic endeavors, I’d say there was never much friendship involved. Just carnal magnetism.”

“Carnal? Really?”

“I mean, isn’t that what sex is all about? Being carnal?”

He shrugs. “Things with Dealia were always . . . tender.”

I cover my mouth, trying not to throw up all over this table. “Dear God, Grandpa, do not use the term ‘tender’ when referring to sex.”

He chuckles. “That’s what it was, though. I tried spanking her—Jesus, why am I saying this to you? You’re her friend.”

“That I am, but I kind of need you to finish that spanking sentence. I’m very interested in hearing how it ends.”

He sighs. “I tried spanking her once, but she was so offended that she slipped her clothes back on and pulled the blankets all the way up to her neck, turning them into a chastity belt. After that, I kept things tender.”

“I’m literally gagging over here with that word. Please don’t say it again. I’ve never considered sex to be . . .” I swallow hard. “*Tender.*” He smirks, and that smile eases some of the bile that rises to the back of my throat. “Sex has always been extremely physical for me.” I pause and tilt my head to the side as it occurs to me: “Wait, have you only ever had sex with Dealia?”

He shrugs. “We were each other’s firsts. Of course she’s the only one I’ve ever been with.”

“Wow.”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised. We got married young—I thought she was it for me.”

“Now, I get that. I’m just surprised you haven’t really done anything since you’ve been divorced. One of my mom’s friends got divorced and downloaded Tinder as a fifty-year-old woman just to test out what she’s been missing out on in the bedroom department.”

Cooper pulls on the back of his neck. “Didn’t think I was in the right state of mind to do anything like that. Had to focus on myself first.”

“Makes sense.” I tap the table with my fingers. “So would you say you’re ready now?”

His teeth roll over his bottom lip. “I’m not sure I’ll know what ‘ready’ feels like. I guess if something happens, then something happens . . .”

His eyes connect with mine. I can physically feel my body heat up, starting at the tip of my toes and, like a tidal wave, crashing all the way to the top of my head.

Then something happens . . .

What exactly does that mean? Is he talking about me? Is he referring to tonight?

Do I even want something to happen?

If he wasn’t Dealia’s ex? I wouldn’t have even given it a second thought. I would have already made a move just based on the chemistry I feel between us and the immense amount of attraction I have for him. But with Dealia in the mix, hovering between us like a guilt-inducing ghost, she makes things complicated.

But God, he’s so handsome, and I don’t think I’ve ever had a connection with a man like I have with Cooper right now. If this was a first date—which I know it’s not—I would easily be planning out dates two, three, and four.

He nudges me with his foot, forcing me to meet that steel gaze of his again. “Is dessert still on the table?”

“Um, what . . . uh, what kind of dessert are you thinking about?”

His brow creases in confusion. “You said you know a dessert place.”

“Oh right, yes,” I say as my cheeks heat up.

“What did you think I was talking about?”

“Nothing.” I wave him off. “Just was confused for a second.”

He grins and leans his arms on the table. “Were you thinking I was talking about another kind of dessert?” He winks, and God, it’s the cutest thing ever. So cute that I’m tempted to leap across the table and tackle him with my lips.

This isn’t good.

I’m feeling too much.

My foggy brain is wanting too much.

I should step away now, call it a night.

I shouldn’t take this night any further, but what if us running into each other is supposed to mean something? What if there is something more, and I’m not allowing myself to explore that?

Would that make me a horrible friend?

“The spanking,” I say, pulling away from my thoughts.

“What?” He laughs, the sound so deep, so earthy. Does everything about him have to pull at me now? Does the sound of his laugh really need to make my toes curl? Because it does.

“Uh, the mention of spanking. It put me in a dirty frame of mind.”

“So you *were* thinking about a different kind of dessert.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I mean yes. Wait, I mean no!” I shout as a light sheen of sweat breaks out on my lower back. I stand from my chair. “I need to make a phone call.”

“Okay.” He chuckles. “Do you want me to leave?” He thumbs toward the door.

“What? No,” I shout again and reach over to touch his arm, just to make sure he doesn’t go anywhere. What is happening to me? *Get it together, Nora.* “Don’t go anywhere. I just need to take this phone call quickly.” I hold up my phone, flashing a blank black screen.

I’m such a mess.

His eyes land on the black screen, and his brow furrows as they move back to mine. A small smile spreads across his lips. “Okay. I’ll wait here while you take that important phone call.”

“Thanks. Be right back.” I hold the phone up to my ear as I head back toward the bathrooms. “Hello? Oh, hey, one second,” I say to no one, continuing the world’s worst charade. When I reach the bathrooms, I quickly dial up my mom, the only person I can talk to about this, and pace back and forth until she picks up.

“Hey, honey, it’s late, you know.”

“Mom, I need your help,” I blurt.

“Are you in trouble?” Mom’s voice comes out panicked.

“Not the kind of life-ending trouble probably going through your mind. I’m safe, no need to worry about that. More of a moral trouble.”

“Sheesh, Nora. You gave me a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but this has to be a quick call. I have no time to mess around.”

“Okay, what’s going on?”

“Uh, well, I ran into a guy—”

“Oh, praise be to Jesus, my prayers have been answered.”

“Can you not right now? This is serious.”

“Sorry, okay. Proceed.”

“And I know this man because he used to, uh . . . be with one of my friends.” Keeping it vague might be best in this situation. I love my mom, but she’s a gossip, and if she found out I’m spending the evening with Cooper Chance, she would not be able to keep it to herself.

“Like, in a serious relationship?”

“Yes,” I answer. “But they went their separate ways, and it was a mutual parting. I ran into him, and we began talking, and, well . . . we’re hitting it off. And he’s so handsome, Mom, and I don’t think I’ve ever had this kind of connection with a man before.”

“So, you’re wondering if you’re breaking girl code by hanging out with him?”

“Basically. Am I a horrible friend?”

Mom sighs. “Honestly, my motto is act now, beg for forgiveness later. If they broke up amicably, then there shouldn’t be any reason for your friend to be mad about it. I believe there are only a few people in this lifetime that you can have a special connection with—don’t waste it because you’re nervous about what your friend might think. See where it goes, then broach the subject later with her if . . . let’s say this connection goes any further than tonight.”

I nibble on my finger and look out toward the bar, where I spot Cooper scanning through his phone.

“You think it’s okay?”

“Yes, sweetie. I say go for it, and then deal with the ramifications later.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, knowing she’s right. Dealia really didn’t love Cooper in the end. She told me that. So she can’t possibly be mad if I tell her, right?

“I really think I like him. It’s been so easy talking to him.”

“Then go for it. You work so hard. Don’t let this moment pass you up.”

“Okay.” I let out a deep breath. “I’m going to go for it.”

Mom squeals. “Promise you will tell me more later.”

“I’m not promising a thing.” I smile into the phone. “Love you, Mom. Thank you.”

“Love you.”

I hang up the phone and then take a long, deep breath before exhaling through my mouth.

Okay . . . I’m going for it. Whatever happens tonight happens, and I’m going to live in the moment rather than worry about it.

Now I can only hope he wants dessert after dessert.

Chapter Seven

COOPER

“Sorry about that, really important phone call,” Nora says as she grabs her wallet off the table and secures it around her wrist.

“Yeah, I can imagine the importance of a fake phone call at nine thirty at night. Wouldn’t want that to go unanswered.”

Her cheeks flush, and she glances down at our table. “You know how fake phone calls are—you miss one, you play fake phone tag for three days straight.”

I let out a chuckle. “Hate that fake phone tag.” When she doesn’t look at me, I reach out and tilt her head toward me, nudging her chin with my finger. “Hey, everything okay? Should I be worried that you’re taking fake phone calls?”

“No. Just freaked myself out for a second is all, but I’m all good now.”

“Freaked yourself out?” I ask, feeling concerned. Did I say something that could have caused her to leave? I know this situation might be a little weird. But we’re just having fun. Nothing to freak out over, right?

“I would rather not talk about it, if that’s okay with you. Just want to have fun, because that’s the goal of the night—fun, right?”

I study her for a few seconds and then nod. “That’s right, fun.”

“Because you are unaware of the magnitude of fun you’re able to achieve, due to the whole Debbie Downer thing.” The feistiness that temporarily disappeared while she was taking her fake phone call has now reappeared. The mischievous glint in her eyes settles the momentary nerves that erupted in my body when she took off toward the bathroom—when I thought the night might end. “Are you ready for dessert?”

“Do you still want to get dessert?” I ask, just wanting to make sure she’s still in the right frame of mind.

Her eyes connect with mine. “There is no way we are ending this night without dessert.” She reaches for my hand and links her fingers with mine. I stare down at the connection for a few beats, lost in the possibilities it holds, before I look back up at her. “Come on, Coop.”

And just like that, I’m whisked out of my chair and through the authentic Irish bar. When we hit the sidewalk, I half expect her to let go of my hand, but when she doesn’t, when she squeezes in closer to me under the romantically lit sidewalk, a sense of . . . contentment passes through me.

This feels simple, but not in a bad way. In a very good way.

A simple pleasure.

It’s something that should be so easily accessible to a human—holding another person’s hand while walking—but so many people don’t get to experience it. I can’t remember the last time I have, and once again, Nora is offering me comfort.

Comfort I didn’t know I was looking for.

Frankly, it’s slightly terrifying, but also . . . addicting.

“I wasn’t expecting to be traipsing around Seattle tonight, or else I would have worn a jacket,” she says, once again shivering next to me as we power walk down the block.

“I’m a man and don’t plan accordingly—that’s why I don’t have a jacket.”

She chuckles. “At least you’re honest.”

“I also didn’t think I’d be moving about the town either. Before my parents made their wingman plans, I half expected to be spending the night at their house tonight.”

“Do you do that often?” she asks. From the corner of my eye, I can see her breath rise in the air. Fuck, it’s getting really cold out. I pick up the pace.

“Stay the night at my parents’? Well, to not sound like a loser, I want to say never, but that’s not the truth. I would say maybe twice a month. Mom likes to spoil me in the morning with a big breakfast, and I can’t say that I don’t love it. Plus, Dad always has some kind of project waiting for me. He says he would rather not spend the money on hiring someone when I can just help him, but I think he has a problem with people around the island seeing him at his house. He’s aged a lot since he’s retired from the store, and he’s self-conscious of that. When he steps out of the house, he puts on a show for everyone, but I know that can be exhausting.”

“I can understand that,” Nora says, looking up at me with eyes full of

compassion. “I’ve noticed my parents have started to age too. Dad takes things a little slower. Mom tends to forget her glasses are on the top of her head when she’s attempting to read. It’s the little things, but things they wouldn’t have done when they were younger.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I’m quite ready to be their caretaker, but that’s where it’s leading.”

“Would Ford or Palmer help out?”

I shake my head. “They have their own lives. I’m the one here. I’m the one who knows them the best. I might not be ready, but I know I’m the one for the job.”

We turn the corner, and Nora’s bakery comes into view. I can’t help but smile. Of course this is where she’d take me for dessert. The white brick building is lit up, with large-bulbed Christmas lights outlining the door and the windows. As we approach, I take in the window display, which is filled with an animatronic Mrs. Claus feeding cake to Santa.

“Where did you get those?” I ask her, entranced at the spectacle.

“My dad special ordered them years ago. I think they’re amazing, so I always make sure to put them on display every year along with a Christmas-themed cake. We went with sugar poinsettias as the theme this year. I think it came out beautiful.”

I take in the four-tier cake as Nora unlocks the door to her bakery. It is beautiful.

“You create beautiful cakes,” I say, and I mean it.

“Thank you,” she says as she opens the door for me.

I step into the building, and I’m immediately assaulted by the rich, sugary scent of her bakery. There’s nothing in the cake display by the register, which is situated in the back, but it’s outlined by Christmas lights, along with the perimeter of the ceiling and every doorframe.

“You decorate like my mom—if you can hang something on a wall, you do it.”

“It’s not Christmas if you don’t make it gaudy and in your face.” She flips on a light switch, which turns on a single light over the cash register. From the side of the store, she drags a stool over to the register counter and points at it. “Sit. I’ll be right back.”

She takes off through the archway that connects the front of the store to the back, where the kitchen is located. I can hear her shuffle around in there, clang some things, and then . . .

“Ooof, you son of a bitch.”

“Everything okay back there?” I call.

“Yes, just some containers being difficult.”

“Need help?” I ask.

“No . . . I . . . got it,” she says in a rush as I hear something pop open.

I smile and crane my neck to see if I can catch a glimpse of what she’s doing. When she doesn’t come into view, I decide to be patient. I wasn’t expecting to step inside her bakery tonight, but I’m kind of excited. My family has always ordered cakes from Nora and her parents, and there’s a reason—they’re really freaking good.

And after some drinks and nachos, I could totally eat some cake.

After a few more minutes, Nora comes back holding a tray. She carefully sets it down and pulls up a stool as well, settling herself across the counter from me.

I glance down at the tray and hold back my smile at the sight of her holiday cheer. On two plates are multiple cake samplings, garnished with some pine leaves and berries. In the middle are two glasses of what I can only assume is eggnog based on the thickness.

“Okay, are you ready for the spiel?”

“There’s a spiel?” I ask.

“Always. I have to present the cake to you.” She squares her shoulders and then puts on a smooth, professional voice. “Thank you so much for taking a seat with us today. As you can see, we have four varieties of cake for you to taste test. As I go through them, please feel free to ask me any questions. We will start on the right.” She gestures to it. “This is a slice of our *bûche de Noël*. A flourless chocolate cake rolled in a whipped frosting, covered in a chocolate buttercream and sprinkled with powdered sugar. Our next cake is the glazed rum cake. A yellow sponge soaked heavily in rum, with a brown sugar glaze and sprinkled with pecans.”

“Can you get drunk off the cake?”

“Can’t be sure.” She winks. “And to freshen your palate, we have our candy cane cake. Peppermint-infused yellow sponge with buttercream frosting and pieces of broken-up candy canes sprinkled throughout the cake. And then, last but not least, my favorite—our gingerbread fruitcake.”

“Fruitcake?” I ask skeptically.

She rests her hand on my arm. “Don’t worry, this isn’t the kind of fruit cake that your crusty old aunt brings to the holiday gathering that no one

touches. This is a gingerbread-base sponge, infused with chopped pecans, cherries, and pineapple. It's covered in a sweet cream cheese frosting and a dusting of cinnamon. Trust me when I say save it for last. And then, to wash it all down, some spiked eggnog."

"Spiked?" I pick up the glass and give it a sniff. "Whoa, that's spiked all right."

"Thought it would keep the night going, and I have more in the back." She picks up a fork and hands it to me. "Dig in."

"Do you have a particular order I should eat these?"

"I'm glad you asked." She smiles broadly. "I would start on the right and move your way over."

"Sounds good." I push my fork through the chocolate cake, and it smoothly sinks into the sponge. I'm not surprised—the cakes here are always moist. I bring the fork to my mouth and take a large bite. The flavors easily melt on my tongue, reminding me of home on a wintry day. "Fucking delicious," I say through my mouthful. She chuckles, and I go in for another forkful. "These won't last long. Just a heads-up."

"I can see that. I take it as a compliment."

Over the next few minutes, we enjoy the cakes together—the samples are small, so it's not like I'm taking down large slices—and we do exactly what Nora planned: we wash them down with some eggnog. After the cakes are cleared and the cups are drained, she goes to the back to drop the plates off in the sink and refill our glasses.

"Thank you," I say as she returns. "That was fucking phenomenal."

"You're welcome. Told you it was the best dessert place."

"I had no doubt in my mind. And the eggnog, it's really good." **hiccup** I cover my mouth and look up at Nora with wide eyes.

She laughs out loud as another hiccup pushes through me. "Oh God, you're like one of those drunk sailors—you can't handle all the booze in your belly."

I hold my breath and count to twenty before slowly releasing it, waiting for another hiccup, but when it doesn't come, I sigh in relief.

"That was slightly embarrassing."

"I thought it was cute."

"Yeah?" I raise a brow. "Hiccups are cute to you?"

"I thought yours were."

And I'm not sure if it's the heavy dose of rum from the cake or from the

eggnog, but . . . is she flirting? And do I like it? I'm so out of practice, so goddamn unaware that I don't think I know what flirting really is.

"Not sure how to respond to that. Should I try to hiccup again?"

"I'd be impressed if you were able to pull that off."

"Impressive and cute? Seems like I'm becoming a dangerous specimen."

Her pretty nose wrinkles up. "Specimen? That's so not an attractive way to describe yourself."

"Then how would you describe me?" I ask.

She leans both of her arms on the narrow counter between us and props her torso up on the counter. Her chest is framed by her arms, and the shirt she's wearing clings to it like Saran Wrap, making my eyes wander where they probably shouldn't go. But I can't help it—she's hot. There's no denying it. Her curvaceous body has been driving me nuts all night. It's hard not to take her in, especially when she leans in the way she is.

"Well, let's see. Am I describing you purely on a physical basis?"

"I believe so," I say, wetting my lips as my eyes trail to her mouth. The goddamn red lipstick has been a tease all night as well.

"Physically, yes, you are a specimen, but that's the obvious part. If I were to describe you to, let's say, a friend, I would say pretty muscular."

"Pretty muscular? I enjoy the compliment, but that doesn't really replace 'specimen' in my vocabulary."

"Ugh, Mr. Editor coming in as a wet blanket."

I let out a roar of a laugh. "Sorry, can't let it slide—you're going to have to try harder."

Letting out an exasperated sigh, she finishes her eggnog and then dips down under the counter. I'm about to ask her what she's doing when Christmas music begins playing softly over the speakers of the bakery. And then she flips off the overhead light, so the only light in the bakery is coming from the Christmas strands strewn through the store. Hate to be corny, but hell, it's romantic. She then rounds the counter and walks up to me. Hip leaning into the counter, she rests one hand on top of mine and draws lazy circles over my knuckles.

Just from her soft touch, I can feel a part of me, one that's been asleep for so long, light up. Something dimmed inside me after the divorce, and she just turned on the light.

My body heats up, and my mind wanders to what it would feel like to

touch her, to lean in closer and taste her lips.

“Okay, Mr. Editor, how about this?” She takes my hand in hers and then tugs on me to stand. When I do, she places my hand on her shoulder and pulls me to the center of the room, where she encourages me to slow dance with her. I fall right in line and place my free hand on the small of her back, just above the curve of her ass, against her bare skin. My body buzzes as she flashes me a satisfied smile. “How about ‘Gym Alien’ as a description?”

“What?” I say with a laugh. “‘Gym Alien.’ What the hell is that?”

She shrugs. “Honestly, my brain feels like a pile of mush—that’s the best I could come up with.”

“It’s probably mush because of all my alien muscles. They’ve turned you into a puddle of a woman.”

She lightly chuckles. “No, if anything turns me into a pile of mush, it’s your eyes.” Her hand lifts from my shoulder and to my face, where she pushes at my hair. “They’re mesmerizing. Hard not to be intimidated when they look at me.”

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘intimidating’ to describe me. I would be more apt to say ‘Gym Alien’ than ‘intimidating.’”

“But that’s how you see yourself—you don’t see the persona you project on the outside.”

“And what persona would that be?”

She lowers her hand back to my shoulder. “Broody, contemplative, intimidating gaze. But there’s a side of you I’m assuming you don’t show many people . . . this caring, fun side I’m seeing right now.”

“It’s the booze.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” she says. “You’re a good man, Cooper, but I think you like to pass yourself off as the grump, and I’m not sure why.”

“Maybe so I can prevent someone from hurting me again,” I say before I can stop myself.

Her eyes flash up to mine. “Are you talking about Dealia?”

I glance away. “We hurt each other—that was an added dent to my heart.”

And then, as if a light bulb goes on in her head, she says, “Your birth mom.”

If you’re friends with my parents or know anything about my family, then you know my parents’ unique story—how they tried for many years to

get pregnant but never were able to conceive. And then Ford and I came along. Hungry, desperate for a roof over our heads. Our parents took us in and gave us a family. Shortly after we were adopted, our parents became pregnant with Palmer. And even though they gave us the perfect childhood, the damage was already done, and I still very much feel the scars that were left on my soul as a young boy.

“Not something I really want to talk about,” I say, realizing I just brought down the mood in an instant.

“You don’t have to, Coop.” Nora’s hand glides up my neck. “Just know that I don’t take that dent, that scarring, lightly. Know that I’m here if you ever want to talk about it.”

There’s something in the way her words capture me, in the subtle way her fingers trace over the back of my neck, in the delicate tone of her voice, that pulls some carnal need out of me. A need so deep that I can’t stop my fingers from slipping past the waistband of her jeans.

When she lets out a small gasp and then a satisfied smile, a bolt of possessiveness pulses through me.

And when I unlatch my hand from hers and lift her chin, I wet my lips, knowing exactly what I want.

There’s something to be said about someone hearing you.

After these past few hours, I know she looks past all my exterior scarring and sees me for the man I’m trying to become, the man I’m trying to reshape myself into. My siblings don’t see that.

My parents marginally acknowledge who I’m trying to become.

But Nora, she doesn’t hold preconceived notions about me. She doesn’t hold power over the man I used to be. She’s just encouraging me to be the man I want to be.

And that erupts new life in me.

Before I can stop myself, before I can even consider the ramifications of my choice, I tilt her chin up and descend my mouth onto hers. Tentatively at first, I press light kisses across her lips, waiting to see if she pulls away, but when her grip on me intensifies, I capture her mouth in a deep kiss.

Her hand floats up into my hair, pulling on the short strands as my fingers slide farther down her backside, under her jeans, until they collide with the hem of her thong. I twine my fingers in the thin fabric and pull her even closer.

A low moan flows past her lips, and I swallow it whole while deepening

our connection with hot, openmouthed kisses that drive me to dizziness.

Her free hands claw at my chest.

My free hand tangles in her hair.

And our slow, tentative kiss turns into us pulling, grappling at each other until I pull away, putting space between us. We stare at each other under the festive lighting, “White Christmas” playing in the background. We both breathe heavily, holding curiosity and yearning in our eyes.

“Tell me this is crazy,” I gasp.

She shakes her head. “It’s not.”

I drag my hand over my mouth. “I want more of you.”

“Same. I live nearby, you can . . . come over.”

Fuck, I would want nothing more than that.

“Do you want me to come over?”

She wets her lips, and I wonder if she can taste me. “I want you to come over.”

“Then show me the way.”

Without another word, she goes back to the counter, where she turns off the music, and then she snags my hand and leads me out of the bakery. She locks up quickly and then tucks her side into mine as she guides me across the street and down a block. I stick my hand in her jeans pocket and keep her close as we make our way to her apartment. By the time we reach it, I’m fucking desperate for her.

When she unlocks the door of the building, I place kisses along her neck.

When we reach the elevator, I push her up against the wall, my hand on her rib cage as I devour her mouth. Her arms wrap around my neck, and her leg twines around mine until we reach her floor.

Reluctantly, we pull away, and I allow her to unlock her apartment door, but the moment the door clicks shut behind us, I reach for her, spin her around, and lift her up against the wall. Her legs wrap around my waist as I press one hand against the wall beside her head to brace myself.

“I could get lost in your mouth for hours,” I say before pressing another set of scorching kisses to her lips. Her hands tangle in my hair, keeping me in place, matching my greediness with hers.

Needing more, I slide my fingers up her crop top, but before I can go further, she reaches down and pulls it up and over her head, revealing a red-lace bra.

Hell.

I give myself about one second to take in her breasts before moving my mouth to her jaw and then down her neck and across her collarbone. I push one of her bra straps down so it's just dangling against her arm. I move my mouth down her body, all the way to her cleavage, and then I grip the cup of her bra and turn it down, revealing one of her breasts.

More than a goddamn handful, I squeeze it and bring it up to my mouth. She hisses out a sound of pleasure as I suck her nipple past my lips. Her hips thrust against mine, and for a moment my mind goes blank. I feel nothing but the burning need for her ripping through me.

"Bedroom," I say.

"Down the hall, on the right," she replies breathlessly.

I spin us around and head in that direction, bumping into the wall only once. When I reach her bedroom, I toss her on the bed and then pull my shirt up and over my head. Her eyes fall to my chest, and a satisfied smile plays across her lips.

I reach for the waistband of my pants, and she does the same. Together, we strip down until we're both completely bare. My cock strains between my legs when she spreads herself across the bed and licks her lips.

"I don't have protection."

"I'm on birth control. I'm good."

That's all I need.

I bend down on the bed and move between her legs. I pause and meet her heady gaze. "I feel slightly out of control right now."

"Me too."

"I'm not sure this is going to be graceful."

"I don't need graceful, Cooper. I need you."

Her hand reaches up and loops behind my neck, pulling me down as her lips take control. Crashing against mine, taking, begging.

Her tongue plunges.

Her fingers tangle.

Her breaths grow heavy.

I smooth my hand up her stomach to her breast, where I squeeze it a few times before bringing my attention to her nipple. With my index and thumb, I roll it carefully, testing her out. When she doesn't say anything, I roll a little harder, offering her a pinch. Her hips thrust up, and a moan falls past her lips.

Hell.

I repeat the movement over and over again until she's clawing at my back, her nails digging into my skin.

"Inside me, Cooper. Now."

I grip the base of my cock and I tease her entrance. Not giving her exactly what she wants right away but instead rubbing the precum on the tip of my cock along her slit, loving the way her hips move against me, seeking more.

"Cooper. Please."

The begging, it does me in.

I press against her entrance and then push all the way in, sinking into her warmth until I completely bottom out.

"Yes," she whispers.

Yes is such a goddamn understatement. More like unbelievable. I'm not sure if I'm thinking clearly, but Nora feels like the perfect fit. And when her legs spread even farther, taking me in another inch, I nearly black out.

"Fuck," I breathe out heavily as I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to will my body to not lose control yet. It's been so goddamn long for me, and Nora feels like a fucking glove, warm and tight. "Shit, you feel too good. Too damn good. I won't last long."

"Same," she groans out as she pulses her hips against mine.

"Don't." I still her hips. "You're going to make me come too early."

"Good, because I'm right there, Coop. Please."

I grind my teeth together. "Fast now, slow later. I'll need you more than once tonight."

"You're reading my mind," she says as she reaches down and grips my ass, pulling me in.

I take her direction and prop myself on the mattress. Finding a good stance, I thrust my hips into hers.

"Oh God, Cooper." Her hands fly up to my shoulders, gripping them tight.

I thrust again, and she lets out a hiss of pleasure.

One more, and she cries out in a frenzy.

With pleasure ripping through every muscle in my back, I know neither of us can last much longer, so I pick up the pace and piston my hips in and out of her, not letting up, not even when she's calling out my name. Not when I feel her go tense beneath me, and not when she cries out my name in pure ecstasy.

I only pick up my pace, pushing myself, until my vision goes dark, my legs turn numb, and my balls tighten against my legs. A rip of pleasure pulses up the underside of my cock, which swells, and then with an explosive roar, I still and come, my orgasm an out-of-body experience.

Together we ride out our pleasure until we're completely spent. I collapse next to her and press my hands behind my head as I attempt to catch my breath.

"Holy shit," I whisper. "I'm not sure I've come like that . . . ever."

"I . . . I don't know . . . I haven't ever . . ." She turns toward me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes heady. "That was amazing."

I turn toward her and grip her cheek. I bring her lips to mine, and I let my tongue wander a few more seconds before I pull away. "Fucking phenomenal," I say.

Her fingers glide over my chest. "Do you, uh . . . do you want to spend the night?"

"If it means being able to do that multiple times? Fuck yes."

She smiles. "I would prefer it that way."

I press another kiss to her lips before she stands from the bed and heads to the bathroom. I appreciate the view for a moment before I roll to my back again and stare up at the ceiling.

Fuck, I can't remember the last time I felt this good. The last time I felt this light. This free. And there is no doubt in my mind what the reason is. She just walked into the bathroom.

We spend the rest of the night making out, sleeping, and fucking. I take her a few more times, making her come even harder than the first.

I become addicted to how vocal she is.

I become obsessed with making her orgasm.

And when we catch our breath, I savor the warmth of her body curled into me.

Everything feels so goddamn perfect.

It just feels . . . right.

My body twists, my legs tangling in a confining sheet, stirring me awake. Groggily, I attempt to open my eyes and take in my surroundings. Where the hell am I?

And why am I so warm?

Eyes blinking, I turn to the side to find a wave of black hair stretched over my arm, followed by a sleeping Nora.

Hell, how could I even forget for a moment?

I inwardly smile and then reach out and push her hair off her beautiful face. She's passed out, completely out of it. I don't blame her. After everything we did last night, I'm surprised I'm awake.

But I've always had a hard time sleeping places other than my own bed, even if I spent the entire night in and out of Nora.

Needing to go to the bathroom, I carefully untangle myself from the sheets and tiptoe across the creaky wood floors to Nora's bathroom, where I quietly shut the door and turn on the light. I catch my reflection in the mirror and chuckle at the sight.

Hair completely askew, sticking up on all ends. My lips look swollen, and embarrassingly enough there are scratch and teeth marks all over my chest.

I move to the toilet, lift up the seat, and take care of business while I reflect back on last night.

Going out with my parents.

Them running into Nora.

Ditching me, which in return forced me to speak to her.

Which then led to the night we shared.

I flush the toilet and wash my hands.

And what a fucking night. A night that . . . I glance up at the mirror . . . a night I never would have expected from Nora . . .

Nora, the girl I grew up knowing but never got to actually get to know on a personal level.

The girl who introduced me to my ex-wife.

The girl who is still best friends with Dealia.

Jesus Christ.

My hands fall to the counter, propping me up as my mind whirls.

What the hell have I done?

I was so caught up in the moment last night, so desperate to feel anything other than the boring, dull breaths, that I let myself forget Dealia. I let myself forget our history, our failed marriage, and what it would mean if I slept with her best friend. I inadvertently put myself in a situation I had no right putting myself in.

What the hell would my therapist say?

Self-sabotage?

Possibly.

Because look at the progress I've made since the divorce. And here I am, making a decision that has the potential to blow up in my face. Hell, who am I kidding? It 100 percent is going to blow up in my face. I can't get away with sleeping with my ex-wife's best friend unscathed. And who's going to be hurt in the long run? Me?

Maybe.

But that's not whom I'm concerned about. I'm worried about Nora.

I've made some mistakes in the past, some that have hurt me, some that hurt my marriage. And now that I'm finally on the right path, I refuse to make the same mistakes.

But haven't I already done the damage?

I move toward the doorway of the bedroom and stare back at Nora, still very much asleep and very unaware of the war raging in my head. What was this to her last night? Did it mean anything? Was it just fun? Where is her head at? When she wakes up, will she have a massive tidal wave of regret?

From the corner of my eye, a flash of light catches my attention. The light peeking through the curtains shines off a silver frame propped up on her dresser. It takes me a few seconds to make out the picture, but when I do, my stomach drops.

It's a picture of Dealia and Nora, posing at our wedding, their arms wrapped around each other, huge smiles on their faces.

It's like a cold bucket of water, crashing over me in a wave of chilling reality.

It's too late. I've already made a grave mistake.

A mistake so monumental that I have no idea how to handle the ramifications.

Panic sears through me, propels me toward my clothes.

Anger with myself makes me slip my shoes on and grab my wallet, phone, and keys.

Hatred for my inability to make the right decisions forces me out the door of Nora's apartment without a goodbye or a note.

This is not the man I've been trying to become. I don't sneak around like this. Granted, I'm no longer married to Dealia, but Nora is her best friend. I've created an impossibly messy situation, one that could ruin their

entire friendship. This will hurt Nora—no doubt, this will *hurt* her. I should have never crossed that line.

Leaving is the right decision.

Not calling her is the correct thing to do.

Not returning her texts means cutting ties I should have severed at the beginning of our wonderful, terrible night.

At least that's what I thought until over a year later, when I'm forced back into her bakery and find myself getting lost in those dark, mysteriously angry eyes all over again . . .

Fall more in love with these characters in
THE REUNION, by Meghan Quinn

Chapter One

FORD

“Larkin, did you get the invitations sent out?” I call from my desk as I type out a quick email to our head of marketing. I was supposed to receive mock-ups for our rebranding by end of day. It’s end of day, and there are no mock-ups.

“I did.” Larkin sweeps into my office, tablet in hand and blue light-blocking glasses perched on her nose. “They were sent out at lunchtime. The calligraphist did an impeccable job on the addresses. And as an added touch, I took one of the pictures from your parents’ recent photo shoot and made it into a stamp.”

I smile. “Did you make sure to send them one?” Larkin nods with a knowing glint in her eye. “They’ll get a kick out of that.”

“I also got word from your housekeeper that your bags are all packed, your suits are freshly pressed, and the remaining food in your fridge has been taken care of so nothing goes bad while you’re gone for the next month.”

“Great. And have you heard from marketing about the mock-ups? I drafted an email to ask where they are but thought I would check with you first.”

“She clutches her tablet to her chest. “Yes, they brought them to me early this afternoon, but they were missing color swatches and a few other things I knew you would ask for, so I asked them for a redo. I told them I’d stay late to grab them so we can bring them with us on the trip tomorrow.”

“I can stay late—you don’t have to. I’m sure you have to go home and pack.”

“I woke up this morning and packed in preparation for late mock-ups.” She smiles, and I can’t help but shake my head.

Larkin Novak is one of a kind. I hired her four years ago, and I’ve given

her significant pay raises every year just to keep her. She's efficient, incredibly intelligent, vastly organized, and can anticipate what I'm going to need before I even know it. She's such an integral part of this company and my day-to-day that I don't know what I would do without her.

"Do you ever sleep, Larkin?"

She pushes her ice-blonde hair behind her ear. "Who needs sleep when there's so much to do?"

"You need sleep." I stand from my desk and walk up to her. Carefully, I take her precious tablet from her hands. "Go home. I'll wait for the mock-ups."

She eyes the tablet in my hand and then looks back up at me with those intensely blue eyes. "I get plenty of sleep. A solid eight hours every night."

"Then you need a life. Go home." I chuckle and walk past her to her desk, where I slip her tablet in her work bag, pick the bag up by the strap, and drape it over her shoulder. "Go, Larkin. We have a strenuous month ahead of us with the rebrand and the anniversary party. Have a second to yourself before you're forced to be at your boss's side for precisely every second of every day for twenty-nine days."

The rebrand is the first business-altering project I've taken on since my dad retired, and I'm spending every waking hour working toward perfection—if there's something I never want to do, it's let my dad down, especially after everything he and my mom have done for me, for my siblings.

"You do paint an awful picture of what's to come. If that's the case, I'm going to go grab some dinner, which will be ice cream, and drown my sorrows in my one and only night to myself before I'm inserted into apparent hell on Marina Island."

"Yeah." I grip the back of my neck. "Are you prepared to be around my family? They can be a bit much."

"You act as if I haven't met them before."

"But you haven't been in the same space with all of them together."

"Nervous I'll quit after a week?"

"Yeah." I let out a dry chuckle. "I am." Folding my arms across my chest, I lean against the doorframe of my office and take a second to relax. I'm constantly wearing the CEO hat, and it can be exhausting after a while. Larkin and I have a good enough relationship that she knows when I need to "kick my shoes off" and take a second to breathe.

"It's going to take more than your family to drive me away. You know I

can't find a benefits package quite like yours anywhere else."

"Ah, the true reason you stick around," I joke.

"You had me at four weeks' paid vacation and bonus structure." She lets out a familiar chuckle.

"At least I know what will keep you around now." I sigh deeply. "Okay, I should finish up some work before we head out tomorrow." I push off the doorframe and head back into my office.

"Can I order you anything for dinner before I leave?" she asks, tailing after me.

I shake my head. "I have a protein bar in my desk drawer that's been begging to be eaten all day."

"Thrilling." Her sarcasm seeps through, which it seems to do more often after hours. "I have a car coming to pick you up tomorrow, eight in the morning. I'll have a breakfast burrito waiting for you."

"You're perfection. Thank you." I wake up my computer by moving my mouse around. "See you in the morning."

"Bye, Ford." She takes off, and I turn to my computer, focusing on the emails in my in-box. The worst part of the job is sitting in front of me: answering questions from department heads. Oddly, I prefer the mundane tasks like numbers and projections, and I'm good at them.

So good at them that we'll be opening fifty new stores in the coming year, which is the direct reason for the rebranding. We've stuck with the same storefront, color blend, and aesthetic ever since we franchised. Walking into one of our stores, you get a sense it's slightly outdated, with its oak timber logs, forest-green linoleum floors, metal bracket shelving, mustard-yellow accents, and outdoor adventures from a photo shoot nearly fifteen years ago. The stores are successful, but they're not capturing every consumer . . . like the young crowd. In order to keep up with the competition, which dominates the Gen Z market, we need to make sure we're keeping the stores fresh. We have the funds to do so, but we need to make sure we have the right research and development in place to appeal to our customers and make them not just enjoy what they're buying from Watchful Wanderers but to enjoy the experience as well.

Because if anything, the young crowd is always about the experience, something Larkin has been drilling into me since the moment we started the rebranding process.

After I've made a decent dent in my emails, my phone buzzes with a

text message. Mom.

When I was seven and Cooper was five, our biological mom overdosed and our grandma became our legal guardian. We lived with her for a few months until she couldn't physically take care of us anymore. At that point, we were placed into foster care. We bounced from house to house for a few more months until we met Peggy and Martin. The minute I met them, I knew—I knew we were going to be a family. I felt it in my soul. And after a year of living with them on Marina Island, a small island off the coast of Seattle, they sat us down and asked if we wanted to be a part of their family permanently.

I'm not one to be sentimental—I'm more logical than anything—but that hug, the one I gave my parents when they asked us to take their last name . . . yeah, I can still feel their arms wrapped around me. I can still smell Mom's lavender perfume and hear Dad's sniffs as he showed his true feelings that day. He gripped me by the cheeks, looked into my eyes, and told me that he would be honored to call me son.

From that day forward, I knew my life would be dedicated to thanking them for giving me a chance in life. And not only me but Cooper as well. Shortly after, Mom and Dad were surprised when they found out they were pregnant with Palmer. They didn't think getting pregnant was an option for them, but life has a tricky way of throwing you for a loop. From a family of four, we became a blended family of five and have been ever since.

I open up Mom's text and read it to myself.

Mom: What's this I hear you're not going to be staying with us? You know the Island's Bed and Breakfast claims to have the best continental breakfast, but nothing beats my homemade pancakes. Are you really going to give up my fluffy, melt-in-your-mouth pancakes for a free continental breakfast of dry muffins and orange juice tainted with pulp?

Smiling to myself, I shake my head at her. Want to talk about a mama bear? Peggy Chance is the definition. She clings to every facet of her children's lives. We were her goals, her aspirations, her fulfillment. While Dad was running the store, she was taking care of the home front, keeping us in line, dishing out responsibilities, and inserting herself into our lives in every possible way.

I type back to her.

Ford: Larkin will be with me. It would be weird for her to stay at the family house.

Mom: We have plenty of room. We can stick her in your room, and you can sleep on the couch.

Ford: My assistant sleeping in my childhood bed isn't exactly what I would call professional. Parents are very social humans. Unlike me, they have an extensive

Mom: Oh stop, Larkin is practically part of the family. I bet she'd love to see where you used to hide away when you were a teenager.

Ford: I'm sure she'd love to obtain any sort of knowledge when it comes to my teenage years to tease me with, but I'd prefer if I keep things professional. Plus, we have a lot of work to do. If we stayed with you, you'd be interrupting our meetings every half hour, on the hour to make sure we're drinking enough water to make our pee clear.

Mom: Hydration is important, especially if you want to stay young looking. Which reminds me, have you started using that eye cream I sent you? You're 36, prime time for having to use an eye cream. I already have Palmer using hers and she's 27. You're behind.

Ford: Good on the eye cream, Mom. Thanks though.

Mom: Well, if you're not going to use it, bring it with you so I can give it to Cooper. He's starting to get some crow's feet.

Ford: Can't wait to tell him that.

Mom: Don't pick on your brother. He's sensitive.

The elevator door dings, and I glance up to the parting doors, expecting someone from marketing to drop off the mock-ups, but instead see a wisp of ice-blond hair right before Larkin steps off and walks toward my office, a paper bag in hand.

I lean back in my chair and watch her approach me, a smirk crossing her lips.

“What are you doing here?” I ask as she sets the brown bag on my desk. “I told you to go home.”

“I couldn't let you not eat dinner.” She pulls out two carry-out cups from Gelato Boy, our favorite ice cream place in Denver. She pushes a cup toward me, along with a spoon. “Got your favorite, Gooey Buttercake and Caramel.”

“You're trying to make me wake up earlier than I want so I can get in some extra miles on the pavement, aren't you?” I take the gelato and remove the lid. Creamy gelato mixed with caramel glistens up at me, making my mouth water. Didn't realize how much I needed this until now. “I plan on getting in three miles.” She scoops a spoonful. “Which means you have to at least meet me or beat me.”

Mouth full of ice cream, I answer, “You know I'm going to beat you.”

She smirks. “You always do.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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USA Today bestselling author, wife, adoptive mother, peanut butter lover, and author of romantic comedies and contemporary romance Meghan Quinn brings readers the perfect combination of heart, humor, and heat in every book.

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