



*Two Truths  
and a Marriage*

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
NICOLE SNOW

# **TWO TRUTHS AND A MARRIAGE**

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A GRUMPY SUNSHINE ROMANCE

NICOLE SNOW

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

I can still pinpoint the exact second when my life became two truths and a lie.

You don't forget delivering a mountain of fresh-baked sweets to a man like Dexter Rory.

I never wanted to see his scowling, bossy, brutally godlike face again, no matter how well he tipped.

If you told me I'd wind up wearing his ring, I would've died laughing.

But here I am, trying to cling to my sanity while I confront the undeniable.

Truth #1: I'm spiritually allergic to this man.

He's as grumpy as a storm, twice as unpredictable, and he thinks my life's work is the devil.

Truth #2: I need his money—it's the only Hail Mary I have to keep my family bakery alive.

That's why we're living a ginormous lie that can't last.

I mean, who would believe we're engaged when we can barely share the same oxygen?

But Dexter can be wickedly convincing when he needs a win.

And the way he kisses me dizzy right in front of my adoring grandmother...

Hello, butterflies.

What happens when the truth matters less by the day?

What happens when you start falling in love with a lie?





## SWEET RELIEF (JUNIPER)



**T**here are days when I wish I was a college girl.

Not often, mind you. And not because I love the thought of having a gazillion dollars in debt on my shoulders, either. Because with the Sugar Bowl creaking along on its last legs, the very last thing we need is *more* debt.

But a few more math classes would sure as hell help my brain hurt less with these numbers.

“That can’t be right,” I spit.

I rub my eyes, squinting at the spreadsheet for the fifth time.

Nobody warned me that inheriting a business means spending more time hunched in front of a computer screen than actually working. My already pale skin practically glows white. I’m ninety percent sure the blue light from the screen is making my hair frizz.

Numbers.

Ugly money numbers.

Numbers with sharp teeth and a ferocious appetite for chewing up my dreams.

Yeah, things aren’t looking good.

I take a break from the nightmare on the screen and glance around. The back office looks about like it did in Nana’s time.

Same old tall metal filing cabinets propped up against the dusty wallpaper—probably less dusty when Nana ran the shop with an iron fist, of course—and the old faded photos hanging everywhere.

Same awards plastered to the wall. Newspapers and cards and bronze plaques proclaiming some version of *best in Kansas City!* for more years than I can count.

As I always do when I need a moment to get my wits, I stand up, push my chair back—ignoring that one squeaky wheel that cuts my ears—and pace the room, slowly taking in the wall of photos.

There's Nana, young and bright, standing by the shop with her parents on its opening day in June, 1955. The date is recorded at the bottom of the photo, taken at a time when the world would shine in black and white with a certain charm no Instagram filter will ever match.

My gaze flicks to photos of the interior renovation in the late fifties. And again right around 1970. Before 2000, the Sugar Bowl had a stunning redesign every decade or two, and each one generated a flurry of news and happy, hungry customers pouring in for the grand reopening.

Unimaginable now.

I'm surrounded by an entire gallery of reasons to succeed, to keep going, to remember this bakery's greatness. But I'm also buried in the fact that those fond memories and fabulous accolades come to a screeching halt in 2021—the year Nana stepped down.

Glaring evidence of my failure to take flight.

This is my family's legacy, all wrapped up in a store that used to soar.

With me at the helm, it's struggling to even crawl.

It's enough to make my throat close up.

If I was the woe-is-me type, I'd have thrown in the towel a year ago. Instead, I put my hands on my hips and look around.

My eyes stop on another photo, Nana and my mother when she was a little girl.

“You better not be watching, Mom,” I warn. “This isn’t my finest hour. I mean... neither was last year or the year before that. Come back in a few. The store will be hopping again or the sign will be swinging in the wind.”

I wince at another possibility—we’ll keep stumbling along, just like we have been since I took over the place, twenty-two and fresh-faced. Back when I still had a boyfriend and sky-high hopes for the future.

Better times.

*Easier times.*

I take one last melancholy look around at every sharp reminder of why I need to step it up—and why I suck—before turning back to my computer.

“Hunk of crap,” I whisper. The ancient thing was probably on the *Titanic* with its boxy monitor that’s big enough to fit Nana’s flower garden inside.

One day, it’ll give up the ghost, just like everything else here, but I don’t dare replace it.

Not when revenue looks so thin I’ll be lucky to buy an ink cartridge for the printer next quarter.

My chest swells as I sigh and melt into my chair.

The spring menu’s pushing new coffees and light pastries, but they’re lower ticket items for a fast-casual customer base.

Two weeks ago, the ovens randomly stopped firing and our accountant retired, meaning we had to shell out big bucks for a new guy with triple the fees.

Not to mention the payroll needed to run this place, cutting deeper and deeper into my skeletal profits.

My projected turnover, if these damn numbers are to be trusted, looks like—

Well, let’s just say it’s litterbox territory.

Instead of pressing my face into my hands and screaming until my throat rips—totally reasonable under the circumstances—I lean forward until my forehead thunks against the screen.

The very *hot* screen.

Which almost certainly shouldn't be hot enough to slow cook an egg.

“Oh, no. Oh, shit,” I hiss, shoving back and almost knocking the giant machine off the creaking desk.

That's when Emmy pokes her head in. *Perfect timing.* “Hey, Junie!” she says, tucking her static curls back with one hand. “There's a guy waiting at the register.”

I rub the sore spot on my forehead, grinding my teeth.

*A guy? What guy?*

The only kind I meet.

Another rude prick expecting the red-carpet treatment and a lifelong discount because his espresso was three degrees too cold.

But it's my store. I'm effectively the boss and I'm expected to defuse every temper tantrum that comes barreling through the door.

I didn't say I was *good* at it. I'm only slightly better at customer relations than I am at math.

My armpits are already sweaty in this heat. Missouri summers always have that merciless phase and we're in the thick of it.

God, if I have to choose between replacing the archaic computer and functioning air conditioning, I'll be in real trouble.

I suck in a breath and step away from the glaring monitor, hoping to leave my nervous breakdown behind with the overheated machine.

Maybe by the time I return, the numbers will magically change.

“Lead the way, Emmy,” I say with way more enthusiasm than I feel, fanning a bit of much-needed air up my shirt before following her to the front and the asshat waiting for us.

And what an *asshat*.

Holy hell, I wasn't ready for this breed of scary-hot alpha male to be standing at my counter, waiting to tear my face off.

I expected a scowling prick—and let's be honest, he certainly *is* one—but he's a finalist for world's hottest prick.

Toweringly tall? Check.

Dark-blue eyes flashing with sin? Yes.

Mile-wide shoulders that look like they could hold up the sky? Oh, baby, he's got them.

He's the full Prince Charming package, up to and including the intimidating look etched on his face that's pinched with a thousand demands.

While I take my place behind the register, he glances at his digital watch with the designer gold band and sighs.

Yep, definitely a prick.

But rich as hell, if his designer brand oxford shirt and bright-blue tie are anything to go by. I don't have it in me today to offend rich paying customers.

So I do the only sane thing a struggling business owner can—I reach down, dive deep, and dredge up a smile from the bottom of my soul.

“Hi there,” I say, my customer service voice bright and bouncy, ready to deflect the avalanche of crap he's about to dump on me. “Is there a problem with your order?”

“No. I haven't made one yet,” he clips. He's not even looking at me. His eyes are turned up, fixed on the overhead menu.

*O-kay.*

Good thing I've been doing this for a while.

One prick, no matter how sharp his cheekbones are or how defined his jaw is—and God, what a jawline—will distract me from making money.

“Sure,” I say cheerfully. “How can I help you then?”

“Can you execute a large custom order for delivery today?” He doesn’t even wait for me to nod before waving a hand at the glass case gleaming with pastries. “I need a sampler of this crap. Tortes, cheesecakes, turnovers, cupcakes, the works. Make it extra sweet.”

*This crap?*

I’m frozen, stunned and staring as my brain tries not to get ragey and defensive.

This is an order, even if he’s placing it in the rudest way imaginable.

A real oh-shit-this-is-expensive order that will make good money.

My *favorite* kind of order that only comes up a dozen times a year, if I’m lucky.

I turn my smile all the way up to blinding. “Certainly! Do you have any specific requests for your crap?”

There goes my tongue. It didn’t get the memo to be polite.

He looks at me like I’m a crushed bug under his shoe and swipes a frustrated hand through the air. “All of it. Everything you do here. I don’t care.”

I blink at him, waiting for more, but he stares at the bakery case like it’s personally offending him.

“Okay, yes, we can do that,” I say slowly, looking him up and down.

So, he doesn’t look insane, but maybe he’s unhinged in the usual rich people way. The kind where you walk in and buy out an entire store without even caring what it sells. “I’m sure we can accommodate your needs with a custom package of—”

“Extra sweet,” he snaps. “So rich you’ll choke.”

Oof. I hate the way his eyes flash when he makes me imagine gagging.

“Sure, sure. It’s easy to scrounge up our sweetest creations or add a little extra frosting to the lighter stuff.”

“Whatever, lady. It needs to be perfect. I’m trusting you.” The way he narrows his eyes at me says he trusts me to muck this up beyond recognition.

“Perfect, huh? You’re in luck. We’ve been doing that for over fifty years,” I bite off nicely at his assholery, beaming an even wider chipmunk smile that hurts my cheeks.

He hate-glares at the bakery case, then turns his dubious eyes back on me like swords.

Oh, boy.

My hair’s probably a worn red ball in this humidity plus the back office turning into a sauna.

But why does he look so skeptical?

“Sir, trust me, you’ve come to the right place. This place lives up to its name,” I tell him, gesturing to a few framed thirty-year-old newspaper reviews behind me. “Whatever you need, you can count on us. Cakes, éclairs, apple turnovers, honey-olive tortes, or anything you can imagine. Custom orders, bulk orders, samplers, the lot. You tell us what and when and we’ll deliver. Even *today*.” Oh hell, I’m rambling. But that’s not a bad slogan. “Whatever you need, we’ve got you covered.”

“Right.” One dark eyebrow rises and he rakes me over with a look.

It isn’t fair.

No grouchy customer barging in has any business making me feel this vulnerable.

“Would you like a few samples to give us your feedback?” I ask brightly. “It’ll put a smile on your face, guaranteed.”

Somehow, his mouth turns down even more.



“I don’t do sweets and I don’t have time to *gab*.” He spits the word like it’s dirty. “Can you have this order ready for six o’clock?”

Eep.

My eyebrows almost fly off my head.

But fine, fine.

If he wants to play bad cop and put us under the gun for turnaround, I’m more than happy dropping the cutesy act and getting to work.

“The Sugar Bowl isn’t a Kansas City institution for nothing,” I tell him in the same hard-edged tone he just used on me. “We’ll get it done. Early.”

“I hope to fuck that reputation is as sterling as you claim. Here’s the delivery address,” he mutters, pulling out a small Post-it note and slamming it on the counter with enough force to rattle the display cabinets. “Six o’clock sharp. Don’t even think about being late.”

Then, with one last frigid scowl worthy of a mafia don, he storms away from the store, the bell tinkling behind him like it’s glad to send Satan back to hell.

Emmy and Jake immediately start snickering behind me.

“What a dick!” Emmy whispers, and Jake bursts into more giggles. “Way to go, Junie. You’re a lion tamer today.”

I don’t acknowledge that.

Let them be kids.

I’ll be the grown-up professional owner who keeps her shit together, even if I’m inwardly turning into a basket case. I can always beat my pillows at home *after* we get paid.

I tense my shoulders, just for a second, and inhale sharply.

The address he left is a fancy-ass hotel a few miles away. The kind that only lets people in if they smell like money.

Figures.

“Okay, team,” I say, turning to the two laughing teenagers behind me with my best boss face. “We have two hours to buckle down and get this done. And the man said extra sweet for—everything, I guess. I’m calling in backup. No matter what happens, we are *not* screwing this up.”



THE ENGINE whines as I ease my foot on the gas, hoping the lights at the intersection don’t go red.

I’m making beautiful time, just as long as nothing *else* goes wrong and the late rush hour traffic is kind to me.

Flipping caramel apple tortes.

But I’m the genius who decided to break out the sweetest treat in Nana’s old recipe arsenal. It took three batches to get them just right.

I was almost forced to leave without them to meet Mr. Sweet Tooth’s life-or-death deadline. Luckily, they came out and passed a quick taste test just before the deadline, but it was *close*.

So much for the promise I’d be early.

Even now, I’m pushing it, grinding through the bustling traffic of a summer evening. I swear the humid nights bring people out like bees.

I really can’t afford to be waiting at the intersection, though.

To my eternal relief, I only whack the wheel once before the light turns green, and then I head down by the Riverwalk, passing the Winthrope KC hotel on the way.

The engine’s whine morphs into a rattle.

“Oh, no, are you joking? Not now!” I grimace at the windshield. Just another big ugly repair bill I’ll need to scrounge up money for. “Come on, baby. You can make it. I’ll let you rest as soon as we get there...”

The rattle shakes through the seat as I stomp the gas and ease off it again.

Ugh.

I've never been much of a praying type, but I will sell my soul to any deity right now just as long as I make it to this stupid hotel.

This dude's order is big enough to cover several big car repairs and then some. It's so huge that if he didn't reek like money, I'd have worried whether he could pay it.

And if he isn't a total scrooge when he tips...

Ohhh, if he tips, I might actually be able to *live* on more than home-baked banana bread and frozen burritos for a few weeks.

But I try not to get my hopes up.

Hefty tips are never guaranteed, but if there's one thing I've learned about jackass customers, it's that they're often halfway decent tippers. Almost like they're trying to buy off their guilty conscience when nobody's looking.

Of course, that hinges on everything going right, and I *have* to make this deadline.

Miraculously, I swerve into the hotel parking lot without the van breaking down.

No time for celebration.

After a quick chat with reception, I grab the first set of boxes and haul them into the conference room. Thankfully, it isn't far from the main door.

To my surprise, Mr. Sweet Tooth stands in the conference room alone, leering over everything like a general surveying a battlefield.

He leans on the ginormous walnut table with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his lips slightly tilted and those cutting blue eyes ready to flay me open for the slightest error.

But I don't think he sees me at first.

He doesn't seem to hear the door or my panicked footsteps; he just stares out of the long, wall-length window overlooking the city basking in the sunset.

"Nobody else coming to the party yet? This is a lot for one guy," I joke as I set down the first box.

He starts, whipping toward me with that familiar stormy scowl.

"Unbelievable. You're five minutes late." He taps his watch in case I've forgotten the concept of time. "Your desserts better be goddamned ambrosia. Where's the rest?"

"Um, coming right up!" I say nervously, biting my tongue on adding *you absolute jackwagon*.

It takes him two seconds to realize it's just me unloading the stuff.

To my surprise, he follows me outside to the van and helps grab the remaining boxes, stacking them high in his arms.

"Can't believe people eat this stuff," he growls once we're back in the room, popping open a lid and checking out its contents—Nana's famous strudel bites. "It's begging for diabetes. There are places where sugar bombs like this get a sin tax."

Yikes, talk about opening a can of worms.

"So, what? You think no one should ever be allowed a little sugar?" I ask flatly.

"In any sane world, it'd be a controlled substance enforced by DEA troopers. If I were dictator for a day, I'd ban the shit entirely."

...he's mighty serious about a world without glucose, isn't he?

And I wonder how a man this painfully handsome wound up with the world's biggest stick lodged up his ass.

"You're hilarious." I stop what I'm doing and stare at him, trying to brush it off as a joke. He's hot, sure, but clearly a

little—okay, a lot—deranged. “Do you hear what you’re saying?”

“I know. I shouldn’t bother debating the merits with someone who makes a living peddling death salt.”

“Death salt? Excuse you?” One second later, I bite my tongue and sigh.

His glare cuts right through me.

*For the love of everything holy, be nice.*

*Remember the money.*

“Um, I mean... I’m a little confused. Help me out. You’re the one who ordered this stuff *extra sweet*, right?” I rip open another box a little too forcefully and frown at the raspberry and white chocolate cheesecakes inside. “Please don’t tell me you’re some sort of health freak.”

“If health freak means I actually take care of myself, then yes, sue me,” he snarls.

“Oh, that would be the day,” I huff under my breath.

His glare just got ten times hotter.

Putting all the samples out on the tables and arranging them neatly clearly isn’t his talent, so after I tidy them up a few times, he gives up and watches me with an unwavering stare that makes me sweat.

*Dude, could you let up on the evil eye?*

It’s a minor miracle I don’t drip all over the dessert spread.

When I turn around, he’s folding his arms. I hate the way the shirt tightens around his biceps like a second skin. *Nope, not staring.*

“You want to know the truth? If it was up to me, we’d have mandatory tracking and weekly workout times to offset every gram of this stuff,” he grouches, looking past me at the treats.

So, he’s not just a sugar-hating prick then—but a prick who’s anal enough to obsess over the metric system, too.

I ignore his insanity and step back to examine my handiwork. Not a bad presentation, if I do say so myself, especially considering the time crunch.

“Well, we’re lucky it’s not up to you. Too many control freaks already in power,” I say with a sunny smile I hope hides my total contempt. “Anyway, sorry about the *five-minute* delay. I’d be happy to knock fifty bucks off the price for your trouble.” I lay on the emphasis real thick and his scowl deepens. “But everything is here and customized to your liking.” A smirk escapes before I can bite it back. “I mean... clearly not to *your* liking. But customized to your order, I should say.”

His eyes flick around the room, probably searching for something else he can blame me for.

He looks like that kind of walking horse dick.

Nothing’s ever good enough. There’s always something to complain about.

But there’s nothing wrong with what I’ve put out—I triple-checked—and after a breathless minute, he nods. Grudgingly.

“As ordered,” he admits. “Forget the discount, I’ll pay you in full.”

Holy crap.

I stagger back a step.

I’m not used to things going right.

“Great!” I shove the paper bill and the credit card reader at him before he can change his mind. He raises his eyebrows at the bulky plastic reader pushing fifteen years old.

Jerk.

I half expect him to make a pointed comment about convenience—and I would’ve been half tempted to take the cherry pie and shove his face in it—but he just scrawls a signature on the bill and jabs his black credit card in the reader like a knife.

Like he just can’t wait to get rid of me.

Right-o. The feeling is mutual.

While he stares at the screen and waits for it to finish processing at a speed slower than molasses, I stick my tongue out at the back of his head and that thick dark hair.

Childish, yes, but it makes me feel better.

Then the door opens.

We both look up to witness the Kingpin of All Money swaggering in.

He's a bear of a man, probably in his fifties. Sweet Tooth is built and lean, yes, but he looks almost small compared to this older guy with thick limbs and a penguin belly.

Sweet Tooth immediately stops scowling. Oh, is he nervous?

*Interesting.*

So maybe Kingpin is Sweet Tooth's boss or something?

Makes sense. Doesn't every shark answer to a whale?

I turn back to face my tormenter with a saccharine smile.

"As you can see, everything's here and perfectly in order," I announce loudly while he gives me a look that tells me to scram. It's kind of delicious, the way his eyebrows sink low above his eyes. They heat with a blue-fire rage he can't indulge, not while he's in front of this other guy. "And extra sweet, just like you asked for. I'm not sure if you have any allergies, but just to be sure, the items with nuts were baked separately and are off to the left, over there, and—"

"Yes," Sweet Tooth clips through gritted teeth. "Understood, ma'am."

Kingpin stares across the spread with raised eyebrows and a shit-eating grin on his face. "Rory, color me impressed! Or should I be thanking our lovely delivery gal?"

Sweet Tooth inhales sharply and glowers at me.

"Thanks," he grinds out without an ounce of sincerity. "This all looks... great."

*Lame, dude.*

*You aren't even trying.*

I smile innocently.

“You don't think it's too sweet, do you?”

He shoves the bill into my chest and guides me to the door with one big hand pressed against my back.

I don't even have time to glance back at Kingpin and find out whether he's enjoying the cheesecake before Sweet Tooth practically picks me up and throws me out the door.

It closes behind him with a loud *click!*

“Jesus.” I turn around, rubbing my arm and yelling, “You're welcome!”

Then I decide not to press my luck and beat it.

I get out of there as fast as I can without running.

It's only when I'm back in the van that I bother looking at the signed receipt.

There's a name scrawled across the bottom in a garish slash. *Dexter Rory.*

“All right,” I say, rubbing my face. “Let's find out how crappy a tipper you are, Dexter Rory.”

I skim down to the tip line and my eyes nearly exit my face.

My jaw drops.

*Well, crap.*





## ONE SWEET DEAL (DEXTER)



**T**here are few things more disgusting than watching Forrest Haute stuffing his face.

That viral video of a baby hippo in a zoo enclosure turning into a literal poop factory while kids scream through the glass.

The six-week-old forgotten Philly steak sub I rediscovered once in the back of my fridge.

The latest celebrity slop from Twitter or X or whatever the hell they're calling it these days—does the world really *need* a public debate on electric vehicles between a hotel heiress and a one-hit grunge rock wonder?

I don't have a weak stomach. Hell, I could sit through any slasher flick with oceans of blood and not give two shits, but this devourer of worlds is making me sick.

It's not the fact that his gut could make Santa jealous. The man must have three stomachs in one to put away his weight in cake, pastries, and endless cups of coffee heaped with the confectionary crack otherwise known as sugar.

No, it's the *way* he eats—and it's enough to put anyone off having dinner for a year.

He can't be fully human. He's able to unhinge his jaw a few extra inches to stuff half a caramel apple torte down his pie hole in one go. Maybe the lizard people are real after all.

At least *one* thing went right, though.

A real shocker after that bungling delivery girl took her sweet time piling this room with sweets I can barely stand smelling from ten feet away.

And apparently, my brothers were right on the money about Haute's legendary sweet tooth. I wonder how he even stays conscious with the amount of sugar thickening his blood over the last twenty minutes.

Half of me expects him to stop, turn pale, and keel right over, but he just keeps going.

*And going.*

Honestly, if I look at him a minute longer, I'll be the one puking, so I turn away and force my fingers to hold still on the table.

Nervous tapping won't get me anywhere. I've made it this far, but it's hardly a done deal.

I need to play my cards right. Or maybe just let him eat himself into a coma first.

Either way, I need this property.

Higher Ends International needs it.

All I need to do is bide my time, and watching Haute polish off the better part of an entire bakery's daily output might get me somewhere.

I hold in a sigh, glancing out over the city again and the sunset glinting across the glassy high-rises. Somewhere out there, she's sitting by the winding Missouri River, just waiting for the right renovation to make a lot of people very rich.

The Mill could be a goldmine if it's just handled properly. Haute, or whoever calls the shots in his development arm, didn't have a clue what they were doing.

Only an idiot would rework it and market it as artists' lofts. Kansas City has a healthy art community, sure, but it's not New York. The average non-starving artist here couldn't afford that sort of luxury studio in their wildest dreams, which he would've known if his people had done more research.

That building with its history, its location, its riverside charm, God, there's real potential there. The best part is, it won't take much to refurbish it into the finest luxury rentals in the entire KC metro. People will pay stupid amounts for a location like that.

It could easily be one of our most lucrative deals ever.

I just need to *get* the damn thing in our hands first.

Unfortunately, that hinges on Forrest Three-Stomachs Haute not stuffing his face.

Plus, the other rumors that have nothing to do with his appetite, I suppose. The ones that involve a particularly nasty arm of the Chicago mob and the Haute family's ties to it.

All in the past, supposedly.

We don't walk into new partnerships completely blind.

It's not like I can come out and just ask about that, though.

You need tact when you're flirting with a man who's one degree removed from the devil.

When he finally pauses and blots his mouth with a napkin, I take my chance.

"Thank you for joining me this evening, Mr. Haute," I say before he has the chance to grab another cupcake. "And thanks for reconsidering your future with the Mill lofts on the river."

Haute holds up something dark and dusted with icing. So much goddamn sugar. "Please. This triple chocolate cupcake left me no choice."

He's joking, right?

Jesus.

If a hill of pastries really can win him over, I could *kiss* that hot little baker.

In hindsight, she was awfully sweet on the eyes—the kind I don't mind with that flyaway red hair and seafoam-green eyes—even if her personality was like a rotten banana peel.

But hell, if it convinces Haute to turn over the Mill, I might even choke down something that takes a year off my life in celebration.

The question is, what?

I asked for extra sweet, but this stuff could rot my teeth out just by looking at it. The only thing that looks remotely palatable is the dark chocolate torte—if I scrape off the frosting—and it still probably contains a month’s worth of my sugar intake.

“We’ve been killing it in the local game for a while now. I’m sure you’ve seen the numbers? The Mill will be in the very best hands with Higher Ends,” I say, dragging the torte closer and putting a piece on my plate with a frown. If anything, Haute’s expression gets smugger. It’s like he knows this is torture. “Together, we’ll make a jaw-dropping rental offering while still maintaining the property’s unique historical roots, just as you envisioned with the lofts.”

Haute sends me a dull glance, a flicker of annoyance in his dark-brown eyes.

“Well, numbers or not, at first I wasn’t sure. To be frank, Rory, I almost brushed off this meeting entirely. It just seems an odd business model if you ask me.”

“How so?”

“A rich man’s Airbnb?” The man picks up a slice of cheesecake and stuffs half of it in his mouth. “Is there really so much demand?” He rattles off, still chewing, “In my day, people with money stayed at good hotels if they wanted the service. Places just like this one. What’s wrong with that?”

Seeing as he’s too busy eating to talk to me properly, I return the favor, biting into the torte and hoping I don’t spray it across the room.

Still too sweet, but palatable.

“The market’s changing with the times, Mr. Haute. It’s all mindset, a generational change,” I say. “People want hotel amenities and service to go along with one-of-a-kind properties without being in a crowded hotel.” I wave my hand

around the room, which, in all fairness, doesn't back up my point. "Places like this are fine, yes, but where's the exclusivity? The local charm? People visit a Winthrope property for world-class service and designer ambience. They come for a sanctuary in Kansas City, sure, but it's not a seamless part of the city, is it? The place is barely ten years old. That's where we come in. People will pay good money for exclusive and local, as I'm sure you're aware. The young and affluent respect history and art just like we do."

His eyes narrow as he considers my point—and the fact that people haven't been paying for his ridiculous artists' lofts. Last I checked, he was at eighty percent vacancy.

"I see. Still, you can't compete with hotels like this on service."

"If you mean spas and gym facilities, sure, the Winthrope has us beat. Like them, though, our staff brings comfort. On-demand turndown, room service, high-end food, laundry, the works. There's a reason why Higher Ends is enjoying its explosive growth." I settle into my flow, the sugar high forgotten. This is why I'm here—the sale. Reminding him what we're capable of, and the irrefutable fact that we're not just another quirky startup, but battle-tested and proven. "We're giving people what they want, Mr. Haute. Maximum privacy, great service, and truly original properties. The only thing holding us back is finding new acquisitions worthy of our brand in a tight market—and that's where you come in."

Haute raises an eyebrow.

"How long did you polish that speech?" he drawls, "Or did you come up with it on the fly?"

Fuck.

I flash him a disarming smile as we lock eyes.

"The only thing I planned out was bringing you these exquisite desserts."

He throws his head back and laughs, a loud barking sound as big as the rest of him.

There we go. *Bullseye.*

“I must congratulate you, Rory.”

“Let me be straight with you.” I lay my hands on the table in a fake expression of honesty. “The real estate market’s crowded and expensive, even here. Kansas City has ten times the competition it did five years ago. It’s a growing sea of sharks, and we have a reputation to uphold. The Mill is exactly what we’re looking for. The kind of gem that only turns up once in a generation, if we’re lucky.”

“You’re scrappy and hungry, I’ll give you that.” Haute points at the torte on my plate. “Are they good?”

Shit, can this man stop thinking with his gut for one second?

“The best,” I say. My mind flicks back to the big claims the baker chick made when I stepped into her store. “The Sugar Bowl is an institution of sorts around here.”

“Ah, well, I can certainly see why.” Haute grabs a piece and bites into it, making a low, appreciative grunt that sounds filthy.

Appropriate in a porno, maybe, but not in a business meeting between professionals.

Of course, he’s not the type who would know professional, even if it slapped him in the face.

If I had my way, there wouldn’t be anything in this room except some water and self-serve coffee to help the money go down smoother. But last week, Haute wouldn’t even agree to a second meeting until I mentioned a special sampler of some local baked goods.

So here we are, and it’s just as horrific as I imagined.

“Well, hell. I’ll have to discuss any final decisions with my partners, of course,” Haute says around a mouthful of torte. Chocolate smears his teeth and he makes no effort to lick it away. “However, I will say this, Rory—I’m feeling more bullish about the whole thing than I did last week.”

Bullish.

*Progress.*

About fucking time, too. We've been chasing this deal for months. It took weeks to even get a reply from his team, let alone set up talks.

The only thing that bothers me is his mention of 'partners.'

Hopefully, he means ordinary real estate goons and not something shadier.

That's the part that almost scuttled this before it got off the ground. Archer wasn't sure we should pursue it because of Haute's reputation elsewhere. And, you know, the possible mob ties.

Waking up with horse heads in our beds would be unpleasant.

Then again, there's been nothing implicating him in any dirty dealings for over ten years. His holdings have grown in the usual boring ways, without any weird surprises, steady and occasionally stumbling like the juggernaut he is.

I'll just have to hope my stick-up-the-ass big brother doesn't have a point. Still, if there *is* anything dubious here...

No, I brush off the thought.

He's selling property. We're buying and that's where it ends.

Sure, he'll probably negotiate a small ongoing cut of the profits for turning over such a magnificent slice of KC real estate, but that's expected.

It's a sweet deal. Simple. And we'll have the lawyers' fingerprints all over it.

There won't be *room* for any unexpected surprises, conventional or otherwise.

If he does shady business, he's got his fingers in a thousand pies for that, and it won't be the Mill. Not when he's offered a continuing stake in the property if he goes ahead with the deal.

He licks his fingers loudly like he's reading my mind.

Fuck, okay.



Now he's just doing indecent slurping like wants to turn my stomach.

"You know, I wasn't sure about you," he says, "but I think I'm feeling better about this."

*Finally.*

"Glad to hear it," I say. "I really think this could be mutually beneficial for you and Higher Ends—"

"I wasn't done," he snaps.

I ball my fists under the table and take a deep breath.

Yeah, if he was *anyone* else, I'd be out the door by now, but we need this deal.

My pride can wait.

Even though there's nothing I'd like better than to punch him in his smarmy face for holding me in suspense like a greedy hog and eating like one too.

"It's good to experiment at my age. The only thing worse than making mistakes is being stagnant. It's true in business and truer in life," he continues.

Goddamn, he better still be talking about the deal. The last thing I need is some kind of unhinged man-to-man chat. Maybe we should've sent Archer after all.

Anyone would be better at this than me. Even my little brother, Patton, who's a notorious wild card.

Haute stares at the pastries—what's left of them, anyway. I'm sure I bought enough to feed twenty people and he's reduced them to crumbs.

"Anyway, yes, I think we might have a future, Rory." He looks at me slowly like he knows I'm already aware he's about to ask for something ridiculous. "Especially on one condition—you make these delights part of the new property."

"These delights—" My brain stutters and my mouth clamps shut.

He cannot be fucking serious.

Right?

Then again, when has the man ever cracked a joke? Or even smiled, minus the times he's delighting in someone's suffering?

He smiled at the baker girl, though. I noticed that.

And I inwardly cringe because his enormous appetites likely don't stop at food.

No doubt he thought she was cute—though she won't be sweet enough for his tastes. Not if she gives him the same passive-aggressive treatment she gave me, and I'm sure she was holding back.

“Rory, Rory. Don't tell me you're about to disappoint me,” he says when I hesitate too long. That dead-eyed glare is harder than nails.

*Shit, think fast.*

“I don't believe in disappointing our partners,” I tell him. Back to business, because that's all I know. Even if this is strange, unfamiliar territory and the summer heat must be creeping in through the air-conditioned building with the sweat rolling down the back of my neck. “Whatever you propose, I'm sure we can make it happen.”

He holds my gaze a second too long, reminding me that he wields all the power here. He's also not buying a single word I'm saying.

*Hurry, hurry. Think.*

“Are you psychic, Mr. Haute?” I blather, with no clear idea what I'm going to say next. All I know is I can't blow this deal over a few goddamned cupcakes. “It just so happens we're finalizing plans to have a full complement of Sugar Bowl desserts—plus an on-demand menu—added to all our Kansas City properties.”

*Fuck.*

My mouth is moving, but it can't comprehend what I'm sentencing myself to.

Now I'll have to work with that awful woman again and tell her we need more of her baking. After telling her how much I loathe sugar and making it clear this was a one-time bit of insanity.

Haute smiles broadly.

I hate him and his mammoth fucking sweet tooth that has me lying through my teeth.

“Amazing. You must be as big a fan of these treats as I am,” he says with more of that smarmy, layered charm that makes me want to slug him.

“More than a fan!” I lie smoothly. The sweat on the back of my neck seeps lowers, wetting my collar. It's like my body senses where this is going before my brain does. “The Sugar Bowl has been around since before I was born”—though I'm fucked if I can remember when, even if she told me—“so you know it's good. I'd be a fool to leave them out of the spotlight.”

“It's rare when something lives up to its hype, yes.” His gaze flicks to me, more curious than ever. “Can you really make that happen with all your properties, Rory? It's a tall order for such a small local shop, isn't it? You don't have to exaggerate on my account.”

But I do.

The sensible thing to do would be to back down or walk back the promise to just the Mill as soon as it's in our hands. But I've never been that sensible.

When I go all in, it's balls to the walls.

I *need* him to believe me.

My eyes search the room frantically, staring at the paintings on the wall.

A man on horseback and his white dog, gazing into a hundred-year-old red sunset.

A woman at work, what looks like a maid prepping a tall cake in a butler's pantry.

An abstract wedding scene, a century out of style again, the happy couple embracing in front of a faceless crowd.

It's the last painting that sticks in my brain and immediately short-circuits it.

"I wouldn't dare overpromise, Mr. Haute," I say. "I have my ways. It's easy when my lovely fiancée runs the Sugar Bowl these days."

*Fuck, fuck.*

*What are you doing?*

Digging my own grave in grand style, I guess.

I stare at him, waiting for a scolding the second he catches the lie, but he just raises his thick eyebrows.

"Fiancée?"

Dry-mouthed, I nod.

"That sweet redhead from earlier?"

My teeth grind together.

I'm sure she's anything but sweet once you get to know her, but I can't tell him that when I'm busy shoving my entire foot in my mouth.

So I nod again like the jackass I am and say, "She's a firecracker. Really puts her passion into everything."

I hope it's enough to shut him up.

"She certainly brought a little fire today." Haute mimes spanking something in midair, and amazingly, it's possible to despise him even more. "You're a lucky man, Dexter Rory."

*Yes, a very unlucky, stunningly stupid asshole.*

What sort of idiot claims they're engaged to a woman they've met once—a woman he doesn't even like—just to close a sale?

This guy, apparently.

And it's so fucking asinine I almost laugh hysterically at myself right here. Who knew signing my own death warrant

could be so amusing?

“Yep,” I grind out. “Couldn’t be luckier.”

What’s one more lie on the pile? The funeral pyre?

Whatever else happens, I better seal this deal.

“I can’t wait to meet her when the time comes to iron out details,” Haute says, extending a thick hand. It’s an oddly limp shake for a man who’s built like a rhinoceros, but I don’t give a shit when we’re shaking over the Mill. “You’ll have to introduce us. Certainly, keep bringing me more of these delicious desserts.”

There’s no way in hell he’s ever meeting her, but that’s a tomorrow problem.

Now, I just have to figure out how much I’ll need to spend on these damn sugar licks masquerading as desserts, on top of whatever it costs to un-fuck my life.

Which means more run-ins with that insufferable woman.

My ‘fiancée.’

Proof that I’m in the running for world’s biggest idiot ass-clown.



## NO SWEET SUCKER (JUNIPER)



**T**here's nothing better than a good barbecue sandwich.

This one has everything: coleslaw, roasted peppers, sautéed mushrooms, caramelized onions, and of course, enough meat to put me into a mini coma.

I might be a bakery girl, but there's no denying I love a good chunk of pulled pork. In this city, good barbecue is practically a religion.

Put a spatula in my hand and turn me loose over a grill and I couldn't be happier. It takes me back to the old days, back when my dad showed me how to grill. I was the son he always wanted.

Before he snapped and left, I mean.

But that's a whole boatload of trauma for another time, so I focus on the way the barbecue sauce runs down my cheek as I take a nice big bite.

"You've got a little something..." Emmy breaks away as I look at her. "You know what? Never mind. You look perfect."

"Good answer, Emmy." I toss my hair back in an exaggerated gesture that makes her laugh while I blot my face with a napkin. Jake's too busy stuffing his face to smile, but he's definitely happier ever since I announced lunch was on me today.

All thanks to Mr. Dexter Rory and his fancy credit card. Dealing with his rotten attitude paid off, for once. The tip he left—

Sweet baby Jesus.

I shake my head at my sandwich in memory.

I hate to admit it, but the guy was *generous*. The order left me enough money to take the van in with plenty left over for other disasters.

I'm already eying a new computer and a few other neglected upgrades. Like lunch for everyone today.

Best thing of all, knowing he's a rich, traveling jerkwad, I'll never have to see his arrogant—and irritatingly attractive—face again.

Jake sighs in delight as he finishes his sandwich and uses his napkin to wipe his mouth. “That was awesome. So much better than my mom’s homemade sandwiches.”

The homemade sandwiches in question lie abandoned on one of the tables. Cling-wrapped and soggy, they're possibly the least appetizing thing I've seen all day.

“Gross.” Emmy pulls a face.

“You're telling me. Who thinks cream cheese and a pickle needs jelly on it?” He groans and lets his head flop down. “You're a lifesaver, Junie.”

“Speaking of saving lives, it's time for me to get back to the accounts.”

“That,” Emmy says firmly, “is the least lifesavey thing I've ever heard.”

I ruffle her hair as I pass. She's a good kid.

Most businesses claim they're a family, but this place really *feels* like it sometimes. Sarah and Jake are busy saving up for college; Emmy's trying to get her art career off the ground and working part-time to cover costs, and then there's me, desperately holding it all together.

The computer whines to life with less complaining than usual today. When I open the dreaded spreadsheets, they don't feel so miserable after all.

In fact, I almost feel—



Okay, *light* might be an exaggeration. But when I look up at the pictures of Nana on the walls and the way the store was back when she was kicking butt, I feel like less of a failure.

I've almost had enough time to settle into the accounts and start crunching numbers for real when Emmy knocks on the door I've left cracked open.

"Junie," she says hesitantly.

"What's up? Didn't I say I have a hot date with a calculator?" I call back, trying not to groan. I'm *so close* to finishing this quarterly crap and being able to focus on something besides profit margins and expenses that finally have a shred of breathing space. "This better be important."

"It's him. The guy from a couple of days ago..." she says too quietly. Her blue eyes are hesitant as she looks up at me. "You know. Big Fish."

Oh my God.

It's crazy that with just *one* ridiculously bear-sized order and awful attitude, they've given him a nickname.

"Shit." I thread my fingers through my hair, tugging the resistant strands out and staring at them, red and worn in my grip.

Why the hell is he back?

Did he realize he grossly overtipped and now he's here to correct the error?

Holy crap, no. My stomach knots.

But what if it's even worse? If the food somehow made his big boss sick...

I do the calculations in my head.

It was three days ago now when I presented the food to this man with all the pomp of a Roman emperor. Plenty of time for his big boss to get sick and for him to take the brunt of the abuse—and to figure out how to make my life miserable.

"I don't suppose you can tell him I'm out?" I ask.

Of course, I can't ask her to hide me.

Letting her or Jake deal with him wouldn't be fair or wise. Even if it's amazingly tempting right now.

"Junie..."

"Relax, I'm coming, I'm coming." I drag myself up from my chair and follow her to the front.

He's standing by the counter with the same terrifying *maleness* as before.

It's like every single thing about him is designed to shock and awe the primitive part of my brain, reminding me the customer from hell looks like a scary-hot man's man.

And dammit, my very confused body *likes it* for some unholy reason.

He gives me what might even pass for a smile as I take my place behind the counter.

"Hi," I force out, not trying for the breezy placating customer voice I went for last time.

If he's here and pissed off, he'll know better, anyway. I sassed him before, after all.

I cringe internally.

"Juniper Winkley, is it?" he asks, reading my name tag. "Nice to see you again."

Nice? *Nice?*

I don't believe this guy finds anything about me 'nice,' but he delivers the line with such practiced sincerity, I almost believe it.

Then I come to my senses and wonder what he's up to.

My eyes narrow as I clear my throat.

"Um, yes." I fumble over what to say next and settle for, "Thank you?"

"I didn't thank you properly before." He smiles, this time wider than before and fake as hell.

Oh, man.

It doesn't reach his eyes, but there's something charming about it anyway. Even if he's just putting on a show, it's nice to see a face that handsome set to something besides perma-sowl.

He has good teeth, too, perfectly set and very white.

*The better to eat you with, my dear.*

“Anyway, I really appreciate the effort you put into the sampler.” He hands me a business card with Dexter Rory blazing across it in gold letters. Underneath, I see the words *Higher Ends International*. “My associate was especially impressed with everything you delivered.” There's something actually warm in his voice now, and I straighten. Did he just say *impressed*? “I came by because I was hoping we could meet later, after the bakery closes.”

Meet? After close?

Oh, hell. Is he asking me on a date?

Then again, I've never had a man give me his business card when he's asking me on a date before, but he doesn't exactly look like he knows how it works in the real world.

“I have a proposal,” he says when I hesitate.

Like he can see the panic in my face, his jaw twitches and his smile dims a little.

“A business proposal for you,” he corrects, nodding at the card in my hand. “A lucrative opportunity for both of us.”

“Oh. Oh, right, a business proposition,” I murmur, giving myself time to think. “Okay. Yes. I can do that.”

“When do you close?”

*Calm down, down.*

“We close at six on the weekdays,” I tell him. Just in case his privileged ass has forgotten that most people *work* during weekdays and need to get home for the evening to do it all again the next day. “If you want to come back around six-thirty, we can discuss your—opportunity.”

“Six-thirty sharp. See you then.” He nods, his smile gone, and heads back out the door.

Whoa.

It’s weird that he looks more like a guardian angel than a swinging dick.

That’s how I know my mind is going to very weird places.

Although maybe that has more to do with the way his suit fits over his broad shoulders like it was made for them.

He’s a handsome devil, I’ll give him that.

Even his business card is nice and flashy. Lacquered, gold embossed, and it has that extra weight that whispers *money*.

Bad puns aside, Big Fish really knows how to make a splash.

I purse my lips as I tilt it so the lettering catches the light.

Higher Ends International, huh?

Whatever that is.

Sounds expensive.

Sounds successful.

The name makes me wonder if whatever he’s up to could be a good opportunity.

But I know not to get my hopes up. I’ve met guys like Dexter Rory before. Rich men who think they’re entitled to the entire world just for breathing.

Nana didn’t raise a dummy. Whenever a big, easy opportunity knocks, there’s always a catch.

*There must be.*

I just need to figure out what this one is before it sticks in my skin like a rusty hook.



BY THE TIME closing rolls around, I need a hairband to keep my frizzy hair in check.

My whole head goes to war with the summer as soon as the humid months hit.

My cheeks are red from whizzing from one side of the store to the other, only stopping a few times under the creaky ceiling fan to take the sweat off my neck.

My accounts still aren't done, and we had such a late influx of customers I'm still recovering from whiplash. Long summer nights and no school means older kids come pouring in for their sugar fix less than an hour before close.

I scuttle through cleanup and flip the sign on the door, switching off the lights on the front. I notice a couple letters burning out in BOWL.

Another repair.

*Awesomesauce.*

Maybe the money slated for the computer will have to go toward the lighting after all.

I rub my hand over my throbbing face and lean back against the door.

And there, striding through the late crowds of people shopping and heading home, is Mr. Big Punctual Fish. It's not a minute past six-thirty.

Clearly, he doesn't wait.

Emmy and Jake are in the back, taking off their aprons and washing up one more time before heading home. I told them I'd clean up tonight, and they're all too happy to leave me to it.

Listening to them chattering happily about their plans after work, I can't quite push back the bite of jealousy.

Once, that was me.

And now I'm here, mopping and scrubbing and meeting with a guy who looks like he'd rather be anywhere else now that he's here.

The bell tinkles cheerfully as he lets himself in, ignoring the Closed sign.

Go figure.

He also looks just as attractive as he did earlier, though there's something tight around his jaw.

Something tense.

The guy's straight pissy about something, which does not bode well for me and this little *business meeting*.

"Coffee?" I ask, switching on the machine. "I'm having one."

"Sounds great. Thanks." He parks himself at a table near the freshly cleaned bakery case.

At least he's playing nice, despite the way he glares around the room like he has X-ray vision looking through the walls, searching for the slightest reason to back out.

I get two coffees going and lean back on the counter as I look at him. He's wearing a navy-blue suit that brings out his tan and the blue depth of his eyes.

Those sharp eyes fall on me with a calculating intent I'm not expecting.

For a second, I wish I wasn't still slumming around in an apron with my hair going wild, without a bit of makeup on my face. I wish the summer humidity wasn't more than a match for our clanking A/C that's also overdue for a tune-up.

In another life, I wish I wasn't here, and I was going out for a date after work with a man who looks like Mr. Rory but who knows how to smile.

He's used to dealing with a very different kind of professional, no doubt. Definitely not the kind who daydreams.

*Okay, deep breath.*

*You can do this.*

"Cupcake?" I offer. "On the house."

His eyes flash to the few items still on display and he wrinkles his nose.

“Thanks, but I’m not one for sweets,” he says in that deep rolling voice of his.

“Oh, right. You’re hoping the next president starts a war on cookies.” I can’t resist the wisecrack, so I don’t snort.

*Not one for sweets* is one hell of a way to describe his outburst the other day, when he told me he thought sugar should be illegal.

But since he’s here I should hear him out, so I check my inner sarcastic bitch and bite my tongue until it hurts.

“Frankly, Miss Winkley, my tastes don’t matter. I’ve seen what a hit your creations are,” he adds, resting his elbows on the table. “You’ll be glad to know my associate was an instant fan.”

“Oh, great. What a relief. I was actually worried something went wrong when I saw you here again.” I grab the drinks and walk to the table with a cupcake for myself. He might not want one, but that doesn’t mean I’m going without. “We don’t get many complaints, but there’s always a chance.”

*And if anyone was likely to complain, it would be you*, I want to add.

“Not a single objection.” He gives me another one of those intimidating pinned-on smiles.

“Okay, well...” I gesture widely at the empty store. “You have my full attention.”

Disconcertingly, he looks up from his coffee and stares at me. This is probably the closest we’ve ever been.

I regret not leaving more space between us. I’m pretty sure his cheekbones could cut glass.

And *damn*, have I mentioned his eyes?

Up close, they’re even more spectacular, which is way more annoying.

Eyes so beautiful shouldn’t belong to a jerk like him.

They definitely shouldn't remind me of the way the sun glints on the open sea.

"Did you know I'm local?" he asks.

That is a surprise.

"You mean you're from here?" I frown, sipping my coffee to hide my confusion.

Not that I should be shocked. We wouldn't exactly have moved in the same circles and it's a big city.

"Kansas City, born and raised," he tells me. There's a touch of pride in his voice. "I formed a company with my brothers a few years ago—Higher Ends International. It's a fast-growing start-up delivering five-star rental experiences to folks from all over the country."

"Oh, you're one of those." It's out before I can clamp my mouth shut.

"Those?"

My face heats.

"I mean... aren't a lot of investors buying up properties the reason why nobody my age can get a house? Sorry if I'm confused." I might as well be honest, voicing what feels like my wildest dream.

Plus, the fact that he's one of many reasons it's never coming true.

"Miss Winkley, you *are* confused. Higher Ends isn't some fly-by-night crew of jackoffs sweeping up as many duplexes as they can get on credit, all so they can brag about smoke and mirrors success on TikTok," he says with a dismissive snort. "We're incredibly selective. We only acquire properties that offer a truly rich, immersive experience true to the area for a high-end clientele that pays dearly. When I said fast-growing, I meant in the unique niche we've carved out."

Right. It's so fast-growing I haven't heard of it and I'm *also* from here.

I stare at him.



And even if he isn't one of the cutthroats creating a housing shortage, I'm not sure I feel much better when I picture the sort of clients he's looking for. Rich people with money to burn who don't work in a bakery, fighting to make ends meet.

"You're skeptical," he grumbles.

"I prefer careful."

He snorts again.

My eyes narrow as I sip my coffee, fighting the urge to spray it in his smug face.

"There's no danger to you, only an upside. My offer is simple," he says. "I'm inviting you aboard for an experiment. The Sugar Bowl is perfectly suited to take part in our new pilot program. It's designed to supply fresh pastries and whatever else our guests might want for a few of our properties."

*Ugh.*

*Regular business.*

Why does he have to make this so hard?

"Also," he says with a little more warmth, "if that pilot goes well, we're considering making larger items available—things like custom cakes for special occasions. Our guests just order and you deliver to our star properties. Not complicated."

My gut clenches.

Something about the way he says *star properties* makes me uneasy. It's gone straight from tempting to too good to be true.

Also, there's something horribly distracting about his flickering blue eyes tonight. I kind of miss the scowl and constant growling.

At least then I could forget how attractive he is when he's being *nice*.

"I'll admit it sounds interesting," I say slowly, pulling at my cupcake and leaving crumbs on my plate. Bad habit, but I

can't help my nerves, especially when it feels like this is playing with a house of cards and one wrong move will send everything crashing down.

“But?” he urges.

“But why the sudden interest?”

His face closes off again, the warmth retreating behind a stoic mask.

“And, um, what do you want in return? I know how these things work. There has to be a catch in there somewhere.” There's no sense in pulling any punches.

“Well.” He clears his throat. “There is something else.”

*Of course.*

“I knew it.”

He inhales slowly, glancing around like he's trying to keep his lungs working.

Fair enough. I'm having trouble breathing, too.

Because here it comes.

The whole reason why you don't make deals with atrociously hot men who tip like they should be institutionalized.

And judging by his face, it's a really flipping big reason.

I take another gulp of my cooling coffee. I reckon I'll need the caffeine hit to get me through this. Or maybe I should just give up and fetch the whiskey stashed away in the back right now that I only break out for real emergencies.

“Before I start, let me promise you this is only temporary.” He places both hands on the table, palms down. “It's a very stupid condition and it's entirely my fault. The man who was with me the other day, he's very difficult to win over. When I did, I gave him the wrong impression and it made things a tad complicated for our arrangement going forward.”

That's all it takes to send my heart climbing up my throat.

“You're scaring me, Mr. Rory,” I say.

I definitely mean it as he sighs and slowly fixes his gaze on me again.

“I just need you to act like we’re engaged.”

I squint at him, wondering if I heard that right.

But he doesn’t correct himself.

*What. The. Actual. Hell?*

I push back from the table like he’s brandishing a knife.

*See, I knew it.*

This dude isn’t just your run-of-the-mill rich, handsome jerk—he’s psycho.

He is *actually* insane, and if this is some kind of convoluted ploy to ask me out or take advantage of me—or... or—

I’m out of ideas.

There’s no other earthly reason why he would possibly want us to be pretend engaged. It’s beyond illogical.

Rory also stands, shoving his chair back so fast it almost falls and holding up his hands. “Look, I know what it sounds like. Batshit crazy, but hear me out—”

“Hear you out?” My voice is high-pitched and grating. “Why the crap should I? I’m not qualified for this and you need help, sir.”

“Miss Winkley, it was an accident. A catastrophic slip of the tongue. A fucking brain fart, if you will.” The exasperated way he says it makes me laugh. Then he sighs again. “Frankly, my business prospect loved your desserts more than my ideas. He practically made it a condition of moving forward with a very large real estate deal. I told him I could make it happen, I had connections, one thing led to another and—and then I blurted out a white lie like a complete jackass.”

“White lie? That’s an understatement. You told him we’re *engaged?*”

“Yes.” He swipes a hand over his face.

Holy hell.

“And what? You think I should just play along?”

*Would it kill you?* his face says, but he holds his tongue.

“What else do you want me to say?” he growls, the softness gone. “I told you, it was a massive slip. A runaway fuckup in a high-pressure meeting. We *need* this deal, Miss Winkley.”

“Oh, okay. That totally sounds like something that really happened and not a cheesy rom-com plot bunny from the nineties.” As excuses go, it’s pretty terrible.

Surely he doesn’t expect me to believe him.

Except he’s looking at me with desperation in those dusky-blue eyes, and that tells me one of two things. Either he’s going to stuff me in the trunk of his car or he really did do something this unbelievably stupid.

“Oh my God. You’re serious,” I huff, fanning myself in the summer heat. “Okay. Okay, I think we just need to calm down for a minute. Let’s think this through...” I run my hand through my hair, twisting it into a makeshift bun at the back. “So, you’re ready to sign on to a boatload of stuff you hate if I pretend to be your *fiancée*?”

“Fake fiancée.” He nods gruffly. “You’ll think about it, then?”

I grit my teeth.

*Absolutely not.*

Except I can’t tell him that. Not when he’s clearly unhinged and even if he is... I do need the money.

I’m well aware of the fact that we don’t even know each other. Even if this *was* real, it’s not something a mentally sound person would do.

And even if we did, there’s no way I could agree and let it go public.

Nana’s been on a mission trying to marry me off, and one almost-engagement breakup was bad enough.

She'd never get over another one, no matter how fake or flimsy it might be.

“Mr. Rory, this is weird, but I'm flattered. I guess,” I lie, trying to let him down easy. “Honestly, I am. And I'm willing to try out this pilot delivery if you'd still like to move forward. But I just—I can't be your fiancée. My family, they... they wouldn't be comfortable with it at all.”

Although, if she ever found out, Nana would be at the head of the marriage train, blasting the horn to all my nosy cousins.

I wince at the thought. Pure torture.

Nope. Not a chance.

Last I checked, it's ninety degrees and muggy, which means hell is far from frozen over.

They'd never let me live it down, and the fact that he's got a cologne model's dark hair and piercing blue eyes and *cheekbones* that look menacing just makes this whole thing worse.

“I'm sorry,” I say more firmly. My apron feels too tight and the knot at the back seems stuck when I tug at it. Being trapped in an apron while turning down a fake engagement really sucks. *God*, why can't I get it off? “I don't want to be the reason that your deal falls through, but this is too weird for me. Never mind unprofessional.”

I half expect him to argue, to throw a tantrum, to hurl his coffee across the room.

Honestly, it wouldn't be the worst thing when I'm used to dealing with angry, explosive assholes all the time.

He looked desperate enough to unleash some fury a minute ago, but now he's eerily calm again, and he watches my sad attempts to undo the knot with deflated curiosity.

“A pity,” he says roughly. “I'm afraid the engagement is part of the deal.”

Oh, sure. Part of his deal in wacko world where people do crazy things for big money, maybe, but not mine.

I'm just scraping by, but I still have a shred of pride.

Sighing, I give up on the apron and let my hands drop.

"I'm sorry," I tell him again. "Really. I'm glad you like our pastries, though. If you ever need another order—like, a normal one—you're welcome to—"

I stop mid-sentence.

He pulls out another business card from his wallet—how many of those things does he carry around?—and a pen. A fancy one, obviously, because he wouldn't just walk around with a basic clicky ballpoint pen from a value pack like the rest of us.

"That's my personal number," he tells me, scrawling something quickly across the back. "Just think about it, Miss Winkley. Then call me the instant you've made up your mind."

"...but it already is," I tell him.

The man is either selectively deaf or brutally stubborn. He just gives me a look of pure soul-drilling intensity and walks off, but not before stopping behind me, reaching down, and—

Holy shit, no.

He can't be.

But he is.

I barely feel his fingers working, his hard knuckles scraping my back, before the knot comes loose.

I stare up at him in shock.

"You're free. I hope you realize that won't change when you reconsider."

I'm like a fish out of water, straining for words that won't come and staring at his back as he disappears out the door.

God.

After sucking down the rest of my coffee, I set my cup on the table and pinch my arm until it hurts.

Yep, still here, unfortunately.

I'm not dreaming.

This is a real-life nightmare wrapped up in a dark joke. A perfect deal and some serious money gone *poof!*

And all because one big rich idiot couldn't keep his mouth shut.

I sit back down, picking at my tattered cupcake and trying to muster up the energy to finish cleaning up before I head home to my cat.

“Engaged?” My lonely laughter spills through the store. “That would be the craziest shit ever...”

No fooling.

Even the thought of dating this guy makes my skin crawl, never mind acting like I'm planning on *marrying* him. But his hands felt electric on my back.

Ugh.

Why are the men with slag for souls the best fallen angels?

It's not fair.

But Dexter Rory could be an actual heaven-sent angel in disguise and I still wouldn't change my mind.

I'm not pretending to marry him and that's that.

He'll just have to find another sucker to play the part, a sweet girl willing to bat her eyes and fawn all over him like he has a better personality than a hungover grizzly bear, and I'll just have to find a saner way to keep scaring up money.





## SWEET PURSUIT (DEXTER)



**G**uess who's reached an entirely new level of absolute humiliation, previously unknown in human history?

That would be me.

I swear at the traffic ahead of me as I stomp on the gas. The Tesla leaps forward like it's airborne, but for once that doesn't put a smile on my face. Driving in downtown Kansas City on a busy night isn't something anyone does for fun.

Of all the meetings to flub, the one with Sweet Stuff just had to be it.

I had no illusions walking into her shop.

I thought she might be reluctant, suspicious, stubborn as hell.

Whatever.

Not everyone wants to pretend to be in a fake relationship, and all because I planted my foot so deep down my throat it came out my own ass again.

Still, I thought the business would convince her it was worth it.

A temporary inconvenience for a sizable payoff.

Hell, it's not like I *want* to date her, anyway. It's a business arrangement like everything else.

But no. Miss Winkley has other plans.

She wants to let her poor shop sputter along in this brutal economy. I did some research before our chat. Judging by the fading reviews and low social media engagement, the Sugar Bowl has seen better days.

It's not winning the rave reviews from food critics and travel guides like it did in the past.

Institution or not, it isn't a place where people are beating down the door and begging this redheaded hellion to take their money.

All because she has her *pride* or some shit.

I have mine, too.

And now that she's gone and demolished my chances with Haute, it means there's another meeting waiting. One where I have to own up to this wreck with my brothers.

Fucking hell.

I suck in a breath through my teeth and stab through the traffic clog to Lee's Summit, just outside the city. It's a sleek, modern office that looks like it belongs in Silicon Valley.

Of course, there's still time for it to crumble around my ears.

They're waiting for me in the conference room like usual.

Archer sits at the head of the table with the familiar no-nonsense stare he's been practicing since the day he was born. And Patton is leaning back in his chair like he's still in high school and farting off homework, sending me a mocking grin.

"There he is," Patton says in the style of a baseball commentator. "The middle brother has returned, dragging his lazy ass in with bad news."

Ah, hell.

Can we have one day where my little brother doesn't read my face instantly?

I'm going to be in so much shit.

I slide into the third chair and shoot Patton the finger. “No one ever taught you how to behave in a meeting, huh?”

“I learned from the best,” he says with a shrug.

“Guys, knock it off,” Archer growls. “Do you always have to bicker?”

I let a slow smile spread across my face, even though my insides feel like they’re ready to leap out of my mouth.

“We’re brothers,” I tell him. The annoyed look he gives back tells me he wishes he could forget. “That’s what we do best.”

Archer doesn’t grin, but Patton does, letting his chair fall back on the floor again with a loud squeal of the wheels.

“So,” he prompts. “How bad was it?”

“What can I say? You guys were right.” I spread my hands. “Haute really does have a sweet tooth.”

“Told you,” Patton says with a smirk. “The man eats like he’s running out of time.”

“With that much sugar in his system, he might be. I’d hate to be his doctor,” I say, stalling for time.

“Dex,” Archer clips. “Get on with it.”

I roll my eyes, mostly for show, as I choose my next words carefully. “Initially, the meeting went well. Excellent, really. He’s interested in talking to his partners and he seems keen on moving forward with the Mill on reasonable terms.

“But?” Archer stares at me blankly.

“But?” I echo.

Patton tilts his chair again. “There’s always a but; otherwise, you’d have told us the good news immediately.”

I stare at him. Nobody would think Patton, of all people, would be intuitive as hell with his lazy smile and short fuse, but he’s got a knack for seeing right through any shit.

“Like I said, the guy’s a sugar addict,” I say. “You remember that sampler of sweet crap I arranged for him? He

liked it so much he made providing the new property with an endless supply of baked goods an operating condition.”

“You’re fucking kidding.” Archer groans and drops his head in his hands. “Are we dealing with an imbecile? Did his partners break something in his head at some point?”

He’s not wrong.

Only, the imbecile is me.

“There’s more,” I say flatly, “and you guys won’t like it.”

Archer glares at me.

I should be used to it after thirty years of dealing with his crap, but somehow, because it’s Archer, he still manages to pack a punch in every glare. I think it’s the thick dark eyebrows and the fact that his beard is just starting to go silver, shot with age.

“Stop beating around the goddamned bush and tell us,” he snaps.

I hold my hands up. “I am telling you. So, Haute wanted his pastries as part of the deal. I told him fine, and I also mentioned that I’m sort of”—*oh fuck, here we go*—“engaged to the Sugar Bowl owner.”

Silence.

For five whole seconds, maybe longer.

Probably a new record for the three of us.

Then Patton’s chair hits the ground so hard he flops against the table, a shit-eating grin spreading across his face. “Is she hot?”

“Screw you, Pat.” I ball up a piece of paper and toss it at him. “That’s not the problem here and you know it.”

Archer looks like he wants to tear my head off and hurl it at Patton.

“Humor me. Exactly what the fuck was going through your head when you decided to tell a crucial business prospect

that you're engaged to a woman you've met—how many times?"

I pinch my jaw.

"Twice," I bite off.

"What the—What made you think this was a good idea? Were you drunk?" Archer's fist crashes down on the table.

"Look, I *never* said I thought it was a good idea—shut up, Patton. I know it was stupid. Terrible case of foot-in-mouth."

"Did he buy it?" Patton asks between his rolling laughter. "Did Haute buy that you—Dexter Rory, the man without a beating heart—are engaged to a *pastry chef*?"

"She's the store owner, and *yes*, as it happens, he did. Forrest Haute thinks with his stomach first and I think his gut was impressed."

"Damn. She must be a total smokeshow." Patton looks at Archer. "Wouldn't be impressed otherwise."

"Goddammit, Pat. Enough," Archer flares. "We need to find a way to neutralize this, not think about Haute jerking off to this bakery chick."

The absolute worst part is that Patton's right.

She *was* cute in that fluttery stubborn damned way of hers, and Haute smiled at her plenty.

Which means he thought she was easy on the eyes, too.

Which also means he should be the jealous one, and I shouldn't be feeling the slightest hint of pins and needles in my blood over a woman who means jack shit to me.

*What the hell?*

"I think we know what we've gotta do," Patton says, turning his grin on me. "You've got to double down, Bro. Make this girl *want* you."

I wonder if I can make my brother burst into flames if I just stare at him long enough.

“Patton’s right,” Archer says. I do a double take. “You need to sort this fuckery out. We’re *this* close to the biggest deal this company has ever had. We can’t lose it now over you getting fucking tongue-tied, Dex.” He frowns at the table. “The Mill could set us up permanently. It could keep Colt sleeping easy for life.”

Colton.

Archer’s son, my nephew, and the entire reason Archer’s so hard-assed about life like the perfectionist asshole he is.

I can’t even hate it.

Colt’s a good kid and Archer’s a better single dad than having three parents.

“Just offer the girl a nice cut of the profits if she’ll play along,” Patton suggests. “She’s a businesswoman, right? She’ll know a good deal when she sees it.”

“Out of your *personal* share,” Archer adds. “Seeing as you got us into this mess.”

*Sure, asshole.*

If only he didn’t think I was done. I bite my tongue hard enough to taste metal, tapping my fingers against the table.

*One, two, three.*

Here comes the cherry, the icing, and the whole goddamn filling on my cake of epic screwups.

“That’s the thing,” I say. “I already tried. I sat down with her less than an hour ago and offered her the deal of a lifetime on a silver platter. She looked at me like I was crazy and basically threw me out.”

Hell, maybe I am psychotic.

That would explain why I told Haute I was engaged to her in the first place, wouldn’t it?

I have a sudden blinding urge to ask our mother if there was ever a great uncle or distant cousin who lost his marbles.

Amazingly, having an unexpected brain disease almost feels easier than admitting how hard I fucked up.

Patton snorts before he can help himself.

“What? She didn’t take the bait?” he asks, ignoring Archer’s glare. “Did you kiss her? Play up your smolder? Promise her your share of the property when you divorce?”

“For fuck’s sake, Patton, shut it. This isn’t a joke,” Archer growls.

“No, but it’s pretty funny. Little Dex, falling down the abyss. From dateless wonder to getting rejected by some small-time bakery chick.”

“Thanks, prick. Your wisdom makes this so much better, knowing you’ve got my back,” I snarl.

“With this?” Patton raises his eyebrows. “Bro, you’re on your own. Archer’s right, this is *your* mess to clean up.”

“He isn’t wrong.” Archer takes a sip from the paper cup beside him. Water or vodka by the looks of it. I realize I need a drink too. “No excuses. I don’t care if you have to follow her home and camp outside her house with a wad of Benjamins until she’s convinced. I don’t give a shit what you do, Dex, but you make this right. We can’t lose Haute.”

Right, right.

No big deal.

I’ll just persuade Miss Juniper Winkley to go along with a scheme she wants nothing to do with or we’re all collectively boned to the moon and back.

Yes, I can do that.

I just have to hope she won’t end up having me hauled off in handcuffs the next time I try to win her over.



LITTLE MISS CONGENIALITY doesn’t answer my calls.

I should've known.

The store number's practically my main contact now, but whenever I call, the kids that answer say she's not in, she's not available, she's gone to the Mojave Desert to go fly fishing.

Excuses, excuses. They're not even trying.

The one time she did answer, she cut the call off before I said three words. I should be flattered that my voice is so distinctive, but it's mostly just a royal pain in my ass.

*Just like her.*

Who did I piss off in a past life to get so lucky?

If I could've asked any other woman in this city to be my not-fiancée, I would have. At least some random-ass woman off the streets more susceptible to flashing dollar signs wouldn't ignore my calls.

I've met women. I know how to handle them.

This lady, however, is something else entirely.

Not in a flattering way.

Not in a she's-the-one-I'd-take-home-to-mom kind of way.

Not even in an I-want-to-fuck-her-brains-out way.

If she was stranded on the side of the road with a flat tire, I'd have to think long and hard about whether I stopped to help.

Given the fact that she won't speak to me, I turn up at the store again. I pick midday, when there's a rush.

There are a few people in the queue ahead of me, mostly families with kids looking to satisfy their sweet tooth. As they're being served, I watch the teenagers behind the counter.

They really are kids. Just out of high school, maybe in college. The boy has zits on his chin and the girl hasn't quite lost the round-faced chub of youth.

They're polite, though, I'll give them that. Efficient, too, serving the people ahead of me with orderly movements.

The girl's eyes widen the second she sees me.



I barely have enough time to read her name tag. *Emmy*.

“Hello, Emmy,” I say, leaning on the counter and forcing something that resembles a smile. “I’m here to see your boss, Miss Winkley.”

Emmy swallows and glances over her shoulder to the back, where a mess of red hair is clearly visible through the window. The door’s ajar and looks almost buckled. Heat and time have really done a number on this place.

“Um, you’ll have to try another day. Junie—Miss Winkley—she’s not in right now,” she says after a second, panic flashing in her eyes.

If there’s one thing I hate, it’s liars trying to save their own asses. Possibly because it’s like looking into a mirror.

I hold my fire, knowing if I snap at her, she’ll probably cry.

Unlike Miss Winkley, who would love to give me a piece of her mind.

“Sorry,” the boy says, joining the girl at the register. “You heard her, Miss Winkley’s not here.”

*Like hell.*

Obviously, they’ve been given their orders, and they’re executing them like loyal little minions.

Fine.

“I’ll come back when she’s available,” I mutter, not bothering with another phony smile.

I’ll wait all goddamned day if I need to.

Emmy blinks and the boy—Jake, I think his tag says—scowls at me.

“Is there a better time when she’s available?” I ask.

“Um, she’s been out a lot lately. Crazy busy!” the boy calls after me. “Calling might be better. You might not want to waste another trip—”

“Oh, believe me, I want to,” I say with a violent wave of my hand. “Until next time.”



WHEN I COME BACK the next day, I notice several letters on the neon sign are burned out.

The whole place needs a makeover fast.

It's perfectly clean, yes, but damned near everything except the bakery cases are worn and dated.

The Sugar Bowl needs real investment if it's going to stay above water. Sweet Stuff herself must know—and that gives me an idea.

I make a small mental inventory as I head to the counter, taking my sweet time. The lights are antiquated, the stainless-steel appliances are dull and scratched, the overall aesthetic is old.

The floor needs some serious refinishing, too. The counter has a few ugly chips on its side. The whole color scheme looks like it was last updated before the turn of the century. It feels like a bad trip back to the nineties.

A few new tables and chairs would help while they're waiting to renovate the rest of the space. The window also needs a facelift, if not replacement, judging by the mottled-looking glass.

That's not even *mentioning* the back, which is—if the front is anything to go by—probably clean to a fault but extremely dated. Their equipment should be replaced before it starts a fire.

My jaw tightens.

Yeah, this is going to be one hell of a job, assuming they don't have the capital. And considering they haven't made a start, I already have my answer.

I reach the counter and don't bother making small talk with Jake. There's no point, considering he's eyeing me like he wants to find out how to eviscerate me with a spatula.

He should meet Archer. They'd get along fine.

“Dude. She’s not here,” he says sharply before I say one word. “We told you, she’s out.”

“Okay, listen, *dude*.” I spread my hands flat on the counter. “I’m here to see Miss Winkley and I know she’s back there. I can see her.”

By the sound of it, she can hear me, too, because she grabs that beat-up door and mashes it shut.

Rather, she *tries*.

The door squeals like it’s being murdered and the latch pops right open again two seconds after it’s shut.

“Take a hint. She doesn’t want to see you,” Jake says, coughing. “Sorry.”

He’s not sorry. Not even close.

The kid looks like he’s enjoying exerting some real authority, even if it’s by proxy for the most stubborn woman on the planet.

Fuck me.

“I want to place an order then,” I say. “For the office, delivery later today. Can you handle that?”

“Order? What for?” Jake’s nose wrinkles suspiciously.

“To eat, obviously.” I pull out my credit card, flashing it in the light to prove I’m serious. “Your products are delicious, even if your service is lacking.”

The kid squints at me like he’s ready for a brawl.

“I know. Everyone says that about our stuff,” Jake says, a hint of a smirk in his voice, ignoring my service comment.

Everyone with a dozen cavities, I’m sure. Still, if I’m going to win them over, then I need to pretend these little globs of sugary death are God’s gift to humankind.

“Guess they’re right. I know a man who’d crawl over broken glass for this stuff,” I say. “Let’s do another sampler scaled down, and this time go with the standard sweetness.”

Jake might be a kid, but he's got a decent head on his shoulders. He negotiates the biggest deal he can, offering me one of those ancient card readers to pay at the end.

At least when the order turns up, Juniper Winkley should be there with that old van of hers. Then we can talk.

If I can just show her how much she'll benefit from working with me, along with this store, I'll have her.

"Bye!" Jake says, irritatingly chipper as he waves me off.

It's amazing what a few dollars can do.

Also, he's not the only one feeling lighter. I actually crack a smile as I pass under the flickering sign and drive back to the office.



SHE DOESN'T BRING the damn order.

Emmy, the girl with the dark hair and glasses that slip down her nose when she's driving, shows up and hauls it inside while I watch. Three boxes bulging with shit I can't choke down to save my life.

Fantastic.

"Thanks for your order," she tells me nervously, eyeing me like I'm about to bite her face off.

"Plan on another visit," I clip.

Everyone in the office will love me, at least from Sylvia the secretary to the service reps and interns running on a steady diet of caffeine and pure sugar.

So will Juniper by proxy. *I fucking hope.*

"Oh, wow, really? Okay!" Emmy says, her smile widening as I sign the receipt and write in a large tip. "Any idea when you want the next?"

"Tomorrow." It's not like I have much time to waste in the convincing department.

“Oh, great. See you tomorrow, then!”

Dammit, I want the order, but not this bright-eyed kid.

“Actually, I hoped you might send Miss Winkley personally next time instead—”

“Bye!” With a quick flip of her hair, the door swings open. She bolts to the van like there’s a pack of angry Dobermans behind her.

I stand there with my jaw open, too slack-jawed and stunned to curse.

There it is.

Proof positive that the universe means to pay me back horribly for my foot-in-mouth disease and nothing—*absolutely nothing*—is going to go as planned.



I GIVE IT THREE DAYS.

Three whole days of impatiently ordering food I despise and waiting for her to show up in the flesh, only for Juniper Winkley to freeze me out like the arctic ice witch she is.

By day four, I’m done waiting.

I’m done trying to talk nice with her, too.

If she won’t meet me while I’m paying a princely sum for her pastries, then I’ll say what I need to in a letter sweetened with a check.

A disgustingly large check worth more than any big wad of sugar ever churned out of her shop.

I almost reconsider this idiocy, but I can’t.

There’s no talking my way out of an engagement I flippantly announced to a man with our future in his greedy hands.

If I blow this deal with Forrest Haute, his big mouth could easily do collateral damage, too. Word gets around in this biz,

especially when you're rising stars in the Kansas City rental market.

So I seal the damn envelope with the check and stick it in my car. She has to come out of that store sometime, and when she does, I'll be there.

Not to talk to her, of course.

Clearly, she isn't into that.

If she'll just take the money and buy her store some help, we'll all be better off.

I pull up outside the Sugar Bowl and kill the engine.

Five minutes to six p.m., which means I shouldn't miss her.

She's not the type to leave early. It's too easy to imagine her cleaning or hunched over an ancient computer in the back office or maybe a battered old stack of recipe books, combing their pages like a proper ice witch looking for lost culinary magic.

She has a work ethic, at least.

When six o'clock hits, I see a shadowy figure approach the glass door, swinging the Open sign to Closed. The neon lights flicker off.

Just like I thought.

Now I just need to wait for her to leave, either through the front door or the little side door that leads down the alley to the back of the building.

A couple minutes later, as I'm settling in for the long haul, an older woman stops in front of the store and glances up at the sign. The lady squints at it like she's trying to decide if this is the right address.

I sit up straight.

If she even thinks about—

Without even a second's hesitation, she pushes her way through the door and heads inside.

Fuck, that does it.

I do *not* have time for this.

If Sweet Stuff has time for a casual visitor or some Jenny-come-lately picking up a cake, then she absolutely has time for a giant idiot who's busting his balls to pay for her products just to jack up his employees' A1C scores and pray for an audience with her highness.

“Ready or not,” I mutter, “here the fuck I come.”





## SWEET TALKER (JUNIPER)



I never knew the true meaning of hard work until I took over this store and added an evening cup of coffee to my routine.

It's this special blend from a place called The Nest in a small Montana town named Heart's Edge. The owner, Felicity Charter, had a cool puff piece in a women's business mag last winter about her tiny coffee shop expanding into a proper roastery just to keep up with surging national demand.

And the crazy stuff that went down in her life on the way to fame and big bucks—holy hell. I thought I had it bad.

I thought pulling fourteen-hour shifts without much to show for my work and living in Nana's shadow was as rough as it could get.

But I don't have Felicity Charter problems.

I don't have a mafia princess breathing down my neck or kids to raise or a ginormous husband who looks like a movie star to keep happy.

More importantly, knowing Felicity didn't quit when the going got tough, how could I?

How could I ever walk away?

At least the shop's closed for now. I'm into the quiet hours. I stretch my arms out and get ready for another long evening working my way out of this mess.

I can put on a little classic rock and let myself have a good time while I'm cleaning and preparing for tomorrow. If there's time, I might even log on and review the store's insurance policy renewal for next year, praying the premiums haven't doubled.

If only my feet didn't hurt so much.

I'm still up in my own head when the bell above the door tinkles and I look up to see Nana.

If there was ever a day when she didn't make a striking entrance, I wasn't around to see it.

She's had her hair done again, a big fluffy white perm that reminds me of the eighties, but there's nothing old or out of step about her as she opens her arms for a hug that reaches right to my soul.

"Oh, Junie. You look exhausted!" she tells me as I peck her on the cheek.

"Thanks... I think? Is that a compliment?"

"It's a reminder that you need a week off. The Sugar Bowl wasn't meant to chain anyone up, darling."

"And do what? Hire someone else to take my place as manager? You're hilarious, Nana." That reminds me, so I check tomorrow's schedule.

It's Sarah and Kiki on the books.

And me, of course, since I'm always on duty.

"Well, there's no point in working if you don't have the traffic to warrant it, is there?" She jabs a thumb in the direction of the sign. "How long has our pride and joy been out?"

I suck in a breath and pretend to consider her advice.

I know what she's going to say next and there's not a chance.

"Oh, just a couple days," I say vaguely. "I'm going to get it fixed next week for sure."

“You’d hire out for that old thing?” She waves dismissively. “I could fix the sign for you tomorrow.”

Oh no.

Suddenly, I see Nana’s prone, broken body on the sidewalk after falling off a ladder. Not a good image and another huge reason to kindly make her butt out.

“Nana, you’re retired, remember? You can’t come barging in here to fix my store,” I say firmly. “I’ll have someone in next week to fix it. He’s very affordable.”

And if he isn’t, I think I can cover the repair with a crazy man ordering chocolate croissants and banana pudding cupcakes by the dozen.

“Besides, it’s summer. It stays light through close,” I tell her.

“Fine,” she says with a tone I recognize from when I was smaller. “But only because you run the show now, honey.”

*Yeah, badly.*

“Do you have a moment?” Nana already knows I do as she bustles through the store like she still owns it, looking fondly at the old mixers. I notice she’s holding a glass container. “I just had to drop by. I tried a new cheesecake recipe this evening and it could be a real hit, if you’d like a sample for research.”

I pin on a smile. That’s my Nana, charitable to a fault.

Ever since she handed the Sugar Bowl over to me, we’ve had the same little dance where I pretend I have a tenth of her success and she pretends she’s not always offering to pull me out of the fire without breaking her promise.

She always swore not to get in the way when the torch was passed to yours truly.

There’s no point telling her I’m supposed to be cleaning now, of course, so I pull the band from my hair and run my hands through it. After a full day keeping this place popping, my feet aren’t the only thing that’s killing me.

“How could I say no to cheesecake?” I call out.

She’s already on her way back to the front with two plates and a fork when the bell dings again.

Ugh. I must’ve forgotten to lock up after she came in.

That’s my first thought, but because fate hates my guts lately, it’s not just a run-of-the-mill straggler looking for a cake pop after close.

It’s Big Fish, and he looks about as pissed as humanly possible for a man sculpted by the gods.

I thought I’d already seen him hit peak grump-mode when I delivered that batch of cakes to his office, but no.

There’s apparently a higher setting where his ragey blue eyes make it impossible to predict if he’s about to chew me out or throw me against the wall and devour me.

Even better, Nana whirls around at the sound and sees him standing there, casually sucking up oxygen like the intimidating mega-prick he is.

I’ve been ignoring him for days. I’m ready for him to let loose and rip into me, to go off, to throw something.

What I’m not expecting is to see his lips twitch as this human dragon *smiles* at my grandmother.

Oh, crud.

“Hold up. Are you the famous Jo Winkley? Juniper’s grandmother?” He strides forward, offering her a hand like he’s been waiting half his life. I think I’m traumatized because the room starts spinning. “I’m Dexter Rory. It’s amazing to finally meet you, ma’am. I’ve heard so much—all good things, of course.”

*Oh God, oh God, what is he—*

“It’s such an honor,” he continues, still with that serpentlike smile on his lips, “to shake the hand of the woman who put the Sugar Bowl on the map. And, dare I say, who brought Juniper tumbling into my life.”

*What the actual hell?*

My knees give out.

I have to be dreaming.

I lean against the table and pinch myself in the arm. *Hard.*

Bad move. That doesn't get me anything except a bruise as this smiling maniac sweet-talks my Nana with a gentle personality he should win an award for faking.

This is bad.

So bad.

Then Nana smiles and breaks into a loud laugh and everything gets worse.

Insanely worse when I *recognize* that laugh.

I've heard it over the years, though it's not usually aimed at anyone *I* know. But right now, it's a death sentence.

*It means she flipping likes him.*

"Why, thank you. I didn't know my Junie made time for charming young men," she says too loudly, glancing back at me with her eyebrows ready to fly off her face. "How come you hide the nice ones, darling?"

"Juniper—Junie—she's a funny one. I'm afraid you'll have to decide who's the bigger workaholic between us," he says with a low, almost vicious chuckle. I've never heard this man laugh. I didn't think he *could*. "Still, we've been dating for—what, about half a year, Junie? It's high time to meet the Sugar Bowl original."

*Dating.*

I'm going to kill him with my bare hands.

But Gran gasps even louder than me. "Dating! Oh, my. Oh, Junie, you never said—how could you? Leaving your poor grandmother flapping in the wind..."

"Um. Um!" My brain won't work, much less my tongue.

Even my lungs are fried. I'm about to pass out.

My palms sweat as I grasp at the counter for more support, the only reason I'm not sprawled out on the floor.

This man—this total dickhead-fried *turd*—is using my own grandmother against me.

I never fathomed he'd go this low.

And I wonder how long it'll be until someone comments on my face turning a lethal shade of red.

"It's fine," Rory says calmly, quickly approaching me.

Holy shit, no, he's going to hug me, and—

And I don't know what to do about it.

There's nothing I *can* do when I'm having an out-of-body experience.

I just stand there like a scared puppy as he pulls me against him.

Meanwhile, Nana beams over his enormous shoulder like he's just handed her a seat to my wedding and the whole mess of great grandkids she's been waiting for since I turned twenty.

All because he can't just be normal. Oh no.

Dexter Rory just has to be this delicious, smooth-talking, diabolical devil treat that Nana thinks I've been hiding from the family.

I hate him.

Like actual *hate*.

I thought I loathed him before, but this—*this* is genuine fire-breathing disgust. I just want to rip his cold, dead, still-beating heart from his body and *burn* it for turning Nana against me.

For making it impossible to erase that hopeful, happy look from her face.

"I can't believe it, Junie," Nana trills as soon as Dexter releases me. "And oh, sweetie, you're redder than a Maine lobster. Is it the humidity? If you need me to look at your A/C this week, I can do that too."

*Gah!*

My eyes whip to Lucifer just in time to catch the tiniest smirk. Yeah, he's not faking that one.

If justified murder was legal in this state, I'd have pushed his face into a fresh batch of dough and smothered him by now.

"I remember those days," Nana says absently, oblivious to the river of tension flowing between us. She cups her hand against her cheek and I know exactly what she's going to say.

*No, no, no, please don't do it.*

But she's going to.

She's about to reminisce about her perfect romance with my granddad.

And she's going to compare it to me and this selfish snake I'm supposed to be fake engaged to.

If she mentions Liam, I'll definitely scream.

"When your granddad and I were dating—after we got married even—he'd just walk into a room and I'd get all flustered." Nana gives me a look that says *finally*.

That is *not* what's going on here.

"I'm so glad you finally found someone else," she says to me. "I know getting over Liam—"

"Nope. This conversation is over," I say, throwing up a hand and trying to hold it without trembling. "Nana, hold on. I think I should probably clear the air before—"

"No need. I'm sorry for skipping out on you last night, princess. Had to work late," Dexter says. *Princess?* I glare at him, but he just shoves an envelope into my hand. "That's why I dropped by. I hope these concert tickets will make up for the change of plans."

My hand is shaking.

My entire body is on vibrate.

This man is so shameless it's actually scary. That goes double for how relentless he is when he lies.

Worse, I can't just tell Nana the truth.

Not when she keeps looking at us like *that*.

"I've got a long night coming up. You know how the market gets third quarter," he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and giving me another hug that feels too real. As if one wasn't bad enough. "Sorry to interrupt, but it was great to meet you, Nana Winkley."

"Call me Jo!" Nana says like the unwitting traitor she is. "Oh, don't send him home empty-handed, Junie. Do you want something for the road, Dexter? She's just boxing up today's leftovers."

My heart dives.

"Nana—"

"Now, you simply can't send your boyfriend back to work hungry." Without another word, she opens the bakery case and pulls out a couple muffins, a marshmallow brownie, and an apple turnover. "Will this be enough?"

My brain starts working again.

Finally, a chance for revenge.

Not much, but a girl's got to work with what she's got.

"Take more!" I urge sweetly, grabbing blindly for more leftover stuff in the display cases. It normally goes to a local homeless shelter at the end of the day, but how can I miss a chance to make him pay?

"The marshmallow brownies are fire today. Why don't you have one now, *sugar*?" I snap, loving how startled he looks.

Something flickers in those deep blue eyes, but before I can revel in my win, he grabs a turnover and wolfs it down in three hulking bites.

Damn.

If eating something he hates to deceive a sweet old lady was a competition, he'd take first prize. For now, he's winning plenty of new reasons to hate his guts.



“Thanks, ladies,” he says, accepting the box and keeping it at a distance like it’s full of uranium before he gives me a quick wave. “See you later, Junie.”

Nana waves him out of the store, practically jumping up and down, as I sink into a chair.

Well, crap.

I know exactly what’s coming next.

“So,” Nana says, drawing the word out and sitting opposite me. “Tell me all about him right this instant. *Dexter*.” She says his name like he’s some sort of prize.

If she only knew...

With my face half-covered with my hands, I say, “There’s nothing to tell, Nana. You met him.”

Her face pulls into a frown.

“Juniper Winkley, don’t you *dare* lie to me. Did you get a look at him? He said you were dating for months and this is the first time I’ve seen hide or hair of him!”

“Eh, he exaggerates,” I say like it’ll save me. But I’m telling her the truth when I’d rather chew raw cactus, thorns and all, than go on a single date with Dexter Rory. “He’s just persistent.”

“That means he worships you! Oh, Junie...”

*Actually, Nana, I’m pretty sure the only thing he worships are dollar signs, but sure. It’s me he wants so his greedy ass can hoard more money.*

“Well, when are we having dinner?” She bats her eyes. “We simply must introduce him to the whole family.”

“N-Nana!”

“I’m just saying. It’s high time everybody knows you’ve found someone new after that last little heartbreaking scoundrel—and what a yummy catch, indeed.”

This is it.

This is how I die.

Complete and utter humiliation at the hands of my loving grandmother who doesn't have a clue she's pinning her hopes on a human rattlesnake.

“Whatever. If you bring up Liam again—”

“Oh, honey, you know I don't mean to. I just know how you wound up so hurt, especially when you thought he was so close to putting that ring on your finger. But moving on is the right thing to do. The *only* thing that's natural, and bless you for doing it.”

Sigh.

“Nana, I told you before, I've been over Liam for a long time,” I say, waving a dismissive hand.

Yet here I am.

Lying through my teeth for another self-absorbed rich jerk just so I don't have to remember the one who had the audacity to inform me he'd gone as far as buying a ring before deciding I work too much and my boring little life wasn't enough for him.

Of course, the fact that he told me after he started shopping for a replacement girl on Tinder and I found out when a friend screenshotted his profile was just the rotten cherry on top.

“Yes, yes, I just wasn't sure,” Nana says. “With how much you practically live at the bakery—”

“I'm still getting my feet wet. And, um, I don't need a new boyfriend to prove I'm over the last scumbag, thank you.”

“Ah, but now that you *have* a new man, you really should let your family meet him, Junie.” Nana frowns, the lines around her eyes deepening. It's easy to forget that she's old. Fading. Fragile. “Can't you let an old woman have her silly dreams? All I want is to see you happy and settled before I go. Is that so awful, honey?”

Boom.

Just like that, she smacks my heart down like a kitten with yarn.

My heart also lurches, just thinking about the inevitable.

Death comes to us all, eventually, but I want to keep thinking Nana will last forever. She's too strong to waltz off with any grinning reaper.

"Nana, come on. Don't be like that."

"We're not granted endless time here, Junie. When you're my age, well, you'll understand."

"I know, but—" Ah hell, I'm going to have to give in, aren't I? Between Dexter and Nana's pity, I don't have a chance. "Fine. I'll speak to him about coming to Sunday lunch. Sometime. But you have to promise not to get too excited, okay? We're both crazy busy with work and—and honestly, we barely see each other. Who knows, it might not even work out—"

I don't get to finish.

Not when Nana lays her hand on mine, stopping me in my tracks.

"Oh, Junie. Commitment can be scary, especially when it's for life," she whispers, her eyes glowing with empathy. "Just trust me. You'll never find true love if you hide from it too long."

"Yeah. Love." I swallow so hard I almost choke.

Yep. Still planning his murder in my head.

I wonder if anyone will notice if I bake a rich real estate guy into a pie one little piece at a time. Hey, it almost worked for Sweeney Todd.

"Yes, yes," Nana croons, cracking open her glass container and unleashing a heavenly smell. "Now, how about a bite of cheesecake to celebrate?"



I DON'T GET HOME until past eight o'clock.

My apartment building has been through a world war, the hippie era, and probably the meteor that killed the dinosaurs, if the mold on the stairs is anything to go by. The stuff thrives in the muggy atmosphere.

The elevator's out of order again, too, so I'm forced to climb the stairs to my unit on the top floor.

You might wonder how I make it without passing out cold.

So do I.

But I've signed a two-year lease on this place and rent hasn't skyrocketed as much as other places in the city the past few years, so I count my meager blessings.

Inside, I toss my keys on the counter with a sigh and open the fridge, looking for water. I'm surrounded by paperwork and bills on the counter.

Water first, then wine.

Today's definitely a wine day.

A scratching sound in the corner draws my attention.

"Still at it, huh?" I smile when I see him.

Catness paws at the same hole in the wall he was working on this morning. Probably from the mouse he's been after forever.

*Get a cat, they said. They'll deal with rodents for you, they said.*

The big lazy tabby mostly uses his mouser skills for show. The last time he actually caught a mouse, he dropped it in my lap as a gift for his hunting-challenged mama.

Fun times.

"Whatever you do, keep it out of the bedroom. You hear me?" I say firmly.

Catness just gives me a yawn and a dramatic stretch, flicking his tail.

It's been a day and I'm so not interested in ending it in a mouse panic.

“Let’s get this over with. First thing’s first...” I don’t bother pouring my wine into a glass and just chug it straight from the bottle as I grab Dexter’s envelope from my purse, rip it open, and scan the contents.

*Bad move.*

Before I can stop it, I’m spitting wine on the sofa.

The check inside is for fifty thousand dollars.

Fifty thousand flipping dollars. For me. For—what exactly?

That’s enough to buy monster pastry orders for an entire convention.

I scrutinize the check closer.

It has my name on it. It’s inexplicably mine, and I’m apparently free to do whatever I want with it.

But wait. There’s something else in that envelope.

My hands shake as I pull out the note. God, even his paper is extra thick, textured rich-guy stuff with a stylized Dexter Rory header. There’s no way I could forget who sent this to me even for one second.

His note is short, businesslike, and reads more like a contract with everything written in short, bossy lines.

The check is a deposit, I guess. I’ll receive the other half after 180 days of pretending to be his fiancée.

But it seems he doesn’t want to do this as much as me, because he’s also written that to make it ‘as painless as possible for both parties,’ there are negotiable terms and minimal appearances together. There’s even a lawyer set up to keep this nice and legal. Rory only expects a few brief interactions to ensure his deal goes through.

I snort as I reach the end.

*We can keep this strictly professional without any improper contact, Miss Winkley. No kissing, no touching, no sharing beds.*

*Unless, of course, you'd like to negotiate that part too.*

Oh my God.

*Gag me.*

There's no earthly way I would ever willingly kiss Dexter Rory—much less sleep with him and I *do* mean sleep—so that's going to be a requirement of any deal.

Or anti-requirement or whatever.

No kissing.

No sweet caresses.

No holding hands.

No anything.

There are enough married couples in the world who treat their spouses like they have the plague. It's not *that* weird if we always keep a few feet between us, right?

I drink another mouthful of wine and swallow too quickly, coughing in my hand.

When it's written out like this, the arrangement sounds ever-so-slightly less insane than his first proposal.

It doesn't excuse his little ambush at my store, though.

Whatever he wants, he can leave my family the hell out of it.

I turn the note over, feeling the paper under my fingers. He's got good handwriting, too, the bastard.

At the top of what looks like Dexter's personal letterhead, there's an address.

I take another gulp of wine and set the bottle down on the counter. Dexter isn't the only one who can spring surprises.

And wouldn't it be fun to see where he lives when he's not stomping around barking orders? I wonder what sort of outrageously lavish pond Big Fish calls home.

For luck—and courage—I take a few more swigs of wine. Then I open a can of cat food and dump it in Catness' bowl.

He comes darting over instantly, swishing his tail and singing the dinner song of his people.

“Don’t worry, boy, I’ll be back soon,” I tell him, grabbing my keys before I head out the door.

If he won’t leave me alone, it’s time to get even.

Time to pay Dexter Rory a visit and remind him what an absolute vile dick he is in person.





# HOME SWEET HOME (DEXTER)



**M**y knuckles ache like hell.

It's a good ache, born from exertion, sweat, and the deafening impact of the punching bag.

After the day I've had, it's the type of hurt I need. A way to forget about the check, the deal, and playing dirty.

Most folks see pain as something to cope with and minimize. I decided early on I wouldn't do that. I chose to use it as a coping mechanism instead.

What choice do I have?

About as much as I did the minute I walked into that bakery and realized Juniper Winkley's iconic grandmother was standing there.

Yes, I've done my homework.

I've dredged up the articles about the amazing Jo Winkley, how she took an unremarkable bakery and turned it into a temple of all things cavity inducing. It's an impressive story.

I'm not such a stone-hearted bastard that I'm immune to admiring her rave success, especially at a time when women entrepreneurs had every obstacle stacked against them.

If the sugar addicts in this city still worship the elder Winkley, then that goes a hundredfold for her own granddaughter, who's clearly trying to fill grandma's very big shoes.

Juniper Winkley won't forgive me easily for the shit I pulled, that's for sure. If she hadn't played so damn hard to get, maybe I'd regret it.

I circle the punching bag, my chest heaving and sweat pouring down the back of my neck in rivulets.

I've had the same bag since I came back to Kansas City. It's showing its age, along with about a million impacts.

The frosty light in my gym highlights the scarred material, the way it's suffered over the years for my sanity.

So maybe I have a soft spot for this old thing. Mainly because when I punch it, it hits right back.

The pain snaps up my arms as I keep going with bone-jarring force, pushing my body to the limit, straining until my muscles scream.

Again.

Harder.

Fucking faster.

My arms are numb mush when the intercom buzzes and I stagger back to catch my breath.

Stopping to wipe my face with a towel, I glare at the screen.

Who the fuck could that be? It's past nine.

Patton and Archer always call or text to say they're dropping by first. No one else typically comes except my cleaner, and that's never at night.

I'm used to my solitude and I like it that way.

But the damn thing buzzes again and I swear loudly as I cross the room to answer it. "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Can you open your gate?" a woman's voice says, oddly cheerful.

"What for?" I frown, suspicious as hell.

By now, everyone's heard about the scams where some schemer comes to the door asking for help. They always show

up with three beastly guys on standby, ready to split your skull open and steal everything you've got the minute they're through the door.

"Delivery for Mr. Dexter Rory," she says. Does it sound a little like she's trying not to laugh or is it just my imagination? "I'm sorry it's so late. I have paperwork from a Mr. Haute's office. High priority."

Shit, shit.

I should've known Forrest Haute would find a few more ways to be a massive pain in the ass.

"I'll be right up," I mutter.

Groaning, I punch the button to remotely open the gate as I climb the stairs to the ground floor.

*Paperwork. At this damn hour.*

The man should really tell his people that some things can wait for morning, no matter how urgent. I'm practically snarling as I see a small figure standing behind the front door, the privacy glass currently set to frosted.

"If this is from Mr. Haute personally," I start as I throw the door open, "you should tell him he can wait until—"

I freeze.

This isn't one of Haute's lackeys, not unless I've tripped into a parallel universe.

It's *her*.

All cinnamon-red hair and evil green eyes and slightly flushed cheeks. She tilts her head and looks me up and down, assessing my every movement.

Slowly. Like she has all the time in the world.

Goddammit.

And here I am, sweating like a horse and dressed like a gym rat.

"Expecting someone else?" she asks as she steps past me into the foyer, without an invitation. "Sorry to intrude—but

not really. I just thought I should check out *our* home, sugar.”

A breeze blows in with her like Satan himself laughing. I slam the door with enough force to rattle the house.

“What the hell are you doing here, Miss Winkley?”

“Oh?” She quirks an eyebrow at me. “You mean you don’t *like* unexpected visits? That’s a shame.”

Teeth, meet tongue.

She’s got me there.

I want to rip into her, machine gun reasons why this is inappropriate, rude, and just fucking weird.

Only, it’s not when I’m the asshole who went there *first*.

I targeted her family as a means to an end.

“I’m sure you’re upset about earlier, and for good reason. To be fair, I never invaded your home and private space. I wouldn’t dare,” I say gruffly. “The Sugar Bowl is public and open to anyone.”

“Not when it’s closed,” she snaps, turning those green eyes on me like jade knives. She walks around, checking out the dark Madagascar flooring, the open-plan kitchen housing high-end smart appliances, the large Japandi style lounge with the mounted TV on the wall, and a fireplace set in immaculately handcrafted woodwork. “Jeez, dude. Can you save some real estate for the rest of us?”

My lip curls.

“Miss Winkley, I’m warning you. I don’t need this tonight.”

“Oh, yeah? That’s a shame.” Her voice is hard. “I kinda know the feeling. It’s such a drag when you’re ambushed after a long day, isn’t it?”

*Damn her to hell and back.*

When I decided to be an idiot, I knew she’d be pissed, but coming to my house is some next-level fuckery.

“I left you a number. Call it,” I growl, following her through the kitchen as she walks through my place like it’s an art gallery.

My plate’s still there from dinner, half a large enchilada sitting on the counter, waiting to go in the fridge.

“Oh, but *darling*, I thought we were engaged? Isn’t it all the rage now to play house the minute there’s a ring involved?” She sends me a long look over her shoulder, eyes hooded. “Besides, fair’s fair.”

“Fine,” I snarl, leaning on the kitchen island. “Fucking fine, you win. You want to come here and see where I live? Have at it, sweetheart. Help yourself to a drink and stay a while.”

Her mouth hardens like she’s sucking citrus. For the faintest second, my mind goes other places, wondering what she could really do with those lips.

But she just strides toward the stairs.

“Where’s the basement? I’d better make sure there aren’t any dead bodies down there, and you can bet I’ll be rummaging through all your closets—God, I bet they’re enormous—just to check for skeletons.”

“I know you don’t trust me—”

She pins me down with another glare. “Don’t trust you? After all this, you expect me to just settle and take your word for anything?” She finds the stairs leading down and flicks on the light. There’s so much repressed anger in her movements I’m surprised she doesn’t combust into a pile of ash.

“Nothing but a couple guest rooms, a reading area, and my home gym,” I explain. “If you’ve never seen a gym before, knock yourself out.”

Her eyes flash hellfire.

Shit, I didn’t mean it like that.

I open my mouth to apologize, but she shoots first.

“Mr. Rory, let’s get one thing straight. You’ve already insulted my intelligence. That’s bad enough, but I can deal.” She strides forward, her teeth tucked into a sharp smile. “But listen, if you think I’ll just stand here while you insult anything else—”

“I didn’t mean it like you think, Winkley. There’s nothing wrong with your looks—nothing at all. I slipped.”

“Uh-huh,” she says tightly. “You do that a lot, don’t you? You could try some speech therapy.”

“Woman, I told you I fucked up. I don’t need this shit.”

“And I do *not* need any sarcasm from you, Big Fish.”

I’m fucking speechless. Again.

How is she so good at turning my tongue into a useless sponge?

“Can we get on with this interruption?” I fold my arms, matching her gaze with mine. She glances down my chest again, at the worst of the sweat, then looks at the equipment.

“You were working out?”

“When you showed up? Yeah. Evening routine.”

“I’m not surprised.” She wrinkles her nose as I follow her downstairs. It doesn’t take her long to find the exercise room. “This whole place smells like money and—ew, man-sweat.”

“I didn’t invite you down here.” Or to my house at all. “If you have a problem with the smell, leave.”

“Actually, no. I have a problem with *you*.” She shoves the note I sent her—and the check—straight into my chest. The shock of it makes me stumble back a step.

“How dare you,” she mutters.

Oh, fuck.

My eyebrows go up.

“Now you’re pissed when I offer you money?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. Ugh! You know what, screw this.” She runs both hands through her hair and storms back upstairs.

If she needs space, I get it.

There's something almost fragile about her now. Like this experience simultaneously fired her up and knocked the wind from her lungs.

When I follow a minute later, I find her waiting in the hall, slack against the wall like this leggy sagging doll.

"Miss Winkley? Are you okay?"

"Not at all." She lets out a pained laugh. "God, you just don't get it, do you? I'm *pissed* because you gave me something you know I can't refuse."

For the first time since she barged into my house, I'm shaken.

I'm not used to second-guessing.

Would it have killed me to think before I charged into her store and roped granny into helping me toy with her granddaughter's emotions?

Would I have died if I thought this through first, rather than flailing around to put out this fire I caused like the clumsiest asshole ever born?

A low, rough growl slips out of me as I lean my back into the wall next to her.

Then a tiny seed of hope blooms in my chest. Maybe the whole reason she came here wasn't to curse me out after all and remind me what pond scum I am.

She can't be considering joining me in this insanity... Can she?

"I'm not done looking through your closets for skeletons, mister," she whispers, suddenly turning to face me. A lock of that brilliant red hair falls from her messy bun and she tucks it behind her ear.

Damn.

If I hadn't already emotionally traumatized this woman, I might double down on stupid.

I might just grab her face with both hands, press her into the wall, and drink my fill of Juniper Winkley until I've stolen every last breath from her lungs.

"...and if you give me *any* reason to walk away now—even one—I promise you I will." She's still talking and I've been tuned out.

And I still have that check in my hand, but the blood roaring in my ears feels like too much to think about that right now.

This is it.

She's ready to cave and take a baby leap of faith. And all it took was some hideous emotional blackmail and a payday promise with a lot of zeros.

Shit.

Somehow, I don't think I'm buying her cooperation. I'm securing my own seat in the darkest part of hell that has no view—the next worse thing after blowing a multimillion-dollar deal for my entire family.

I stalk back to the kitchen and slap the check down on the kitchen island, half expecting her to follow me and snatch it again.

When I look up, she's watching me as I rip it to shreds, then quickly scrawl out a new one.

"Rory? What are you doing?" She eyes it but doesn't move. Her nose wrinkles and she glances at my clothes once again. "Rory!" she calls again.

I say nothing.

"Dude, you stink," she says dispassionately. "If you want to talk business, go change. I can wait while you shower."

That does it.

I flash her my dirtiest look.

Goddamn, this woman will be the death of me.



“I wasn’t expecting visitors who make me feel like shit,” I remind her, trying not to snap her head off. If there’s even the smallest chance she’ll go along with this, I can’t afford to alienate her. Not again.

She sniffs and heads into the lounge. “Change first. That’s my condition. Then I’ll *consider* talking to you about the rest.”

“Whatever. I’ll be right back. Don’t bother making yourself at home.”

She rolls her eyes at me and I head upstairs, leaving the new check on the counter for her to see when she’s ready. I try to remind myself not to get too excited.

This shit is an anti-celebration. Somehow, I’m paying *more* money to torture myself with a fake engagement to a woman I can’t stand.

Regardless, I can’t afford to take any chances when we’re this close. I have one job tonight and it’s persuading the goddess of war invading my house that this is her best option.

Not hard, in theory, but she’s one of the most stubborn people I’ve ever met.

She *knows* it’s money she can’t afford to lose, but if I even breathe wrong, she’ll walk away out of sheer spite.

I step into the shower, letting the hot water cascade over me.

Frankly, I’ve never come across anyone like her, and it annoys me to no end.

She even brought the check back, though I can’t fathom why.

Is she stupid? Trying to make herself look good?

Hell, part of me half expected her to cash it and run, but here she is.

And here I am, adding more to her sugar bowl, sweetening the deal with money and terrible puns I’ll pay dearly for later on.

Soon, I exit the shower with a hard-on I can't stand, hating that I give a damn what she thinks about anything.

Rifling through my closet, I choose slacks and a shirt, then do a quick spritz of cologne. It's something fresh that smells like walking out of a white marble estate on a Kauai beach.

If I'm out to wow her, there's no sense in half measures.

By the time I head back down, I'm hoping I smell imposing enough to convince her she can trust me.

She glances up at me from where she's slumped across the sofa. The slightest frown touches her brows as she inhales slowly.

"Huh. So you can smell like a million bucks. Who knew?" she says as I join her.

Ignoring her bullshit, I pick up my phone and use the app to start the fireplace. "Was that a backhanded compliment? I'm sincerely touched, Miss Winkley."

As I hold my hands over my heart like I've been shot, she laughs. It's high and bright and too damn real.

She huddles in her worn hoodie, sticking her thumbs through holes that almost certainly weren't part of the original design. More strands slip from her bun, and she sighs and pulls it loose, running her fingers through the knots. I get the faintest whiff of fruity shampoo.

"Do I smell good enough for you to talk to me now or what?" I need to steer this conversation back on track.

"Sure, I guess. Sorry." The faintest flush stains her cheekbones. "That was childish of me."

"I won't disagree." I lean back against the cushions and look at her, the way she's curled up like she wants to be as small as possible. "I also won't deny I didn't smell fresh."

"Or look great," she says with a tiny smile.

"Don't push your luck, lady."

She glances away and those walls creep up again.

Fuck this.

I need to be charming, not push her away. No matter how unbelievably hard she makes it.

“You got my note,” I say. “What do you think of the offer?”

“You gave me fifty—no, a hundred thousand dollars. Are you insane?”

“Yes.”

She stares at me in stunned silence. “As a deposit? You’re paying me in full when I haven’t done anything.”

I inwardly groan.

“Miss Winkley, I’ve decided to pay you *double*. Same terms. You’ll get the rest of it when this crap is over and done. Consider it hazard pay for putting up with my temporary madness.”

Those big green eyes cut right through me. Then she slumps back and sighs. I give her a few seconds to process everything.

“...you did all that without knowing whether I’d even agree to the fake fiancée thing at all?”

Hell, don’t remind me.

“Call it an incentive,” I bite off.

“Um, I’d call it ludicrous. Wacked. Kind of dumb,” she says, and finally there’s a bashful smile tugging at the corner of her mouth again. A genuine, honest-to-God smile that lightens her eyes. “I could’ve just cashed the first check and you’d be out fifty thousand smackers.”

My gaze narrows. “You could’ve done that, yes, but you didn’t. You came here with the check. I could’ve easily had second thoughts and clawed it right back, sending you home penniless. Now who’s being dumb?”

She snorts, glancing over at the fresh check, which is still sitting on the counter with the invisible weight of an elephant.

“I have morals, Rory. Shocking, I know,” she spits, shaking her head at me. “I didn’t want to take it before we agreed to anything. And if we couldn’t agree, I figured you’d want that back.”

Huh.

“I appreciate the gesture.” I fold my arms. “Get on with it then. Name your terms.”

She considers it for a minute, biting the end of her thumb. I struggle like hell to look away.

“First thing you need to know is I’m only doing this for the money,” she says, like that’s some kind of crime. I’d have to be fucking nuts to believe that after all she’s done to blow me off, she’s actually interested in anything else. “And... and if you want us to appear in public or whatever, you need to run everything by me first. Give me fair warning. Don’t *ever* waltz into my store again and expect me to play ball.”

I deserved that.

“Done. No problem,” I say.

“And Dexter?”

I start, not expecting her to use my name.

There’s something hard in her eyes again now—the shyness has worn off, replaced by the familiar quiet anger that fueled her before. Guess talking like adults doesn’t mean she’s forgiven me for barging in on her at the store.

“You will not mess with my family,” she says crisply. “Stay the hell away from my nana unless I give you permission. Clear?”

“Crystal clear.” I nod slowly.

“I mean it. The second you approach them without my permission, the deal’s off.”

“In the unlikely event I lose my mind again, I’ll stand in front of your firing squad without a fight. Of course, that goes for you, too.”

“Trust me,” she says scornfully, “I have zero interest in your family. *I’m* not the one desperate to convince everyone we’re in love.”

“I’m only trying to convince one man, really.” I run my hand through my hair. That vulnerability returns, like she’s made of brittle glass. “Look, I’m sorry for what happened before. I had to get to you and I recognized your grandmother from the research I did.”

“Research? You looked me up?” Her eyes flash with disbelief.

“Like any good negotiation, I had to know who’s on the other side,” I say. “Obviously, it went too far. I shouldn’t have targeted your grandmother, but you weren’t talking and I had to get creative. I saw my chance and I improvised.”

“Improvised! You had to *force* me into a shit show, you mean?” She huffs and glances away, back over the white carpets. “Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Deal.”

“And you better not back out of the Sugar Bowl orders for your properties. That’s part of the arrangement, even if you didn’t include it in your little note.”

I chuckle before I can stop myself.

She’s fiery, all right, and I can’t say I hate it.

Truthfully, in this light with flaring tension coursing through both of us like lightning, I can’t say I hate anything about her at all.

There’s something brutally alluring about the ruddy hair and the forest-pool green of her eyes that makes me wish it wasn’t all make-believe. Just for one night.

Then again, I’ve always been a sucker for redheads with an attitude and emerald-green eyes.

Though the thought of getting *involved* with her in any way but a professional one makes my skin crawl, and I sit up straighter.

“Agreed,” I tell her, and some of the tension goes out of her shoulders. “We can write up a proper contract that includes all of our terms tomorrow. Just tell me everything you want included and I’ll pass it off to my lawyer. He can send it over promptly for review.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about the lawyer.” She huffs loudly, but she doesn’t look surprised. I don’t know why she would be—having a lawyer is practically a prerequisite for making a living in real estate, much less making a mockery of an arrangement like this.

“I’ve got a whole legal team, sweetheart.”

“Makes sense.” She rolls her shoulders and looks around, one soft curl falling down her front.

Right onto her chest—which I’m extremely careful not to look at.

Professionalism is key here. I’m not fucking Patton.

Unlike my spoiled punk of a baby brother, I have boundaries. I’ve spent years cultivating them like a pristine garden.

Even if she does look oddly alluring, sprawled out on my sofa beside me.

“With any luck, we’ll barely interact after tonight, Miss Winkley. Congratulations.”

She tilts her head toward me again, her lips quirking into a half smile. “While I’d love to agree with that, someone introduced himself to my nana, and she’ll never let me live it down if she doesn’t see you again.”

Shit. Right. I should’ve seen that coming.

“I can probably talk her into dinner,” she adds. “Just the three of us.”

“No problem. I can do dinner if it helps patch the holes I blew in your life.”

“It won’t. I’m letting you do the bare minimum. And you’ll have to be nice...”

What the hell? Why does it sound like she's asking me to wrestle a lion?

"Are you doubting my ability to charm her?" I bite off.

"I'm doubting your ability to charm anyone without leaving behind hurricane damage," she mutters, glancing away and picking at the holes in her hoodie. "She'll ask lots of questions and you'll have to talk."

"So we'll answer them," I say with a shrug.

"No, I mean a *lot* of questions. Try not to make a complete ass of yourself this time."

"Relax," I say, rolling my eyes. "I've dealt with older folks before. I'll have her rolling on the floor laughing in no time. She'll love me."

"But not too much." Juniper eyes me cautiously.

It's my turn to stare.

"I don't want her to love you too much," she says again. "Not if we're breaking up the second you've fooled your business guy."

"You knew Haute by name when I answered the door," I wonder out loud, remembering.

"Yeah. I can do some research too. Like how to infiltrate a rich guy's house. You've got a pretty big Google footprint and your Instagram follows are public," she tells me flatly. "Also, it's insurance."

"Insurance? What are you—"

"Now that you've see what I can do, don't piss me off again, Dexter. Next time I find my way in here, I'm leaving with your balls."

I snort loudly. "You'd need the upper body strength to carry them first."

"Oh my God!"

Still shaking my head, I try grounding us again.

“Hold on, Winkley. First, you’re not sure if I can charm her, then you don’t want me charming her too much. Which is it?” I rub my forehead and sigh at the familiar stubborn expression on her face. “Forget it. It’ll be fine. Can you just stop stressing about this shit for one second?”

“I’ll stop stressing when it’s over—and when three lifetimes of questions from Nana aren’t raining down on our heads.”

I need a drink.

“Tell you what,” I say, getting up and heading to the kitchen. “I know what’ll lighten the mood. Wait here.”

“Like I can go anywhere else. You’ve got a gate!” she calls after me.

Right. Because apparently she can’t let me forget for one second that I’m richer than her and I care about my personal security. Like she’s still grinding that axe of hers against my skull.

She peers over the back of the sofa as I head downstairs into the wine cellar and fish out a twenty-year-old bottle of champagne. The good stuff.

It’s been in the cellar for who knows how long without anyone to drink it with. There’s been good reason to celebrate over the past few years, but Patton likes his exotic cocktails, and Archer prefers his whiskey and beer.

Her eyes widen as I return, put the bottle on the island, and find two glasses.

“To partnership and clearing the air,” I say dryly, popping the cork and pouring us each a glass.

“God, what it must be like to live like you,” she muses, accepting her glass as I sit beside her again. “Drinking your fancy champagne and switching on the fire at the flick of a button.”

“If you’re going to rain on our parade, Miss Winkley, you can leave sober.”



This time, her smile is a little wider after she takes a sip. “Holy hell, that’s—wow. Nose tickling. You must drink this stuff like water, huh?”

“Actually,” I say, irritated by her presumption and the amusement she clearly gets from it, “I’m a social drinker. I like keeping my liver intact.”

“Hmmm. No sweets, no alcohol. No vices, then?” she tuts, her gaze darting up to my face and away again. “Something something makes Dexter a dull—”

“You’re unbearable, you know that?”

“Takes one to know one.” She holds up her glass. “But I’m sorry, we were celebrating, right? To misery and company.”

I tip my glass against hers. “To the biggest deal of my life.”

“Can’t argue with that.” She frowns and takes a sip. The crease between her eyes deepens and a shadow passes over her eyes, almost too fast to notice. “You know, come to think of it, we should also toast to the only engagement I’ll ever have.”

I look at her intently, wondering if it’s another joke.

No, there’s no faking that melancholy, even if she’s bitingly sarcastic. I slide an arm along the back of the sofa before I can overthink and lean in. She catches her breath as I clink my glass against hers for the second time.

“To the best goddamned fake engagement ever,” I say. “At least for the next six months.”

The smile returns to her eyes first, then her mouth.

“To the best mistake I’ll ever make,” she echoes.



## SWEET RUMORS (JUNIPER)



**I**t's weird having money.

Like, actual money I can spend to unscrew my life.

The computer whining doesn't send a cold sweat down my spine anymore.

My stomach doesn't knot up when I look around the store and see everything in terrible need of updating.

First things first, though.

I bring the check to the bank. The clerk looks at me like she's seen a unicorn—what normal girl like me cashes a check that big?—but it's signed and addressed to me, so into the account it goes.

Then I start buying.

First, a laptop. No more relying on a hunk of junk PC that's probably been around since I learned to count. This is a sleek, modern little machine I can cart around anywhere, whether I'm at home or pulling late nights working on spreadsheets.

I don't have much of a life beyond work and sleeping.

And now, apparently, lying for Dexter Rory, too.

I scowl, remembering how we celebrated the craziest decision of my life over expensive champagne, before I get back to assessing the mixers in the kitchen. Out of all the appliances, they should be first on deck for an upgrade since they're used the most.

Mixers and ovens and pans and a new microwave to replace the clunky old thing with a broken timer we've been managing with since Nana left.

Oh, and new recipes!

Nana's lemon biscotti cheesecake is a must. I'm thinking of branching out into new territory myself. Trying something a little less homely and more high-class. Especially if we're going to be keeping fancy, high-end properties stocked with sweets.

Some cute, colorful macarons would do the trick. Maybe even some matchamisu or dark chocolate crème for folks who don't like blowing up their glucose scores.

Rich people like Dexter.

I pause what I'm doing to wipe my forehead.

...you know it's bad when I'm starting to care what desserts he might like. If there's a cake that man would eat without being under torture, I want to know what it is.

But I need to get a grip.

Before I start thinking we're doing anything except an elaborate ruse.

*You wouldn't be engaged to him if he was the last man alive.*

Also, he doesn't need me to put in too much effort. He's given me a script to follow and agreed to give me fair warning for any appearances.

On paper, it should be easy-peasy.

It's just, the thought of watching him consume something from the Sugar Bowl without triggering his gag reflex feels oddly appealing. Some nice light matchamisu might really hit the spot.

I really hate that he's the one who gave me the idea, and it might turn out to be a good one.

I make a list of ingredients we'll need on my notepad, chewing the end of the pen as I think.

Lots of high-grade neon-green matcha for sure, if I'm going to commit to a proper matchamisu. Although I should probably make a few trial runs and test them out on the shop floor first.

And what about the macarons?

I'd probably be better off starting with some basics like raspberry and white chocolate, then move on to something a little more interesting like salted caramel or red velvet cake.

A light, gentle flavor to offset all the heavier stuff we sell.

Also, if we're making a lot more deliveries, is it worth employing some kind of courier service? Or would it be better to break down and buy a bigger van that doesn't leak oil?

So much to consider and so little time...

"What do you think?" Sarah whispers from the counter—probably to Jake, who's scheduled with her today. "Do you reckon Juniper and Big Fish are *dating*?"

"Dating? You serious?" Jake sounds surprised.

"Well, he kept coming in to talk to her, right? That's what you said. Weird for a guy that busy."

"Yeah, he hit on Emmy, too." Jake has a gruff note to his voice and I suppress a grin.

No wonder Jake doesn't like Dexter if he thinks the guy was hitting on *his* crush.

Not that I think Dexter would, not seriously—she's barely twenty. Whatever else he may be, I can't imagine him robbing the cradle.

"But she didn't see him. Junie avoided that dude like a curse," Jake says.

"Yes, but you don't get it. He kept coming. He waited until Nana Winkley showed up after close, I heard. He *hugged* her."

"Nana Winkley?" Jake whistles.

"No, idiot!" Sarah sighs like he's being stupid—which, in all honesty, he is. "He hugged *Junie*."

Jake snorts. “Aw, hell. How do you know that?”

“I saw it on the security cam the next day when I was doing my usual check to see if there’s anything worth saving to the cloud. That storage isn’t cheap.”

Oh my God.

*The camera.*

I slam my head down on the bench with a *thunk!*

Of course. The security cam might be the only modern thing we have. Only, now it’s turned into an unexpected spy tool for my gossipy staff.

“So, what? You think they’re dating because they hugged in front of Nana?” Jake says skeptically.

“When does she ever hug a guy? I mean... when does she ever go on a date?”

The long silence between them suffocates me.

Leave it to the kids to humiliate a grown woman without even trying.

“Huh,” Jake agrees. There’s another longish pause. “Can’t say you’re wrong. I just figured she had a couple guys on the down-low. Most girl boss types still have a sex life, don’t they? They just don’t broadcast it to the entire world.”

“You’re a dating coach now?” Sarah laughs loudly. “But she has been landing all those big orders, I guess. There must be a reason that office wants to keep paying our salaries. It makes *sense*.”

“You mean he could be helping out with the store in exchange for—shit.” Jake hums as he thinks it over. “Maybe you’re onto something. Heard her talking about new equipment this morning, too.”

“Not just that,” Sarah says, keeping her voice low even though I’m not that far away and can hear every single word. “She has a laptop now. I saw it. Can you imagine Junie using anything that works?”

“What? No way.” Jake is totally, painfully serious. “You mean she’s finally entered the twenty-first century on some dude’s dime? Let me know the next time Big Fish comes in so I can shake his hand.”

God, I feel my cheeks turning ten shades of red as they laugh.

“Hey, let’s be nice and not get too carried away,” Sarah finally says. “It’s *Junie* after all. You know how she hates spending money. The laptop could still be a loaner from her gran or something. She had to finish the accounting stuff so the new CPA can sort it out.”

I scowl in their direction.

*Way to rub it in, guys.*

Being poor and being a technophobe are two different things. It’s not like I don’t *want* to update my life and the store.

“I’m surprised, though,” Sarah whispers. “I just didn’t think he was her type, you know? Like, I never figured she’d go for someone so... well...”

“Bossy?” Jake suggests. “Shitty? Rich?”

The worst part is, he’s not wrong.

“*Hot*,” Sarah whispers, then dissolves into giggles.

Okay, I’ve had enough.

“Guys,” I snap, poking my head through the door. “You do know I can hear your whole conversation, right?”

Sarah gasps and flushes up to her ears.

Jake clears his throat, awkwardly staring at his shoes like a kid caught with fireworks.

“So, uh... were we right?” he asks sheepishly. “*Are* you dating Big Fish?”

“First of all, you need to drop the nickname. He’s a paying customer and he shouldn’t be disrespected,” I say, like I

haven't been using it too. "Second, my private life is none of your business."

"He *hugged* you!" Sarah blurts out.

"Hugs can be platonic," I hiss back. But hell, if she saw it on camera, then she knows that hug wasn't meant for friends. "Look, okay, yes, we're... seeing each other. You could call it an arrangement."

"Arrangement?" Sarah wrinkles her nose and tucks a strand of her hair back into her ponytail. "Way to make it sound like the least interesting relationship ever."

"You'd be surprised."

"You don't exactly seem happy." Jake looks at me, his previous embarrassment forgotten.

*Yeah, I'm not.*

I'm not happy about the relationship part. The money, on the other hand, is reason enough to smile. So I show my teeth.

"We're just testing the waters, guys. Nothing too serious."

"He's giving you money," Jake points out.

"I—" I grit my teeth and take a deep breath. "We have a business agreement, okay? He happens to be a very big fan of what we do here. It's for the store's benefit, so do you guys think you could put a lid on gossiping for one minute and get back to work?"

"Sure, sorry, it's just slow today." Jake points at the empty tables. "We've got nobody right now."

"Yep, the perfect time for you to clean the bathroom." I fold my arms, daring him to argue back.

"You don't pay us enough for this," he grumbles.

I grab a tea towel and flick it at his back. "Less complaining, more working, big boy. Or else you might not get paid at all."

Everyone laughs.



It's an empty threat and he knows it, but he grabs the cleaning equipment and heads into the bathroom while Sarah wipes down the tables again.

I head back into the kitchen and lean against the counter. My palms sweat and I wipe them on my pants.

This is fine. *Fine.*

It's been two years since Liam. Two freaking *years* and I am so over his boring, noncommittal ass.

The staff gossiping about me and my nonexistent love life is normal, actually. Wouldn't they gossip about anyone and their hot, rich new boyfriend?

So what if it's fake?

And no matter how hot or rich he happens to be, Big Fish wouldn't be my first, second, or last choice for a serious date.

But for a fake relationship, he's peachy—and having his smug face in my head is just a reminder of the terms of the arrangement.

Mutually beneficial, remember?

If I play along like a good girl, then the Sugar Bowl might have a real future for the first time in my lukewarm tenure as boss.

I'm smart enough to avoid getting too invested in annoying, backstabby men.

I've been burned before and I've learned my lesson.

This is a two-way business partnership and not a real relationship. It's not love or even casual dating.

Never again.



NANA'S HOUSE IS SMALL, adorable, detached, and boasts a huge yard teeming with summer color.

She's particularly proud of the green lawn with patches of wild clover and her spacious garden in the back.

When she's not baking or listening to her favorite true crime podcast about famous psychopaths and gruesome murders, she's outside, grubbing around in the flowerbeds and coaxing gorgeous blooms out of dying plants she finds at the nursery.

She's always been like that. The walking savior complex, the find-something-broken-and-fix-it type, and God bless her.

Sometimes, though, I feel like I'm the thing she's trying to fix most.

"Junie," she says brightly, opening the door and giving me a peck on the cheek before waving me in. "You're a little late, honey. How's the store doing?"

"Better," I say, following her inside to the kitchen. Anyone who visits can immediately tell this is the central hub of the house—the place where everything happens. There's a table in the middle of the room, fresh herbs lining the windowsill, and an enormous oven that seems like it's always running or it's just cooling down.

"Get that sign fixed yet?"

"I booked a guy to come and replace it tomorrow, yeah." I grab my apron from behind the door and tie it. She bought it for me a long time ago when I was in high school and it still says *Juniper* in faded letters across the front.

"That's what I like to hear! Now, I was looking through my cookbooks and I found a recipe for a Samoa cheesecake which I thought might be really interesting."

I frown. "Samoa, like the cookies?"

"What else? It's got a lovely, sweet coconut base for texture that should go well with the rest." She opens her cupboard and looks inside. "Of course, we're only using fresh coconut and ideally, chocolate sourced from the Pacific. You'd have to price it higher if you decide to put it on the menu."

*Ouch.* My face wrinkles.

“Nana, the cheesecakes are a staple. We can’t just jack up the prices for this new one.”

“No, but you could raise the prices on all of them by a smidge. In this economy, you’ll be underwater soon if you don’t start bumping up prices,” she says, tilting her head and looking at me. There’s no sign of the sweet old lady now, but a hard-nosed businesswoman. “Oh, Junie. You feel so guilty, don’t you? Like I’ve said before—you’re selling yourself short. Nobody enjoys rising prices, but when it’s basic survival for a small business, you have no alternative. You simply must keep up with inflation or you won’t keep up at all.”

“But everything just sucks right now. A lot of people are barely scraping by, their wages haven’t—”

“You’re not an economist, Junie. Your job isn’t to make life fair—it’s to make a living. This is business.” With that, she gets her ingredients down and lays them on the side. “You can never forget that.”

“I know.” Deep down, I know she’s right. I trail my fingers on the tablecloth she always puts out when she’s baking. It takes me back to when I was a kid, helping her mix cakes and sneaking bites of the batter when she wasn’t looking. “But we’ve got to stay competitive. We definitely can’t alienate the regulars who’ve been with us for years.”

“A few bucks here and there won’t break the bank, but it’s surprising what a difference those margins will make to you.”

I laugh, even though it’s not really funny.

“Remind me why you left the store to me again? I think the cutthroat business gene skipped a few generations,” I joke.

She levels a look over her glasses.

“All good things have an end. I had my time in the sun, Junie. It’s about time you had yours.”

Way to make my heart hurt, Nana.

Especially when it’s so true.

No, I don’t have the same business knack and tolerance for brass tacks that she does. Financial advice mostly goes in one

ear and out the other, whether it's educating myself with podcasts or trying to listen to tax suggestions from our CPA.

Making treats, I can handle.

Keeping the shop family-oriented, yes.

Greeting customers and smiling even to the busybodies who demand to see the manager, sure.

But running the show? Like actually making money at this that amounts to more than a starving artist's wage?

I've had a huge case of imposter syndrome ever since I inherited the place.

"You know," Nana says, peering at me closely, "we haven't spoken since I came around about the lights."

Oh, here we go. "If you're talking about Dexter—"

"I am your *grandmother*," she says. That's a card she pulls pretty often, and I hate to admit it works. "Are you hiding something from me?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Is there something about him you think I won't like?"

*Like the fact that he coerced me into a fake relationship?*

*Perish the thought.*

"No."

"Then what's your issue with discussing your boyfriend?" She takes out her bowl—the same old chipped one she should have replaced years ago but won't when she claims it's her *lucky bowl*—and starts weighing flour. "It's been a long time since Liam. We can talk about these things again."

I try not to think about the way I shut her out after Liam left.

Her excitement leaves this prickly feeling all over my body—this fear like I'm going to let her down again. Like she's going to get her hopes amped up and be disappointed, and I'll be the reason.

*Little Junie, never enough to keep a man around.*

“What do you want to know?” I ask, shoulders hunched.

“Everything! But let’s start with his job. What does he do?”

Okay, I know this, at least.

“He works for Higher Ends International. One of their big fish guys.” *Oh crap, did I say that?* “It’s a pretty high-powered real estate thing, I guess. He like... acquires properties to spruce up and turns them into glorified Airbnbs.”

I’m frowning.

Is that even right?

I have no idea beyond the quick facts I dug up when I did my internet sleuthing.

Beyond the fact that they’re kind of a big deal in the KC rental market and he chases down guys like Forrest Haute who are even bigger and richer than he is, I have no real idea what Higher Ends really does.

Nana frowns as she measures sugar carefully on her old brass scales. I’ve offered to buy her electronic scales more times than I can remember, but she swears by them.

So much so that I bought a pair for myself last Christmas and started using them to bake at home. Not practical at the store, but it turns out there’s something deeply satisfying about weighing things out the old-fashioned way.

“So, he’s a property developer then,” she says slowly. “And a rather successful one at that.”

“Yeah.” I pinch my eyes shut. “You could say that.”

“What do you mean, dear? Surely, you’d know?”

“We haven’t talked much about... money. I mean, I think it’s a little touchy when he’s so rich and I’m—well, me.”

Nana laughs and shakes her head. “Juniper Winkley, don’t you *dare* sell yourself short in my presence.”

“His house is really fancy,” I offer.

That gets her attention. She whips her head around so fast her glasses almost slip off her nose. “Oh?”

I think back to what I remember.

It’s all a blur, honestly.

I hadn’t thought my big ambush through before I arrived, and seeing him there in his workout clothes—with so much sweat clinging to his skin—he was hotter than the sun. Standing and leering at me like a Greek god in his personal Olympus that could fit my shoebox one-room apartment a dozen times over.

“It’s big,” I say helplessly. “He has a kitchen to die for with all the latest stuff. Oh, and an indoor gym.”

“Ah, that explains it. He looks rather trim. You don’t get a body like that pushing papers all day.”

“Nana!”

“What? I have eyes in my head, y’know.”

This conversation could not get any worse.

“So,” Nana says, her mouth busier than her hands. “How did you meet?”

Welp, I was wrong. This conversation *can* get worse.

How am I supposed to answer that?

“Oh, you know,” I say vaguely. “People. Friends.”

“You have mutual friends, Junie? Who?” She darts me a sharp look.

“You know...” I need to stop saying that. “He knows people. Lots of people. He’s wheeling and dealing all the time and probably has a third of Kansas City in his contacts.”

“Yes, but who introduced you, honey?”

*Crap.*

“...I don’t think you know her, Nana.”

She looks almost as frustrated at the conversation as I am. “It was a *her*, was it?”

“I mean...” I am royally screwed now. “Oh look, my phone’s going off. Hang on, Nana, be right back.” Waving my totally silent phone at her, I rush upstairs into the spare room and throw myself on the bed.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

This whole mess hinges on me persuading everyone we’re dating and I can’t even convince Nana and still sound like a normal human being.

Yikes.

Nana, whose *dying wish* probably involves me finding a man to settle down with because she can’t wait for my wedding.

Frustrated, I pull up Dexter’s contact and fire off a quick message, my fingers shaking.

***I don’t know if I can do this. Nana’s asking lots of questions and I don’t have answers. Sorry I suck.***

I toss my phone aside and stare up at the pale peach-pink ceiling.

Nana’s favorite color. Her whole existence is a splash of sunshine, and she’s worked her butt off for every ray.

Coming to her house feels like I’ve gone back in time forty years to the days when she was in her prime, basking in a happy, well-lived life.

Usually, that’s a good thing, but today it just makes me think of Jake.

*You mean she’s finally entered the twenty-first century on some dude’s dime? Let me know the next time Big Fish comes in so I can shake his hand.*

Groaning, I roll over and bury my face in the pillow.

I’m a laughingstock among the kids on staff.

Who else is laughing behind my back?

Who else will look at me and think Dexter Rory deserves better... besides *everyone*?

To my surprise, my phone buzzes for real now. Twice.

Grabbing it, I peer at the screen to see Big Fish on the call screen. Yes, I'm guilty of using that stupid nickname in my contacts.

I swipe the green icon in a haze.

"Um, hello?" I say, slightly breathless even though I've been running approximately nowhere. "Who calls first these days?"

"It's faster than texting," he rumbles, also slightly winded. Though from the sound in the background, he's probably using one of those treadmills I saw in his gym.

*Does this man ever take a day off?*

"What's the problem?" he growls.

"I *told* you. In a message. Like normal people."

"Yeah, I didn't read it," he tells me over the sound of feet pounding the treadmill. "Just saw it come in. What's happening?"

This is embarrassing.

At least by typing it, I didn't have to face his reaction when he hears how hopeless I am.

"It's just... I don't know if I can do this." I press my face against the pillow again, muffling my voice. "I'm at Nana's and she's asking me all sorts of questions I can't answer. I barely know anything about you."

"I see." The sound in the background stops. "You with her now?"

"I'm in the guest room." I roll on my back again, this time looking at my reflection in the window. My face looks blurred, the colors muted. Despite that, the face staring back at me seems prettier than my own. "Look, I know we had a deal and you're paying crazy good money, but how can I make your man believe we're madly in love if I can't even persuade my own grandmother?"

"Miss Winkley, breathe."



“Juniper,” I throw back. “We’re definitely sunk if you keep talking like I’m your secretary.”

“Juniper.” The way he says it shocks me to my core.

Like a slow rolling thunderstorm growling its presence into my bones.

“Easy for you to say,” I snap. “*Your* family isn’t involved in this.”

“Thank fuck they’re not,” he says calmly, “I understand your frustration, though. Haute will be easier to convince than your Nana, I promise you. He’ll barely care what you say as long as he’s stuffing his face.”

“That doesn’t help the fact that I’m stuck here and she’s asking for your life story. Next thing you know, she’ll ask when we’re going to have that dinner, and—”

“So set it up. Soon.” There’s another pause, and when he speaks again, his voice is quieter. “How about the weekend? That gives us time to meet and get our facts straight.”

“This weekend?” I press the heel of my hand against my eyes.

“Unless you’re busy.” There’s an inflection to his voice that suggests he thinks I’m not. Like I have the luxury of ever taking weekends off.

I’m sure I can make time, though. I have a hundred thousand good reasons in the bank to take one measly day off.

“I’ll check my calendar,” I say.

“This Wednesday, can you do seven o’clock after work?”

The store closes at six, but I can always put Emmy and Jake on closing duty. I pinch my nose.

“Okay. Your place?”

“My office in Lee’s Summit. This is business, after all,” he says too quickly. “And Juniper? Don’t be late.”

“Don’t be a complete prick,” I throw back.

To my surprise, he laughs.

Again, my bones vibrate.

Every sound this man makes is a force of nature. For a searing second, my mind flashes to his lips, working against my ear from behind as he flattens me against that perfect kitchen counter in his palace, all hot breath and filthy promises, so ready to—

“Deal. If you’re late, all bets are off,” he tells me.

“I’m going to hold you to your end. Be *nice*,” I warn before the call ends, flopping down again and picking at my hair.

I have some time before I need to panic over Wednesday. Then, if I can hold it together, we’ll figure out the mechanics of lying spectacularly to everyone important in our lives.

God, how sick am I to go along with this?

As I head back downstairs, still wondering when my moral compass shattered, I tell Nana the call was just a kid from work. One more little white lie that makes me feel like a tumbleweed.

I should get used to it, though.

Ditto for this hollow ache in the pit of my stomach.

It persists through the biscotti cheesecake prep and Nana’s cozy stories and frantic goodbye kisses right until I’m home in my own bed, curled up and staring at the evening sunlight scintillating on the wall. Catness curls up against my chest, a warm lump of fur.

It’s nerves. Like standing over a sheer cliff with water below while your friends are watching and no will to turn back and prove you’re a wuss.

Sooner or later, you just have to hold your breath, leap, and pray.

Only, I’m in so far over my head I can’t even see what’s below me anymore.

And in Big Fish’s strange pond, I’m afraid I don’t know how to swim.



# SWEET SLOW DANCE (DEXTER)



**F**orrest Haute might be a ruthless iron-fisted magnate with dubious connections to the underworld and a proclivity for clogging his arteries, but if you've managed to impress him, you know it.

He's a little too appreciative, if you ask me.

For fuck's sake, how excited can a man get over lemon cheesecake? It's certainly not because it's the newest specialty item on the Sugar Bowl's menu. I'm confident I could've shipped him any of their delicacies and gotten the same reaction.

"Thanks again for sending the box of goodies," he says cheerfully. "And all the way to Florida, too. How generous."

"No problem. I promised you a sugar fix and I delivered." I press my pen tip against the desk, clicking my frustration.

"Yes, yes, the Sugar Bowl, you lucky lad." Haute makes an obscene noise. "You sure hit the jackpot with her. She's a lovely young woman, and the sweets she makes—wow—even lovelier."

Fucking hell.

I can't even tell if he's having lewd thoughts about my 'fiancée,' but hot rage sweeps through my blood anyway.

The man is disgusting.

If this deal didn't depend on playing nice with a pig, I'd have told him and his weird fantasies to fuck off long ago.

“Yeah. She’s a dream,” I offer, checking the clock. Fifteen minutes till she arrives, and if I’m not off this call by then, I’m going to murder someone. “Is there anything else you wanted to discuss today?”

“Just called to say thank you, really.” Right. Twenty minutes of thank yous and detailing what I sent as though I didn’t send the damn box myself. “I wasn’t sure, you know, whether you’d be amenable to my terms...”

“Well, I hate to disappoint.”

“I can see that. I’m not disappointed, Rory. In fact, I appreciate the effort you’ve put in. As for the Sugar Bowl—if I may say something, Rory, man to man—”

Oh hell, here we go.

“That place is something special. I’m a bit of a foodie—if you can believe that—and it’s painfully rare to find a gem that lives up to its hype.” There’s a serious edge to Haute’s voice. My God, I can’t believe he’s getting emotional over pastries when just the other day, he was digging his heels in about reviewing the paperwork and getting everything signed and ready to go. “My point is, don’t let it slip through your fingers.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I say glumly, leaning back in my chair and pinching my nose. Twelve minutes till she arrives. “The deal’s moving forward then, I take it?”

“Onward and upward. No looking back,” he agrees. “I’ll see you soon, Rory.”

“I can’t wait.”

Finally free, I set the phone down and switch off my computer.

It’s late now and most of the office has already headed home. It’s just me in this enormous building, the deepening evening shadows reflecting back my own inner state of mind.

Oddly, knowing she’s coming makes me scrutinize my surroundings.

The imposing and glossy black desk for meeting clients when only a more formal setting will do. The fake potted plants my receptionist insisted on. Some bullshit about making the place feel more inviting.

It's a professional setting. Perfect for meeting Juniper Winkley without any more screaming or tears or mutual desire to claw each other to pieces.

After our last meeting, a man needs boundaries.

I won't have her turning up at my house again, sitting on my sofa, sipping champagne and sassing me like we skipped straight past the fake wedding to being an old married couple.

This is less intimate, yes, but for a business arrangement, it'll do—and this time there's no champagne.

Even if sitting and drinking it with her wasn't total agony.

I shove the thought away and review the notes I've just made. The more prepared I am before she arrives, the sooner we can get this over with and the less worry I'll have about blowing up our progress.

She's terribly good at unraveling my discipline.

When the door pops open, I glance at the clock. Eight minutes till she's due.

"You're early," I say, turning to look at her and—

"Patton?"

"Who else were you expecting?" He grins a little too widely for his face.

"Fuck off."

"Don't tell me it was your sugar baby. Is she meeting you today?" He looks up at the clock and back at me, his head tilted. "Damn. No wonder you look so nervous."

"I'm *not* nervous," I snarl back, rolling my eyes.

Really, I'm not—I don't give a flying fuck what she thinks about me as long as we're both on board with convincing Haute.

“You sure? I can crank up the A/C for you—looks like you’re sweating, Bro.”

“Did you barge in to talk business or what?” I demand, my eyes cutting through him.

“Nah, where’s the fun in that? I came to make sure you aren’t blowing too much smoke up your own ass before you meet the girl.”

“Alright, that’s it—out!” I shove my chair back and he holds out both hands.

“Just kidding. I actually came to talk about the future.”

“Like hell.”

“Look, you might be in charge of the Holy Grail deal to end all deals, but I’ve got some other stuff in the works I thought we could hash out.” He sits across the sofa, stretching his legs out. “I even typed up the plans. I know how much you love long boring reams of paper.”

“Bastard.” I snatch the sheaf of paper he’s holding out to me. And goddamn, color me surprised, because he’s gone and done this properly, including the floor plans of his proposed changes, cost breakdowns, even an index in his report.

Little Pat, actually doing things by the book instead of just jacking off and leaving someone else to clean up the mess.

“Impressed?” He raises his eyebrows and smirks at me. “I can work sometimes, you know.”

“Sometimes,” I bite off, fixing a stare.

“Easy, man. *I’m* not the idiot who got engaged to some pretty little baker girl so you could gamble with our biggest project.”

“Cut the crap, Pat. Why are you really here?” I toss the paperwork on my desk. I can review it later. Four minutes till she’s supposed to arrive, and seeing as we’ve made a deal that she won’t be late, I can’t imagine she’ll be considerate enough to wait for Patton to show himself out. “This isn’t a real engagement and you know it.”

“Real or not, it must be intense.” He brushes something off his thighs. “Never seen you so flustered, Brother.”

“I’ll show you flustered in about ten seconds.”

“Hey, Archer said no fighting in the office. Let’s take it to the parking lot.”

“And *I* said my office, my rules.” I raise my eyebrows. Three minutes till she’s due. “Is that what you want? A few missing teeth for your trouble?”

“Bastard,” he grumbles. “You’re just waving your dick because you know I’d win.”

“Because I win everything else.” I point at the door, which is thankfully still Juniper-free. “Go on, out.”

“But my plans for the condos—”

“I’ll review them tomorrow morning and we’ll discuss them in the next meeting.”

“So formal, Bro. You’re starting to sound like Archer.” He makes a gagging sound, slinging his arm over the back of the sofa and making no move to leave. Dickhead knows exactly what he’s doing. “For the record, I came here to *have* a meeting. But I guess if you gave me a real reason why you’re busy...” His eyes light up. “Unless it’s a date.”

“Are you done?”

“Dex, if it *is* a date—” His gaze crawls down my suit. “Man, you need to work on your vibe. This shit does *not* scream fun or—”

There’s my limit.

Without suffering one more word of his shit, I stride over and grab him by the tie, hauling him upright.

“Out of my office, Patton. Right fucking now.”

He laughs through his teeth, flashing me a pained smile.

Same old song and dance. We’ve done this too often for him to be remotely intimidated, and he just swats at my hand.



“Get your dirty paws off me. You’re ruining my favorite tie.”

“Um,” Junie says from behind me. “Is this a good time?”

*Fuck. Me.*

She has a sixth sense for showing up at precisely the worst time. And what makes it worse is that she’s exactly on time today, down to the minute. Which makes *me* the idiot for choosing to squabble with my idiot brother.

“Wow. You must be Juniper.” Patton’s face lights up and he barrels forward with his hand outstretched. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Of the three of us, Patton got the best people skills. This glorified brat could charm the wheels off a car and sell them back to the owner at a horrifying markup.

Archer got the dick-with-me-and-you’re-dead energy, and I got—stubbornness, I suppose.

A certain pigheaded tenacity that serves me in business as much as it hinders me with people.

Right now, though, I wish Patton had shared some of his magic, because Juniper blinks her big green eyes at him like she’s dazzled by his smile.

Jealousy knifes through my blood.

“Hi,” she says, shaking his hand. “Is everything okay with you guys?”

“Don’t mind him,” Patton announces, sending me a wide, malicious smile. “Tensions run high in this family. We still fight like puppies.”

She glances between us. “Oh, so you’re Dexter’s brother?”

“Patton Rory, at your service.”

My blood turns to magma.

I swear, if he bows or kisses her hand, he’s *dead*.

“It’s great to finally meet you,” he says. “I’ve heard so much about you. All good things from less than sterling

sources.”

“You’re joking?” Her gaze cuts back to me, something damnably unreadable in her eyes. “If it’s from Dexter, it’s probably slander.”

Patton couldn’t look more delighted.

“Damn. She already knows you like the back of her hand,” he says, elbowing me in the ribs. “And you’ve been fake-engaged for—how long now?”

“Go, Pat. You’re late for another miserable night alone with your fish,” I growl, giving him a little shove closer to the door and his nerd life of aquariums back home. Of all the expensive hobbies my little brother could’ve chosen, he just had to pick slimy things that swim and bite.

“Aw, you have fish?” I loathe the way Juniper’s eyes flash.

“He has no life,” I growl back. “Hundreds of miles from anything bigger than the Missouri River and he just has to have a bit of the ocean in the Midwest.”

“Oh, man, I’d love to enlighten you another time. I’ve pissed Dex off enough for one day, which means my work here is done. You watch this guy,” Patton tells her, jerking his thumb at me. “He’s always been the funny one in the family.”

“Patton. Out. Now.” I can’t form coherent sentences anymore through the red haze over my vision.

“Don’t forget my report!” he calls as he heads to the door—fucking finally. “It’s a risk, but I think it’ll be worth it.”

Yeah, whatever.

He thought the same about Forrest Haute, too, and look how that’s paying off. I hate to admit Patton gave us the kick in the ass we needed, downplaying Archer’s objections when he went digging through Haute’s old dirt.

He pauses at the door and smiles at Juniper again.

“I trust he’ll treat you nicely,” he says before flashing me a devilish look. “My stone-cold brother, engaged. Never thought we’d see the day. Just *wait* until Mom hears about this.”

“Mom? You better fucking not!” I slam the door right in his leering face and lean against it like I’m holding back a dragon.

I’m not sure it’s much improvement since I’ve stranded myself with a siren.

I’m alone with her now.

Alone with her autumn hair softly curling around her face and her lit green eyes and a knitted sweater that looks like it’s been molded to her frame. Shit, who gave this girl tits that are just the right size for filling a man’s palm?

“So,” she says, quirking an eyebrow. “That was your brother? Are you guys close?”

“Closer every day to beating him senseless,” I bite off, gesturing to the sofa and ready to be done with this conversation. “The brains in the family skipped him, but believe it or not, he’s an idiot savant when it comes to sniffing out new opportunities.”

Juniper laughs. Of course, it’s sweeter than her death-bringing pastries. “You’re lucky. Must be nice having a brother.”

I snort. “I have two, unfortunately, and there’s nothing nice about either.”

I’m weirdly annoyed and relieved when she sits as far away from me as possible at the end of the sofa. She looks around the room, taking in my workspace, which is only fair after my visits to the Sugar Bowl. She stops and lingers on the diagonal stripes of red along the walls—three different shades creating a certain rhythm—and the painted red cardinal on my desk.

“Interesting style for an office. It looks more like a lounge in here. Is this a real estate thing?” she asks, linking her fingers together.

Goddamn, her nerves are making *me* nervous.

“It’s partly a family thing and partly meant to impress potential partners. Judging by your reaction, it works,” I tell

her. “Anyway, would you like a drink before we get started?”

“Just some water, please.”

I grab a bottle from the mini fridge behind me and pass it off to her. She chews her lip before taking a sip.

“I wasn’t late,” she says, glancing up at me through her eyelashes. “That means you have to be nice.”

“It means I won’t be an asshole,” I say with a shrug. “There’s a premium for nice and dealing with Patton just doubled it.”

“Was that a joke?” Her eyebrow quirks up again. “And for the record, Patton Rory seems like the nicer one.”

I clear my throat.

Fuck, I almost regret saying anything. I need her on my side.

More, I need her to commit to this fake relationship bullshit before she has another breakdown on the phone because someone’s asking questions she doesn’t know how to answer.

“So, let’s get on with it. Where do you think we met?” she asks, curling her legs up under her. “Someone like you and someone like me... it’s not an easy match.”

I think back to when she barged in on me at home, dramatically ending my evening workout.

“Fitness group? Or the gym? We could say it was a local hiking group, too. I’m partial to those every other year when I’m training for the marathon.”

“Eesh. Way too physical,” she says hastily, shaking her head. A lock of that red hair spills past her face and she tucks it behind her ear.

It’s so odd how she feels close even though she’s a good three feet away from me.

I idly wonder what her hair feels like.

How silky it must be tangled up in a fist, drawing her in, training that mouth of hers to show some respect.

Is the rest of her hair that red?

If I slid a hand between her legs and jerked down her panties, would I be greeted with fire-red curls inviting my tongue to the flesh below, begging to be teased and sucked and —

“Hold on. Maybe you met me when you came in to place an order,” she suggests. “You know—like you actually *did*.”

I shake my head, fighting to banish the hard-on I shouldn’t fucking have while I’m staring at her.

“Huh? No. I don’t need anyone else thinking I *like* that stuff.”

“Oh, yeah, they’ll revoke your health freak card for sure.” She rolls her eyes. “You know, you’re the *only* person in Kansas City who truly hates it.”

“I don’t hate your sugar factory, Juniper. Let’s not make this personal,” I grind out. “Besides, I’ve got a reputation to keep.”

She side-eyes me hard. “Aren’t you already ruining that by pretending to be engaged? If everyone thinks you’re such a monk, it must be out of character.”

“Trust me,” I say with a snort, “Forrest Haute thinks I’m the luckiest fuck in the known universe. Nothing you need to worry about there.”

“*I* wasn’t the one who was worried,” she mutters.

“Do you have any hobbies? Something outside of work that’s not food?” I ask, flogging this back on track before it becomes another fight. I don’t want to be stuck thinking about whether she’s going to negatively impact my reputation—or why she’s definitely going to negatively impact my discipline when she’s dressed like that.

She chews her lip as she thinks, biting hard enough to whiten the skin. I look away before that damnable hard-on resurrects itself.

“I like art,” she says quietly. “I used to go to all the galleries with Nana when I was in high school, though we haven’t done that for a while.”

“Art,” I echo, mulling over if it’s something I can work with. “Have you been to the Nelson-Atkins the past year?” I lean forward.

Anyone remotely interested in the arts scratches their itch at the local museum. I do it myself a few times a year, and not just for charity events.

“Oh, I love visiting when I have the time. The self-guided tours rock and I think I could spend all day in the European art section,” she says slowly. “I used to burn up whole evenings there when Nana ran the shop, before work got to be too much. Amazing events, too.”

“It’s perfect, then. We’ll say we met during the Lunar New Year festival.”

“Last winter? Isn’t that a little quick to be engaged?”

I spread my hands, clenching my teeth.

“It’s believable. Look, we’re both busy people. It takes time to arrange dates, meet up, get to know each other so well that we’re exclusive. Say it took us two months to start officially dating—that puts us near a solid six months now.”

She folds her arms, but there’s a thoughtful gleam in her eyes. “Okay, maybe. If we both like art, that’s something...”

“Specifically, I like the way colors and shapes can convey meaning without needing to be spelled out in human dramas.”

“Oh, so you like *modern* art.” She makes a face and laughs. It takes me by surprise. I don’t think I’ve heard her laugh at me before. Not like this, a burst of genuine amusement. “Well, we’d definitely have met up to discuss it if you spouted off something like that. Because I think art has more meaning when it’s relatable. Something you can tell was made by a person and not a robot.”

“Hard realism limits the imagination,” I urge, wondering how the hell I fell into debating fucking art.

“But faces are a huge part of feeling. Just look at American Gothic or Nighthawks—” She holds up her hands and shakes her head, a small smile on her lips. “Let’s save this for another time. We’ve still got an entire relationship to make up.”

“Yeah, so we met at the art gallery, argued about modern shit over drinks, and then we fucked a few times.”

Her mouth falls open.

“Don’t tell me you don’t believe in premarital sex, sweetheart? That’s typically what people do before they decide to seriously date.”

“N-no, of course not, I—” She’s stumbling. Red-faced. Adorably flustered. “How many times would you say we hooked up before we decided to make it more?”

“You think anyone will ask?” I snort.

“...for my own information.”

Is she *trying* to kill me today? The way she bites her lip almost makes me think she wishes this part was real.

And it shouldn’t make my cock ache so much, especially when I remember how she’s a fellow workaholic and might just verge on celibacy like yours truly.

“Ten times,” I bite off.

“Ten? Isn’t that a bit much?”

“Woman, it wasn’t nearly enough if I liked fucking you. And it would’ve happened over two weeks before I decided I liked being inside you so much we decided to go exclusive.”

Her legs actually quiver, shifting apart.

“Excuse me. Dry throat.”

That’s my cue to spin around, grab a water, and pour half the bottle down my throat before I become a human fire hazard.

*Fuck you and your big mouth. Stop talking about sex.*

This is *not* how it’s supposed to go.

“Anyway, after that, we decided to get serious. We made a real effort to fit each other into our busy schedules,” I say, finally facing her again with my inner beast back on its leash.

“Hmmm. Two things about that.” She holds up her fingers. “First, we stick to the details, and we act our hearts out. We don’t tell Nana one word about the business part of the deal. Call her old-fashioned, but she wouldn’t understand. She’d probably hunt you down and scramble your balls into a frittata or something.”

“Got it. I do like keeping my balls.” Though her grandmother may sense something’s up soon enough when Juniper starts remodeling with mystery money. “What’s number two?”

“You have to be...” She makes a face. “Serious about me.”

“I can handle that.”

“No, you don’t understand. Nana, she’s been wanting me to find Romeo for a while. And with work and everything else, that hasn’t been in the cards. Meeting you was a godsend. She was delighted—who knows why.”

Yeah, I could tell.

Five minutes with the old gal and her enthusiasm for me—or rather, what I could be for her granddaughter—was unmistakable.

“That’s fine. I’ll keep her in the Dexter Rory fan club.”

“She won’t make it easy for you—or for us. She’s sharp as a whip. Fooling her for an hour or more will be a lot harder than a few minutes in the Sugar Bowl.”

I hate how pale she looks, still sucking at her lip.

Does this chick stress about everything family related? And where are her parents? She never mentions them.

“Juniper, relax. We’ll be fine.” I watch the way she’s curled herself neatly into the corner of the sofa as far away from me as she can get. “You’ll have to get used to acting like a couple, and so will I. That’s all there is to it.”



Easier fucking said than done.

More red blazes appear in her cheeks, bringing out the lush green in her eyes. She's hotter than ever and I hate it.

I hate everything about this self-inflicted stupidity I've thrown myself into.

"You can't keep doing that," I tell her.

"What?"

"Looking like a middle-schooler being thrown into her first dance with a boy."

"I just—" She breaks off and buries her face in her hands. "Look, I'm not used to this, okay? This isn't exactly in my comfort zone, either."

Oh, hell.

Grabbing my phone, I put on some smooth jazz to break the tension. It blares from the speakers and Juniper looks up, the blush still written on her cheeks, her mouth slightly open.

Damn her for looking like every dude's wet fever dream.

"Come on," I say, standing and holding out my hand.

She blinks at me. "Um, what are you doing?"

"Helping you get over your cooties for the middle school dance. If we can't reach a junior prom level of comfort, we're boned."

"Oh." She swallows thickly as she takes my hand, her skin surprisingly cool against mine. "Got it."

I haul her up and pull her into my arms. *Closely.*

So closely I can smell the floral scent clinging to her hair, something breezy and island-like, plus the nervous weight of her body against me.

Eventually we settle, and she rests her hand on my shoulder as we sway to the slow music.

Still awkwardly, but less so than before.

*Goddamn, the things I do for money.*

“Did you ever go to prom?” I ask, trying to ignore the fact that even though she’s still too stilted, I can feel her firm tits against my chest. She’s soft and delectable and *very* distracting. “You’re supposed to enjoy this, you know.”

“Prom was never really my thing,” she whispers back. “I was more of a giant dork into baking and books. Oh, and painting! When Nana had Sundays off, sometimes we’d spend the whole day parked in front of her easel watching Bob Ross.”

Figures.

“Move your feet, art dork,” I instruct her. “One between mine, the other on the outside. Okay, good. Now, see the way your hips move?” I drop my hands down to her waist to demonstrate where her body should be. “See how easy we can get closer without this feeling too awkward?”

Her face heats like a flaming cherry, but she’s actually smiling now.

That must count for something.

“Don’t tell me, *you* were a dancer in high school?” she teases, but there’s a breathy note in her tone that says she’s impressed.

“I have a wide range of talents,” I tell her. “And yes, I danced—one of the few things my mother insisted on. According to her, it’s a rite of passage for every young man to learn ballroom dance. She’s old-fashioned like that, I suppose. All part of being a Rory. Your heart belongs to the last century.”

“How’s this?” Laughing, she looks up at me with a small frown in her eyes and locks her arms around my neck.

“Better. More importantly, you’re moving with me like I’m not made of toxic waste. Progress.” I flatten my hand against the small of her back, drawing her in closer.

I’m greedier than I should be, tracing her skin with my fingers.

Her breathing picks up, but she’s still looking at me.

We're suspended in our own little moment, this bubble of make-believe where being lovers feels natural. Not like two people pretending to be madly in love.

When she moistens her lips, the tip of her tongue just visible, I move faster, lightly grinding my palm to her skin.

Hell, maybe jazz was the wrong choice.

The sharp, upbeat sounds fuel the rising fire in my blood, the drumming urge that screams, *kiss her, you fuck*.

And maybe she wouldn't mind it right now if I did—she's not moving away, not doing anything, maybe not even breathing as her arms tighten around my neck.

My lips hover over hers.

A low moan slips out of her that makes me fucking feral.

I'm about to move in and claim what's killing me—

Then the door opens.

Juniper breaks away so fast I have to help her catch her balance so she doesn't fall on the floor.

It's Archer this time.

Obviously, it's Archer, glowering at me like I've broken a sacred commandment, with Colt standing partially behind him.

Shit.

Though maybe it's for the best, considering I was atrociously close to feasting on my not-fiancée for dinner.

I switch off the jazz—*what the hell was I thinking?*—and practically speed walk Juniper out of the room.

“Time to go. You've already met the funny brother today,” I tell her as I pull her past Archer and his unblinking scowl. “Trust me, you don't want to meet the devil.”

“But—”

“But our business here is done. If anything else comes up, you know where to find me. Keep me posted on that dinner.”

For a second, I feel a little bad about throwing her out like this, but it's for her own damn good—and for mine.

I close the door and turn around to meet Archer's glare from my office.

"Colt, how's it hanging? Summer treating you well?" I give my nephew my best attempt at a smile. Not like he wanted to be mixed up with any of this.

"It's all right, Uncle Dex. Can't do much but read and hang out at the pool in this heat," he says in that lazy way boys do when they're teetering on adolescence. Colt shows me his manga comic—something I never got into with all the talking skeletons and steampunk drama—and sits obediently on the sofa when Archer points to it.

"Put on your headphones, bud. I need to talk to your uncle," Archer says. He's a coldhearted brute, my brother, but I'll give him one thing—he never sets a bad example in front of Colt.

He also protects the kid from the three of us tearing at each other like deranged wolverines. I'm grateful for that.

Too bad it also means there's a chance he'll soon be severing my head from my neck.

Colt sends me a glance that tells me he knows exactly what's going on before popping in his earbuds and turning his music up. *Good kid.*

"Just what the fuck was that?" Archer demands. He's a couple inches taller than me, but I'm broader, so I just fold my arms and let him stride up to me and get in my face. "Patton said you were meeting with her here, but I didn't think it was to *canoodle.*"

"Canoodle? Really? That's the best you can come up with?"

"This is not a game, Dex." He grits his teeth. "This bullshit didn't jibe with me from the beginning. You and Pat, you had the votes, so what could I do but give it a chance? Still. Throw me a goddamned bone. Prove to me I haven't lost my mind for trusting you."

“Yes, it was a vote, wasn’t it?” I remind him. “That’s what you get for having a democracy.”

Archer glowers, but even he can’t argue against the process when we set the company up. Fair’s fair.

“I’m quadruple-checking everything with Haute,” he says. “Don’t think it’s just you cleaning up your mess that has me concerned.”

“Arch, get a grip.” I roll my eyes and fling myself back in my chair behind the desk. I put my pen back in its holder. “The deal’s all but done except for the ink drying. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Sure, but that’s not everything.” Archer sits in the only remaining chair, the flash of anger gone. He’s back to talking business like a normal nonviolent human. “I need to know what the hell Haute really wants. He’s not asking for anything yet except a predictable cut of the profits. Didn’t even jack up the old Mill’s price, and you know how fast this market moves, especially in the summer.”

My entire *job* is knowing how the market is.

“Right. So far, his only input on running the property involves his damn sweets,” I say, frustrated that all things come back to Juniper Winkley.

How the fuck did I almost kiss her? What would have happened if my jackass brother hadn’t stomped through the door?

He runs a hand through his short dark hair.

“Something isn’t right here, Dex. Convinced or not, he shouldn’t be making it this easy.”

I shrug slowly, annoyed that he might be right.

“He’s not exactly shy with his demands. If he’s expecting more than sending our guests into a sugar coma, wouldn’t he just come out and say it?”

Archer says nothing.

His brows sink low as he thinks, searching for a reason to back out and torpedo the whole thing.

“There’s always a chance Haute just wants to be done with it since his loft project hasn’t panned out. Hand off the deadweight, get paid, and collect some easy ongoing revenue. Doesn’t need to be more complicated than that,” I venture.

“That’s what worries me. We’ll see.”

I want to believe in my own optimism, dammit.

Trouble is, my gut tells me Arch might have a point.

Something’s not quite right with all this, and if we don’t figure it out, who knows what the price could be.

What else will this deal cost me, besides my sanity, all thanks to one infuriatingly beautiful woman?



## SWEET ON YOU (JUNIPER)



I am absolutely, categorically, *not* excited for my date.  
It's not even a real date.

Just a fake dinner to showcase a fake relationship in front of my very honest and trusting Nana who wouldn't emotionally understand the concept if it was explained to her ten times. Which, I'm fairly sure, makes me a terrible person.

If she ever finds out this isn't real, I'm toast.

She'll never forgive me.

Worse, she'll probably wonder where she went wrong.

Holy hell, and if she figures out that it's all so I can give the bakery a second chance, will she even hold up at her age without a coronary event?

No, I can't let her know.

I need her to believe it's the Sugar Bowl's legit success that's allowing us to refurbish. The first long overdue upgrades we've had since she stepped aside.

I'm going to finally succeed, and all it cost me was my integrity and a big piece of my soul.

Sigh.

I lean in closer to the mirror to do my eyeliner.

If I'm wearing makeup, Nana will *definitely* think this is the real deal. The last time I wore it regularly was when I was with Liam and we'd go out.



Not that I want to think about stupid Liam's stupid face.

God, when did I get so jittery?

It's not a real date.

It's just Big Fish. Dexter. Dex.

I should probably start calling him Dex tonight because it seems more casual and feels less threatening. And if he calls me Junie, it might help.

Or it might make everything ten times worse.

Blech.

My hands go still as I stare at my reflection in my ancient bathroom mirror, second-guessing all my recent life decisions. The lighting in here is terrible.

My hair looks almost dull, a mousy red-brown, and I think I see every scar left behind by pimples from ten years ago.

"Oh God, will you stop?" I tell myself. "It's not a date."

Good thing, too.

Last time we met up, he almost kissed me. *I think.*

It's hard to tell when he practically picked me up and chucked me out of his office right after that weird slow dance. The thing that left me humming all evening.

Pathetic, I know. But that's what happens when I haven't been with a guy in years, and Liam never danced with me once.

I'm not sure he had a romantic bone in his body. He was just familiar, comfortable, and manly enough at the time.

I guess hindsight works wonders for showing you how crappy your exes really were.

It also leaves me reeling at the contrast between Liam and Dexter freaking Rory.

The dance did its job, melting away the stifling tension.

Somehow, it was *nice*, which was an even greater surprise.

Even when he held me close enough to inhale him with every breath, staring down at my mouth with a hunger that scared me in all the best ways.

Talk about a close call.

I still can't believe I'm getting swarmed by butterflies over an almost-kiss with a guy I don't even like.

We haven't even spoken since then, except to confirm dinner plans and what time he should pick me up.

This time, I insisted on text, saying I was tied up at work. I decided an awkward voice chat just might set me spinning all over again when I'm trying so hard to keep my feet on the ground with this strange, bossy man.

Turning away from my imperfections in the mirror, I grab my heels from the closet.

Sure, I've overdressed, but Nana always told me it's better to make a statement than to come dragging in with nobody noticing.

Considering the last time I wore this outfit was to an engagement party—*obviously not mine*—it's safe to say I've picked the fanciest thing in my wardrobe.

Not that now is the time to worry about that.

Knowing Dexter is Mr. Punctual incarnate, I try to hurry up. The less he sees of my crappy apartment building, the better.

After visiting his sleek castle, I really don't need him wondering how I survive in this hole in the wall.

Catness rolls across my bed with a loud yawn like he agrees, plastering more thick grey fur on my favorite blanket.

"Dude. You don't need to rub it in," I say, stroking his head as I walk past to finish cleaning up.

At seven on the dot, I see him arrive in a ride that's way too polished for anyone else here. A Tesla SUV, decked out in customizations that would bankrupt me.

I text that I'm coming and dash outside, cursing the evening rain that instantly hits my shoulders.

The drizzle does its best to deflate my curls, but I'm inside soon, cushioned in the sort of luxury I've only seen in my dreams.

The dashboard looks like it belongs in a sci-fi movie. He presses a button on the huge screen and heat pulses up through my legs.

As for Dexter himself—

God. This man must moonlight as a model.

Dark hair brushed back, navy shirt, tan jacket fit so tight to his shoulders it should be illegal in all fifty states.

He's good enough to eat without a speck of sugar in his health-freak system.

There go my doubts again.

Who in their right mind would ever believe he's *voluntarily* dating me?

I cough loudly, rubbing my palms on my thighs to try to calm down.

My heart feels like it's ready to splash across the windshield, but whatevs.

I'll live.

I'll survive tonight.

It's not like the last time we were together, the sexual tension was flying off the charts and I was waiting for him to throw me over his desk or anything.

It's not like he flashes me a quick smolder, hinting that a small, horny part of him *might* want to finish what we started.

It's not like my imagination is a startled horse, tramping the normal, sane thoughts I should be having.

We're just heading out on a date with my love and idol.

This is *peachy*.

“Hey,” I say, my voice irritatingly breathy. “Thanks for the ride.”

I half expect him to make a snide comment about my building or the area we’re driving through—maybe about being glad he hasn’t been mugged yet—but he just glances at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

“You’re welcome. You look good tonight.”

Oh, wow. So I’m getting nice Dexter today.

That should probably comfort me or make me feel even a little relaxed, but instead my heartbeat notches up.

I’m almost wishing for that asshole comment that never comes. *Anything* to remind me why I don’t like him.

“Thanks,” I say. “Um, you too.”

Nodding, he uses the turn signal to fight through traffic, and damn, I like him a little more for it.

“Sorry about my brothers barging in last time and the hasty exit. We had business,” he says. “Believe it or not, Patton sincerely liked you.”

“Well, I liked him.” I smile, laughing at the instant scowl that storms his face. “I mean, not enough to do a fake paid relationship or anything. Unless he pays better than you.”

“Careful, Sweet Stuff,” he growls. “You played right into his hands. He’s a born charmer and he likes using his powers for evil. Never misses a chance to show off.”

I laugh and it hits me then.

When Dexter’s not scowling, Patton isn’t the only charmer, but *that’s* a thought I’m not entertaining. Instead, I just examine the enormous screen to the right of the steering wheel, where a map plots our route to Nana’s house.

“This is pretty impressive. I like all the glass in here.”

“I should probably apologize for what happened that night,” he interrupts. Probably a good thing—I was about to say something inane. “Back at the office, I mean.”

“What, your brothers? You already did and it’s cool. Though I’m not sure your older brother likes me very much.”

“Archer likes about three things in life and two of those are his son and beer. The other involves tearing me a new asshole.” Dexter sighs, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel, knuckles bulging before he relaxes. “I was talking about our dance, Juniper.”

*Oh, crud.*

“Oh, sure.” I clench my hands together. “But you did it to make a point, didn’t you? It basically worked...”

“Maybe so, but I’m not doing anything that makes you uncomfortable. I overstepped the line. Shit, if Archer and Colt hadn’t shown up when they did, I might’ve—fuck, never mind.”

Oof.

Just like that, I’m dizzy again, my blood heating by the second.

If only he *had* done something truly unspeakable.

Then I could tell him I never want it to happen again.

We could move on, and somehow that feels easier.

But I can still *feel* his hand against the small of my back.

I still feel the hardness of his broad chest against me like a shield.

I still remember what it felt like for his breath to brush across my lips like temptation itself, and to have him right there, so close and so kissable it hurt.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, my voice brittle. He frowns at me, but I force a smile and lean back into the plush seat. “You know, when we get there, you should start calling me Junie. It’s the name everyone else uses and it’d be weird if you don’t.”

“Sure thing. Junie.”

My nickname sounds strange when he says it. But it's a good weird, and it reaches down inside me and strokes me like a kitten.

There's a madness in the air tonight, this heat flowing down my neck and over my skin. I'm going to blame the luxury seats and freakishly good climate control in this vehicle.

"Do you have a nickname? Dex, maybe?"

"Dex works," he bites off.

I rub the tip of my nose awkwardly. "And, um, we should probably hold hands."

"Junie, relax. We'll give granny the greatest show on earth. Leave it to me," he says with a confidence I wish I had, taking a hand off the steering wheel to lay it on my arm. "We managed junior prom just fine. This weekend, we'll behave like grown-ups."

I take a deep, shaky breath.

I'm totally shaking, especially when my mind goes to dirty places he can't possibly mean, and his reassurances aren't doing *anything* to help.

Honestly, he has no idea what Nana's like. No matter how confident he might be, I'm petrified we're going to blow it.

But there isn't much time to worry with light traffic and a set of wheels that just sails through the rain.

Soon, we pull up outside Nana's house. The rain is helping her flowers, and her front yard is a riot of vibrant color.

"Nice place," he says before shutting the car off and grabbing an umbrella from the back. "Wait there and I'll come and get you."

So much for thinking I wouldn't be red-faced all night. With this gentleman act, my cheeks may never return to a normal color.

Before I can try to stop freaking out, Nana opens the door and waves as Dexter walks around to my side as promised,

umbrella perched over his head. He opens my door like a Mr. Darcy who cusses up a blue streak.

I take his hand and he squeezes, his thumb brushing roughly over my knuckles.

“Trust me, Junie. We’ll have her wanting to beat down your door to help with wedding invitations.”

...does he hear himself?

That’s a massive problem.

Whether we win, lose, or draw tonight, we’re potentially stuck with letting Nana down easy when all this is over.

I swallow the lump building in my throat.

“Let’s just get this over with.” I slide out quickly, letting him twine his fingers with mine. The walk to Nana’s front door seems to last forever, but eventually we reach the threshold and she gives me her usual sweeping hello hug.

“I thought you’d never make it in this mess!” she says warmly. “This city can’t decide if it wants a monsoon or to scorch us bone-white some days.”

“That’s a Missouri summer, all right. We wouldn’t dream of canceling,” Dexter says smoothly, every inch the charming businessman. “It’s lovely to see you again, Mrs. Winkley.”

“Oh, hush. I told you to call me Jo. Now let’s get you out of the rain.” She leads us into her kitchen, where she’s already set the table.

A plate of ribs sits in the center on a warming pan with a pot of creamed corn and sautéed mushrooms by their side, plus her famous rosemary crispy potatoes in a large glazed bowl.

My stomach growls with guilt.

She really went all out for this.

For us.

For a big fat dumb lie I’m pulling over on her.

I wonder if hell is less humid than the summer we’ve been having.

Dexter whistles loudly and rubs his eyes. It sounds so genuine I glance up at him, startled.

“Damn. This is incredible.”

Nana’s smile might break her face. “I like a man who shows up with an appetite. And it’s not often you get to meet the man who’s stolen your favorite granddaughter’s heart.”

“Nana...” I squirm as she directs me to a seat. “I’m your only granddaughter.”

It’s true. My cousins are boys, even if their wives gossip like they’ve always been Winkleys.

“Does that mean I love you any less?” Nana looks so threatening, brandishing a serving spoon like a weapon, I’m forced to laugh and shake my head as she turns her attention back to the potatoes. “I thought not.”

Dexter takes his place beside me and slips his hand into mine again. I don’t know when I pulled away.

My palm feels so sweaty it’s indecent.

Oh God.

“Would you like a drink?” Nana asks Dexter, already pouring me a tall glass of wine. It’s a struggle not to glug down the whole thing to medicate my nerves.

“Just the wine,” Dexter says. “I’m driving tonight.”

She pours him a glass and passes it over before turning her attention to serving dinner. I think she’ll be doing this until the day she dies, ever the attentive host, totally focused on her dinner parties and dishing up food that’s so divine it leaves everyone craving more.

The kitchen has been the focal point of the house for as long as I can remember, and not just for baking. It’s a place of memories, hard work, endless laughter, and life.

“So, Dexter, tell me about yourself. Junie’s been holding all your secrets so close to her chest I’m worried she’ll suffocate them,” Nana says as she heaps heavenly potatoes onto my plate. Far too many, but that’s how she rolls. It’s not



dinner unless you stumble away overfed and bursting at the seams.

He glances at me slowly.

The moment of truth.

“We don’t talk business much, do we, Sweet Stuff?” The endearment slips from his tongue like honey. I don’t know whether to laugh hysterically or burst into flames. Or how to pretend this is anything close to ordinary.

“Uh, yeah. I barely know what you do.” I laugh awkwardly, playing it off as a joke, but if Nana only knew the truth...

“I’m a founding member and owner of Higher Ends International,” Dexter says, launching into a polished summary he must’ve used in a hundred meetings. While he explains their bougie luxury rental business—in excruciating detail, no less—I study my plate so I’m not scrutinizing Nana’s face every second, wondering if she’s buying it.

The ribs are cooked to perfection with a sauce that does Kansas City proud. The pies Nana used to supply to the best smokehouses in town for a bargain really paid off when the barbecue masters invited her to learn from them.

The potatoes, too, crunchy with just the right hint of rosemary. A little of her homemade aioli on the side makes my mouth sing.

She’s outdone herself, but she always does.

If only I could enjoy it in peace...

After Dexter finishes his spiel, grudgingly giving his brothers a little credit for their shared success, she clasps her hands and says grace.

I bite my cheek and glance up at him, but his expression doesn’t crack. He just bows his head respectfully.

“...good God, good meat, Amen and let’s eat!” Nana finishes with a wolfish smile, looking up at us both. She may be old-fashioned, but she tries to make her traditions fun.

“Hurry up and clean your plates. There’s plenty more where that came from.”

“Gladly,” Dexter says, stripping meat off a rib and shoveling it into his mouth.

There’s something weirdly adorable about him eating with real passion, not picking at his plate with perfectly mild manners like I figured he would. I know Nana appreciates it too, nodding her approval as his food disappears rapidly.

I join in, gobbling up potatoes while Nana fires off a few more questions about his company. Of course.

She’s probably thrilled that I’m finally dating someone with a better idea of how to run a business than I have.

“Sounds like you have a lot of responsibilities,” she says.

“Some,” he agrees. “It isn’t always pretty, but I manage.”

“Maybe you and Junie could talk about her big plans for the Sugar Bowl.” Nana points at me with her fork.

*Ouch.*

I smile painfully. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt. When the opportunity comes knocking—”

“Actually, we try not to mix business and our private lives.” Dexter looks at me. I realize he’s giving me an out. “In the future, we’ll certainly touch more on our careers. For now, we’re enjoying our time together. It isn’t always easy finding it with our rigid schedules, and who wants to talk about work?”

*Nice save, Big Fish.*

“Ah, okay. How did you two meet?” Nana asks. “Junie never did say.”

Oh God.

I take a big gulp of wine as Dex looks at me and smiles, waiting for me to take this one.

“We met at the Nelson-Atkins museum last winter,” I say carefully. “Turns out, he’s a big fan of modern art.”

“She walked up to me admiring my favorite piece and insulted it to my face,” he says bluntly. I send him a glare. This wasn’t part of the plan. “She told me modern art can be— what was it you said, Junie?”

I remember the conversation we had in his office.

“Uh, underwhelming? Colorful but confusing? What can I say, I like my pretty pictures more when I don’t need a psych degree to understand them...”

“Right, that’s it. And I said—”

“You asked if I need everything spelled out when I take a walk in the woods. You insisted some art can be so abstract it has its own meaning, just like nature. Then I got up in arms and told you how wrong you were.”

“She was smitten in the first five minutes,” he says, throwing a heavy look at Nana.

She cackles wildly.

“Excuse me?” I jab my fork at him. “*You* were the one who asked me out for coffee!”

“Yeah. Somebody had to correct your prehistoric opinions on everything after Monet and Van Gogh.”

“Oh, right, so *that’s* why you asked me out.” I shake my head.

His face relaxes into an easy smile that crinkles the corner of his eyes. “Nah. I asked you out because I love seeing you get all worked up about the stuff you care about. A lot of people won’t do that for anything.”

I’m blushing.

Holy hell, I’m *blushing*.

Again.

Nana bursts into a new laughing fit.

To compensate, I drain the rest of my wine and pour myself another glass. Yeah, the only way I’m going to get through tonight is with dangerous amounts of cabernet.

“Amazing ribs, Jo,” Dexter says, thankfully diverting her attention before I choke on a potato. “It’s easy to see why Junie’s a natural at what she does.”

“Oh, baking always had her heart. She’s wanted to work at the Sugar Bowl since she was making cookies out of Play-Doh. Didn’t you, Junie?” Nana smiles at me, probably thinking she’s doing me a favor. But the less we talk about my childhood, the better—especially before she touches the depressing stuff.

“Always.” I force a smile. It’s not like my other dreams were ever *concrete*.

And I’m good at cooking, baking especially. I take a lot of pride in my stuff, the way a customer’s eyes light up when they taste the Sugar Bowl’s magic for the first time.

I just never thought making people happy would come with a nice big side of crushing responsibility.

Sensing my discomfort, Dexter keeps the conversation on food and barbecue places he loves. I nibble at the creamed corn, extra glad he’s here to pick up the pieces.

I didn’t realize how smooth he is when he keeps his short-fused attitude in check.

How many social situations has he had to sit through like this, always pinpointing the right thing to say?

He knows just how hard to push, just how warm to make his voice as he showers praise on the food and listens warmly while Nana rattles on about all the rock stars of barbecue she knows in this city.

I wonder a bit jealously if this is the first grandmother he’s had to charm—or has he practiced this on lots of other women’s families?

Probably the first he’s had to charm for a pretend relationship, anyway.

At least I can be the first at something.

Nana doesn’t say anything as she clears my empty plate, but she tops off my wine again and brings out dessert.

I try not to laugh as Dexter's face drops.

He's about to break character, clinging to a neutral look and holding back a scowl for the ages. It's the way the corners of his mouth tighten. The way he eyeballs the cake like he wants to punch it rather than eat it.

Miraculously, Nana doesn't notice.

"There's more," Nana says proudly. "I know how much you must like your desserts to be with my Junie, so I made three classic goodies."

My eyes flick over the spread.

Chocolate fudge cake. Cherry pie. Bola de Berlim—custard-filled Portuguese donuts. Y'know, just in case regular donuts aren't sweet enough for him.

I help myself to a generous slice of chocolate fudge cake and Nana hands him a plate with all three desserts.

Dexter looks at them with the same joy as a little boy staring down a pile of brussels sprouts.

"Aren't you thrilled you're dating a baker?" I ask, my tone saccharine.

*Shut it*, his evil eye says before he fakes a smile for Nana.

"Looks delightful. Yes, I'm a lucky, lucky man. Can't believe it sometimes," he rumbles.

"Eat up, young man!" Nana urges, taking a donut for herself and watching him with the same doting look she normally saves for me. "There's always more. No one's tracking your dessert count in this house, dear."

"I never would've guessed," he says gruffly. "These look divine, but I'm not sure I'll be able to handle much after the main course..."

I'm about to break down in hysterics, knowing he's probably doing the mental math already, hashing out how much time he'll have to put in sweating to burn off the extra calories.

That's probably how he approaches his marketing, too.

Hell, it's how he approached me, isn't it?

Calculating to a fault.

"Dexter, you heard the lady. Eat," I hiss playfully, taking a nice big bite of my cake.

Yum.

Nana knows just how to make it melt in your mouth like a good piece of fudge. Call it my inner basic bitch, but this is my favorite dessert of hers ever.

On my next bite, Dexter joins me, slicing into the donut.

To his credit, he does an amazing job of keeping pure disgust off his face, but he hasn't looked this tense since I saw him with Forrest Haute.

"The chocolate cake is my favorite," I say, nabbing another forkful off his plate to be a good sport. He should thank me later—it's easily the sweetest thing on there. I totally deserve a pay raise for this.

"You've always been a chocoholic." Nana beams at me.

"Only because you make the best, even the really dark stuff like the cocoa truffles you made last Christmas. It's usually too bitter, but yours is just right, Nana."

"Yeah. Just right," Dexter manages, swallowing a mouthful of pure fudge without chewing.

I hide a grin.

Bet he wishes he didn't compliment the food so much earlier now.

"So tell me," Nana says, clasping her hands together and looking at Dexter. "What are your plans for my granddaughter?"

I almost spit out my cake.

"Nana! You can't be so direct," I whisper.

"You can and you will when you're this old, hon. You'll understand some day. After seventy years, a person gets awfully sick of beating around the bush."

Oh my God, this is it.

The end of me.

I'm also getting horrible flashbacks of the time she dropped the same question on Liam and he gave her an answer that haunts me to this day.

*Why, I wanna marry her, Jo. Isn't it obvious?*

If Dexter tells her he wants to marry me, I will die.

Like this will become a 9-1-1 emergency.

Also, I can't bear to see Nana's hopes destroyed again.

To endure the ugly whispers from my cousins a second time, the sad sympathetic looks when it's all over, the smiling assurances that 'someday you'll find your man' that are supposed to be kind but just come off as annoying.

Dexter frowns at me, just slightly, the tips of his brows pulling together. The expression is echoed in his eyes.

I don't dare shake my head. Not when Nana's watching like he's holding the key to the universe. I'm frozen inside.

"Well," he says slowly, still looking at me, "Junie's pretty special, huh?"

*Please, I beg, wishing I could beam my thoughts into his head. Please don't mention getting married.*

"We're coming up on six months together," he continues, glancing back at Nana as he drapes his arm over the back of my chair. "You're a lovely lady, Jo, and I can't be anything but straight with you. We haven't made any big plans for the future yet. There's a good chance that's coming someday, but we're focused on today. And right now, we love spending time together. Right, Junie?"

"R-right," I sputter breathlessly.

God, it's suddenly too hot in here.

Dex's arm presses against my shoulders with a slight pressure that reminds me he's here.

He's doing everything he can.

He's here, acting his heart out and handling Nana delicately so he can satisfy my end of the deal and fix his mistakes.

My heart swells.

"Hmmm. Interesting answer," Nana says, sitting back in her chair. "I guess I won't have to chase you out of here with a shotgun just yet. If you're good to my Junie, then you're good to me, and from what I've seen this evening, sir, you know how to make her smile."

The tension dissipates so fast I feel like I've been dropped back into my own body.

Holy crap.

We pulled it off.

She believes his fake boyfriend act.

*She likes him.*

In the long run, that makes this whole thing so much worse. But tonight, it's the win we need.

"Junie, be a dear and come help me find a new bottle of wine." Nana gets up from the table and beckons me over.

With a longing glance, Dexter removes his arm and I head into her walk-in pantry. She closes the pocket door behind me.

"Okay, let's hear it. What do you really think?" I ask.

"Oh, he's *wonderful!*" she whispers. "Don't you dare let a man like him slip through your fingers, missy."

I sigh.

Did I mention there were drawbacks to spinning the perfect illusion?

"He's Dex," I say simply.

*So convincing. Great acting, Junie.*

"Truth be told, he reminds me a little of your grandfather when he was young," she says, clasping her hands together, a dreamy look on her face.



Oh no. Now she's showering him with the highest praise.

Granddad died when I was a kid so I don't remember much. Just the odd sun-bleached memory at the back of my head. But I do remember the way they looked at each other and that vibrant smile I haven't seen on Nana's face since he left.

"No way," I say, almost out of habit.

"Yes, yes." She opens the wine fridge and starts sifting through bottles. "You're young and in love and you're making your old grandmother jealous."

Then I see it.

She moves quickly, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

I'm instantly sliced in half.

I have a sudden urge to drop the act and fess up, to fall to my knees and confess my stupidity, to tell her I'm so *not* in love with Dexter Rory.

We're barely on speaking terms.

In a normal dating situation, he'd be the guy I'd unmatch the second he goes off about sugar being devil dust.

But I, Juniper Winkley, am a terrible coward.

And even if my honesty cost me everything and I had to pay back Dexter Rory every red cent, leaving the Sugar Bowl stuck in nowhere-land, it still wouldn't be a fraction as scary as facing Nana when she thinks she's seen Granddad's second coming. If she finds out we're pulling one over on her...

My eyes sting.

I decide to keep my dumb mouth shut while she stands up and turns, cradling a bottle of blueberry wine. "Too sweet for his palate?"

"He'll live," I tell her. "I forgot you had that stuff since we usually have it in the fall. Great choice."

It's definitely not as fancy or rare as the ambrosia Dexter keeps in his atmosphere-controlled wine cellar, but then, he's driving. If he hates it, he won't be drinking much.

"Are you sure, though, Nana? Grandpa was—" I stop. The man was a pretty big grump, but I don't want to say that. "They were different, I think. I'm just surprised you think there's a connection."

"June bug, he looks at you the same way your grandfather used to look at me. It's right there in his eyes." She gives me a wink. "I was worried you might not find someone who'd make you as happy as Paul made me."

She doesn't know the half of it, but there's nothing more I can do but follow her back out into the kitchen and then to the table, where Dexter waits with his phone. He sets it down the instant he sees us coming.

I've seen pictures of Grandpa.

Old ones, now, but they're the only reason I can remember his face. Maybe the resemblance wasn't totally off. He was dark-haired, too, with blue eyes that glowed like the sky.

Dexter's eyes remind me more of the sea and its endless mysteries. Dark sometimes, stormy with that veiled threat the ocean always seems to carry, but when he smiles, like he does now, they almost gleam.

Yeah, let's blame it on the wine.

I've officially had too much if I'm buying into his BS too.

But I don't object when Nana pours me another glass. The hazier and warmer the world around me feels, the easier I can get past the guilt that's eating me alive.

She stays to watch Dexter finish the cake—who knew she was a masochist—before making the fakest jump I have ever seen in my life.

"Oh my!" she says. Another reason to know it's a ruse—I've never heard her say that genuinely. "I just realized I've got to call your great aunt Mary in Tucson. She's trying to throw together a bunch of key lime pies for a church thing and

she wants my advice. Would you mind if I made it now? The garden's lovely this time of year and it's stopped raining, if you kids want to step outside."

Another lie, though Nana's garden rocks any time of year.

When she shoos us into the backyard, under the little golden string lights hanging around the patio and across the trees, I start to understand her plan.

We might be the schemers tonight, but we're hardly alone.

Nana dressed this place up to look *romantic*. She did it for us.

Maybe she wants to convince Dexter as much as he's been fighting to convince her he's genuine.

My heart starts spiraling.

Especially as Nana slams the back door shut behind us and it's just Dexter and me standing awkwardly on the patio, the lights splashing gold over his face.

We're a little too close, but I don't have it in me to pull away.

The world wobbles just a little.

I take another sip of wine, tangling my fingers around the stem so I don't lose my grip.

"Sorry about the blueberry stuff."

"It's drinkable," he says with a shrug, finishing his glass.

"And about... her, I guess." Another sip. "Nana can be a lot."

He chuckles so sincerely it makes me shiver.

"Stop apologizing, Junie. Death cake aside, she's honest and likable. That's a hell of a lot more than I can say for most people."

Yikes.

Why does he sound so sincere?

I told him I didn't want him to be an asshole but... he's actually put on his nice guy hat for so long it's like he's forgotten we're pretending. And he won Nana over with flipping stars.

"Thanks for forcing down dessert. You did really well! I'd say I'm sorry for you having to work it off, but something tells me you enjoy beating things up in your gym." Amusement creeps into my voice. "Honestly, though, I wasn't sure if you were going to make it at the end."

He snorts, shaking his head.

"The fudge was a struggle. Took me back to my days when I had to live on military rations. The pudding those fucks stuffed in the kits was unholy. Chalky as hell and too sweet by half. Still, if that was the worst part of the night, we got off easy."

And we did. Unbelievably.

The rest of it—the holding hands, the pretending, the constant lies—I didn't *enjoy* what we were doing, exactly, but it was easier than I ever expected.

So was having Dex cut in and save me before my big mouth stalled and got us into more trouble.

"I think fooling your fellow suit will be easier now," I say. "We've got our script and some good experience acting like a couple."

"It wasn't bad," he agrees. There's real surprise in his voice as he looks out across the lights. "Guess your nana hoped we'd end up out here."

"I think she was going to push us out if we didn't go willingly." I lean against his arm, partly for support, partly for warmth after the rain. "But it's nice having a minute to breathe, isn't it?"

Silence falls between us as he nods, but it's not awkward like before.

When he stops behaving like a fire-breathing grouch, he's not that hard to talk to.

With most people, you're always looking for something to say, but Dex seems as comfortable in the silence as I am.

I set my wineglass on the patio table next to us.

"Tell me something," I say, the alcohol making me bold.

"Yeah?" He gives me a suspicious glance.

"Why aren't you married already? Or you know, at least keeping busy with a harem of models. I saw your brother has a kid. Isn't that what most rich guys do?"

"Archer's not with anyone now. His life is complicated." He turns and gives me his full attention, a grimly amused smile playing on his lips. "And what the hell would you know about what rich men do, Sweet Stuff?"

Again, that dumb nickname.

My cheeks are redder than cardinals.

"I dunno." I wave a clumsy hand. "It's just, you work all the time, but you must have women chasing you. Especially when you're young and hot."

"I'm young and hot now? Big praise from a woman who hates my ass. Better watch your mouth." He raises an eyebrow.

Oh my God. My big mouth is finally working its magic, just delayed.

"No, don't take it back," he says, catching my wrist as I wave it in the air too close to his face. "I like it."

"I'm embarrassed now."

"Don't be, Junie. You worry too damn much." He looks back at my face with the same hunger in his eyes I saw at the office. "Gun to my head—and you've got one there now—I think you're younger and hotter than hell," he growls.

His other hand drops to my waist to steady me.

I roll my eyes pathetically. I'm definitely verging on drunk, yes, but not *that* drunk.

I'm so not falling into the trap of thinking Dexter Rory finds me truly attractive.

“So tell me, Junie—why aren’t *you* seeing someone?”

“I’m just... I’m busy,” I tell him. “Don’t tell me, that’s your excuse, too?”

“Business is demanding as hell. Doesn’t leave much time for anything else when you’re fighting for every dollar and scraping to keep your head above water.”

How generous that he thought of my situation when we’re worlds apart.

“Yeah. Guess we’re not that different sometimes.” I lean in closer as he slides an arm around my waist and I whisper, “Of course, you’re filthy rich and I’m not.”

“Not yet.”

Dang. Even without the wine, he’d sound pretty freaking believable right now.

Over his shoulder, I see the curtains move.

Dexter glances back and I catch his chin in my hand, turning him gently to face me, stroking his short dark scruff.

“Look at me. Don’t let her know we know she’s spying on us!” I try to stop myself from smiling. This is beyond ridiculous. “We’re supposed to be a couple in love having a private moment, remember?”

Then it happens.

His big arm tightens, and his other hand brushes my face.

The blue fire in his eyes makes my stomach clench with anticipation, and warmth bathes my chest as he leans down, his breath flowering across my lips.

Yes, it’s just the alcohol—it *needs* to just be the wine—but I swear I’ve never wanted a man like this in my life.

And that’s a terrifying thought—but not half as scary as what he says next.

“Work with me, Sweet Stuff. We didn’t get this far just to half-ass the grand finale. Let’s give Granny a show that’ll keep her old heart going.”

I don't know what he means.

Not until he pulls me in.

Until I wrap my arms around his neck and we're mouth to mouth.

Until his hand slides through my hair, his fingers tangling with a claiming pull, and he kisses me with what feels like the weight of his entire soul.





## SWEET CHAOS (DEXTER)



**G**oddammit, where is my mind?

Apparently, stuck on one fact that's going to throw me deeper into the abyss I'm already tumbling down.

Juniper Winkley tastes fucking *divine*.

She might be the first sweet thing I've ever had that I don't instantly hate.

It's the subtle wine on her tongue, the lingering sweetness of the chocolate, the delicate flutter of her moan.

She's like a wet dream come true, soft and pliable in my arms, her mouth moving against mine with the same hunger flowing in my veins.

I didn't know how much I wanted her until this moment.

Women aren't my normal weakness.

I've never met a girl who dominates every sense the way Juniper does. She drags her nails through my hair and pulls me closer to my self-destruction—and dammit, I want her to.

What I really want is to carry her to the house, throw her against the wall, and explore every lush curve and smooth line of her body until her whimpers come like music.

I want to take so much more than her mouth.

I want to claim her.

Fuck me to death, I want *her*.

And the torn noise she makes when I slide my hand to the back of her neck and tilt her head back has me harder than granite.

*Calm the fuck down, you demented monkey,* a voice warns.

There's that little pipsqueak called a conscience, right on time to put the pin back in before my lust goes off like an armed grenade.

Yeah, I know.

I need to calm down before it's impossible to reverse this mistake. Now definitely isn't the time.

Not when it's too easy to forget about the show we're supposed to be putting on for her nana.

Not when we're two warring tongues hopelessly in love with our own destruction.

Not when this is *make-believe*.

Snarling, I pull away, sucking air into my depleted lungs.

Junie breathes almost as heavy as I do. She looks at me through hooded eyes. Her lips are swollen, an invitation to bite her I can't accept.

Though I can't resist running my fool thumb along her bottom lip.

The way her breath hitches makes me want to kiss her again.

Fuck, how is this happening?

I'm a grown man with zero interest in love because I know where it leads.

I've seen how it shreds a heart to ribbons. Like I could ever forget the long nights with my mother, watching from the chaise next to her bed, guarding her from her own demons.

I mastered myself ages ago, and yet I'm behaving like a wild beast.

Junie blinks some of the dazzle off her face, glancing back at the house with a gasp.

“Oh. Oh, crap. Um, that was probably more than enough for Nana...” she whispers, hurling me back into bland reality.

“I’m not sure she’s swayed yet,” I growl, loving how her face flushes. “Do you want to get back inside?”

*Say yes.*

*Fucking say it before I do something so reckless it’s irreversible.*

“Y-yeah. Give me a sec. I need to catch my breath.”

That makes two of us.

I need a moment to come down from the high, too, considering my blood’s still liquid fire and I need to convince my body I’m *not* about to fuck Junie senseless.

It was a fake kiss.

Nothing real.

Nothing good, except for the fact that it’s left me humming with need.

I touch her cheek—stupid, I know—but I can’t help myself when my hands want to roam.

All over her. Every waking minute.

“You okay?” I grind out.

“I’ll live,” she says, brushing the back of my hand with her fingertips. “I’m just... Wow. Didn’t know you had that in you.” She laughs, and I’m reminded she’s not quite sober.

I also know I’m the jackass who’s full of surprises here.

The so-called responsible, levelheaded one who wound up being anything but.

“Wow is an understatement,” I agree.

She looks too appetizing in this light, and with the way she licks her lips—shit, it’s like she can still taste me on her and she wants me to know it—I’m about three seconds away from losing the last thread of my sanity.

“You ready or what?” I urge. “I think she’s probably finished her phone call.”

Her face screws up. “Seriously, the only calls Nana’s making tonight are to tell everyone in the family I’m dating again. I guarantee it.”

“It’s nice having a supportive family,” I tease.

She shakes her head and slips her hand through my arm as we head back into the house. “Supportive, judgmental, and gossipy as hens. Take your pick.”

I shrug. “Your Nana seems lovely, her sugar pact with Satan aside.”

She laughs again.

Another damn mistake.

At least the tension eases, though, and I know that was the right thing to say.

I’m sure there’s more going on in the Winkley family—no dad, by the sounds of it, and no mention of a mom either—but that isn’t my business.

It’s about time I started respecting boundaries, even if my dick hasn’t figured out the concept.

“You have a lovely garden. Your bluebells would make my mother jealous,” I tell Mrs. Winkley as we head back inside and she greets us in the kitchen.

“Oh, yes. It’s one of my passions now that I’ve handed the store off to Junie. Gotta keep my hands dirty somehow,” Jo says with a smile that was probably magnetic when she was young.

I can see where Junie gets it.

We stay for a few more minutes, following her into an old-fashioned sitting room where Junie leans against my side with distracting warmth, until finally Jo Winkley sends us off with a flurry of hugs and kisses and I escort Junie back to the vehicle.

She presses her head back into the seat as I pull away.

“Huh,” she says, exhaling. “That went better than expected.”

“You were very convincing.”

“I would’ve been lost without your help.” She glances across at me, her face artificially pale from the dim light of the screen, her eyes too dark. Goddamn, she’s every sort of desirable right now in that dress that shows just a hint of cleavage and shapely legs that go on forever.

I need to get a grip right now.

“Thanks for keeping it light. I hardly kept a straight face when she gave you that plate of desserts,” she says, giggling infectiously. “You looked like you had to eat a plate of spiders.”

“You’re lucky I let you laugh at my predicament,” I throw back.

“Hey, I took some of the fudge cake off your hands!” Her head rolls slightly against the seat as she looks at me. “I’m pretty sure that earns me a pay raise.”

“I’ll leave a big tip on the next order,” I say dryly.

“Miser,” she whispers.

“Choking down fudge wasn’t storming the beaches of Normandy, and you helping wasn’t worth a Purple Heart,” I growl.

She laughs again like the insufferable brat she is.

This time, I chuckle too.

The car echoes with our mingled laughter for a second before I catch myself.

When was the last time I ever laughed like that?

What the hell am I actually doing?

After a few minutes of stony silence, I pull up outside her building and cut the engine. The sky rumbles and splits open, pelting the car with another evening shower.

She frowns over at me, her eyes twinkling with questions.

“What are you doing?”

“Walking you inside. Might as well finish the night like a gentleman since I couldn’t keep it together for that kiss.”

“Dex, it’s like twenty feet away and—”

“Don’t give me that.”

This area is shady as hell with half the streetlights burned out and a couple abandoned cars just a block away. The last thing I need is my fake fiancée getting murdered on the way back to her own apartment.

“Besides, it’s still raining and I don’t like loaning my umbrella,” I lie.

She rolls her eyes, but at least she doesn’t try to fight me as I grab the umbrella and help her out of the car.

Her hand lingers in mine for a second before she pulls away.

When she reaches the front door and uses the keypad to unlock the door, she turns back to me with a challenge on her face.

“You don’t need to come inside,” she says. “I’ll be fine from here. We only had like two break-ins last year, and not on my floor.”

“*Only* two?” My eyebrows go up.

She shrugs sheepishly, staring at the ground.

“Junie, what the hell?” I reach for her chin, gently tilting her face up to look at me again. “What’s the big deal with making sure you’re safe?”

“...maybe because aside from Nana, no one’s ever cared this much.”

Damn.

Just like that, I know I’ve lost my mind to this fake fiancée scheme, and I wonder if I’ll ever be able to stop.

There’s a certain stubborn vulnerability to her that tells me she’s not going to give me more, not tonight, and that’s

honestly best for both of us.

“Good night, Junie,” I whisper, holding her gaze.

The atmosphere thickens as she looks at me, eyes wide, the light from the lot reflected in twin green pools I can’t look away from.

For a second, I’m consumed by having her in my arms, feeling her warmth, reaching into her so much deeper with my tongue.

Only, if I start that here with no Nana, it only ends one way.

And that’s one curse I won’t bring down on her yet.

That’s one colossal error I can still prevent before it happens, however much every molecule of me wants it.

Thankfully, she moves before I do.

“Night,” she whispers, shoving the door open and practically running inside.

*Smart, smart girl.*

I head back to the car and throw the umbrella in the back, still shaking my head.

What the hell is my malfunction?

I can’t keep doing this, kissing this chick and melting my brain—and I damned sure can’t let it go further.

Tonight has to be it.

The only time we ever let temptation drag us dangerously close to the edge.

This is fake, dammit.

Fake, *fake*, and if I don’t engrave that into my brain, then we’ll both walk away from this bruised and defeated.



TWO MORE DAYS don’t ease the tension.

I'm a night owl by nature, but I'm up later than usual, tossing and turning and throwing myself into encore workouts and cold showers when nothing else helps.

I texted her a few times—*yes, I fucking text now*—just to confirm everything's still fine and she hasn't branded me an evil heartbreaker for life.

The few texts that come back are cold, two-word answers.

What little she says is some version of *it's fine, leave me the hell alone*.

Shit.

That's it, then. Either I've gone and hurt her, or she's just as twisted up with confusion as I am.

Or she's decided she hates me and she's just trying to figure out how to get out of this insanity.

Fuck.

I can't even blame her if she does, because I'm the one who turned a fake one-off kiss into a marathon make-out session that's left me with blue balls larger than the moon.

Now, I'm risking the entire deal with my antics.

This whole fiasco has lobotomized me. I want it to be over so I can go back to my boring, ordinary life where kissing strange women for fantastic lies has no place.

Who'd have thought brokering new income streams for Higher Ends was the easy part?

Today feels downright simple even though it means another meeting with Forrest Haute.

I call Junie as I drive over to the Mill property for an inspection and a good look around.

As expected, it goes to voicemail.

She won't call me back, either, if the last few days are any indication.

What the fuck ever.



I can't let her be a distraction when I need to focus on Haute. Especially the fact that he hasn't handed us a draft contract yet, despite talking up his excitement.

If Archer's right about this guy jerking our chain, let alone backing out after everything, Patton and I will never live it down.

The property is close to the river, easy access to the main roads leading into the city, yet surrounded by greenery and trees that make it an oasis of privacy. It's exclusive and appealing and so rustic-looking it's easy to forget it's in an urban setting. Frankly, it's a crime that it's been left to rot as artists' lofts for years.

Forrest Haute waits for me beside his sleek Mercedes, already wearing an obnoxious smirk.

"Glad you could make it, Rory," he says, offering me a hand as soon as I get out.

His palm feels just as clammy as I feared.

"Wouldn't miss it," I say. "I've been looking forward to getting another look at this place for a while. No pictures can ever do it justice."

Nodding enthusiastically, he pulls out a key and takes me inside the large brick building. Inside, the renovated lobby already looks like it's losing its shine.

It'll definitely need to be overhauled for a high-end rental space. I wonder if he's cut back on maintenance and cleaners due to his revenue woes.

That doesn't seem to bother Haute as he displays the space, though, throwing out ideas we've already thought of.

"No need to sell me, Mr. Haute. We both know I'm on board," I say as we come to a huge floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the river. Kansas City stirs in the distance, glinting in the light. "As much as I appreciate another chance to view the property with you personally, we're keen to move on to the next stage."

“Oh, right, the paperwork.” Haute waves a thick hand. “I’ll have that for you soon.”

*Soon.*

He’s been saying that for weeks. Maybe the deal isn’t as ‘done’ as it seems. Could it be he’s having trouble getting an outside interest to sign off on it?

I frown.

“Is everything okay with rights?” I ask bluntly. “If you need more time to ensure there are no conflicts, Higher Ends is more than willing to work with—”

“No. No, Rory, it’s just my company and the way it’s structured. I told you, we’re not the fastest but we always do it right. It’s a lovely location, isn’t it?” he says, pacing around in the light. “I’m sure you must be excited to put your own stamp on it, and frankly, so am I. You and your brothers have a chance to make something of this place I never could, and after putting so much muscle into it.” He sighs.

He’s hard as hell to read.

Is he diverting me or stalling me out? I’m not sure.

There’s also an odd melancholy in his voice. Somehow, I doubt handing over a lackluster property feels that personal. Not for a seasoned cutthroat who sees dollar signs first and last.

“We’re not short on ideas, but we haven’t committed to anything just yet. We can’t do that until we have all the boring t’s crossed,” I say.

He grins at me, but instead of saying anything more about the paperwork—like giving me a real date when he’ll sign off—he just twirls his signet ring around his little finger.

“Since I’ll be spending a little more time in Kansas City over the next month with my lovely wife, I thought it would be nice to do dinner. With you and Miss Sugar Bowl, I mean.”

Ah, shit.

There it is.

“The wife’s coming up from Palm Beach, and she’s dying to meet your fiancée after what you sent down,” he says, “and I’ll admit I’m hardly less keen to meet the brains behind the Sugar Bowl’s magic.”

I stare at him.

I knew it was coming, another round of bizarre praise, but considering Junie won’t even take my calls, it lands like a stick in the eye.

“Anytime,” I tell him. There’s nothing else to say. “I’ll speak with her and see when we’ve both got a free evening.”

“Fantastic.” He gives me a wide smile, his eyes gleaming like a little boy. “I can’t wait.”

I fucking can.

I’m not excited for a fresh level of hell.

As soon as the tour wraps up with Haute and we glance at every stunning floor, dipping into a few of the many vacant studio spaces with their soaring ceilings, massive windows, and infinite remodeling opportunities, I’m done.

I head back home to contemplate another dinner date I can’t get out of—wishing like hell I could.

Mom managed to guilt trip all three of her sons into dinner at her place. It’s been an irregular ritual for as long as I can remember.

None of us have the heart to turn her down, even if we’re hardly enthused with another dysfunctional family gathering.

It’s bad enough that I’m going. Worse that my mind stays glued to who’s *not* there tonight as I clean up and get ready.

Shit.

If Junie thought *my* house was a castle, she’d probably black out if she saw the house we grew up in.

Mansion is an understatement.

This house is old-world charm and old money down to its soul, all stunning brick and an airy porch that could rival most

restaurant patios.

It's been in the family longer than I've been alive, the only home generations of Rorys have known. My great granddad even knew Harry Truman back when he was a mover and shaker with the Kansas City political machine, and having friends in high places helped land what was then prime real estate in a time when houses were the biggest symbols of wealth.

Hell, we wound up with a place a president could only dream of, considering Truman left office damn near broke and mostly depended on help from old friends back home to have a decent living.

Old friends like my grandparents.

Mom has never dreamed of selling or turning it over to a historical society, even if the old place is an expensive drag on her finances.

She's always been happy living in the shadow of the past.

Unlike the rest of us, she just slipped into being a Rory when she was young without ever questioning it. Without the long nights soul searching, bothered by that shadow of a greatness I never had a damned thing to do with.

Patton and Archer's cars are already parked in the huge driveway. I pull in behind them once I'm through the gate.

I'm instantly annoyed that I'm arriving late.

Archer never misses a reason to rake me over the coals, and Patton will just be a smug little prick that he made it here before me.

And now I've got this fake date with Haute and Junie simmering in the back of my mind.

It's just bad fucking timing, all the way around.

Patton and Archer wait for me in the drawing room like they always do—because of course this house *has* a drawing room.

Like always, Archer stands by the fireplace with a glass of whiskey in his hand like he's just stepped out of some fucking Victorian drama. Patton slumps on the sofa, playing with the tassels on one of the ancient cushions.

Mom herself is MIA.

"Where's Mom?" I ask, joining Patton on the sofa.

"You're late," Archer growls.

"Very observant." I roll my eyes. "Too bad that doesn't answer my question."

Archer shrugs a shoulder. "Don't know. She's probably in the kitchen making sure the cook doesn't mess up dinner."

"You know Mom," Patton huffs. "If she ever learns to sit down, we should worry."

She's not the only one in this family, but I'm not here to pick a fight, so I just listen to them talk about Colt's latest woodwork creations.

If the dinner with Jo Winkley was a hurdle, then this would be a damn mountain to climb.

But I'm not bringing Junie here to fake out my family.

I also need to stop thinking about that kiss.

"How'd the meeting go?" Archer asks, turning his attention back to me.

"Jesus, dude. You ever heard of leaving work at the office?"

Patton leans forward, elbows on his knees. "Wait, you met with Haute? Did he finally hand over the paperwork?"

"Not yet. We just walked around the property and he promised we'd see it soon." He also pinned me down for the dinner date from hell, but I leave that part out.

Archer frowns, tapping his finger against the mantel next to him. "I'm starting to doubt this whole thing..."

"Yeah! Because you hate taking risks," Patton says, rolling his eyes. "This is our master *key*. A chance to make a real

breakthrough.”

“Imagine what we’re risking if it goes bad,” Archer snarls. “The fact that he’s dragging his feet tells me there’s something we should wonder about.”

“While you’re busy wondering, Arch, I’ve been working on the hard details, lining up designers.” Patton stiffens, sliding to the edge of his seat. “The mock-ups are coming in next week and you guys will eat your fucking words.”

There they go again.

The same personality clash that’s soured half our meetings ever since we started dreaming of this place.

Archer’s too cautious.

Patton’s too impulsive.

Their approaches are night and day, and we can never agree on how to move forward—or even how to keep fucking moving when it’s a done deal in all but name only.

Though they’re both right about this one.

Forrest Haute is an oddball and there’s a decent chance there’s something else going on under the surface.

But Patton’s also right—if we pull this off, it’ll be our biggest deal to date. Hands down, the best damn thing that’s ever happened to this company.

*If* we pull this off.

“If we did everything the way you wanted, we’d still be struggling to get a single property under our belt,” Patton says, folding his arms. My younger brother might be impulsive as all hell, and he might have gotten the charm gene, but he’s got a temper to match. “You’re holding us back, Arch. We *need* to take risks to grow.”

His eyes snap to me, asking me for support.

Not taking the bait. Not today.

“Then let’s talk about risks that won’t destroy us,” Archer bites off. “You’re not careful and you’re damn sure not in the

right mind to slow down and think this through.”

“Fuck off,” Patton throws back. “The only times we ever stopped thinking and made a move were because of risks *I* said we should take.”

“Risks that *I* moderated.”

“Oh, so now you’re taking the credit?” Patton snorts.

“For not letting you blow up our company and send us into bankruptcy or worse? Yeah, I’ll take the credit for that.”

Patton’s hands are fists now, sitting like boulders on his knees. “Could you check your fucking ego for *once* and just go with it? We took a vote. We decided. We’re doing it.”

Enough.

I hold up my hands. “Guys, we’re not at work. Save it for another time.”

“Shut up, Dex,” Patton says, pointing a stern finger at me. “You’re half the reason we’re in this mess now.”

“And we wouldn’t have been in this mess at all if you’d just listened to me instead of forging ahead with this Haute business.” Archer glowers at Patton. “If you want to find someone to blame, take a good long look in the mirror.”

“Goddamn, you’re always ready to pass out blame, aren’t you? I’m today’s scapegoat, but tomorrow it’ll be Dex. Fuck you and fuck this.” Patton stands.

I get a wicked sense of déjà vu.

They’ve done this plenty of times, bickered and fought and fallen out for weeks while I try to patch up stupid shit between them.

Middle brother duties, I suppose.

They both fight with me, too, but never to the crushing extremes they go at each other. Makes sense when there’s almost ten years between them. Sometimes, it feels like there’s a whole damn generation.

Archer storms across the room, rolling up his sleeves like they're actually going to fight right here, right now, in the middle of Mom's drawing room.

I swear I could choke them both.

"You guys done? We're not doing this shit at home." I get between them before they can react and shove them apart. No easy task when they're both about as big as I am, but it catches them off their feet and sends them spinning in opposite directions.

Mom has the best timing, choosing that very second to sweep into the room with her signature mandarin perfume and fluttering scarves.

For a second, she stops and stares, hard disapproval pinched between her eyebrows.

"You boys are fighting in the house?" she asks, mortified, though she already knows the answer.

The tension hangs in the room, thicker than cement.

Archer is the first to give it up, tucking his hands behind his back and muttering, "Sorry, Mom. Heated business discussion."

"And I expect better, no matter how 'heated' it gets. No money can ever be worth it." Her gaze falls on each of us like a judge, holding the same power it did when we were little.

And just like when we were kids, we line up with our hands behind our backs, waiting to be chastised.

"Oh, what is it now? I thought you'd scored your big opportunity."

Patton glances across at me, clearing his throat. "Actually, Mom, it wasn't all business... We were just having a friendly disagreement over *someone's* wedding plans."

Shit, shit, he didn't.

But he did, and he's going to pay brutally.

Mom's eyes widen, go glassy, and then widen some more until they're about to pop right out of her head. As they should



—this isn't small news.

Since things fell apart with Archer's ex, no one's brought a woman around for Mom's approval. And the fact that Patton just dropped a tactical nuke means I might not walk out of here alive.

“Who?” she asks breathlessly. “Which one of my boys is getting married?”

Archer and Patton both look at me.

If I die tonight, I'm going out as a murderer.



## SWEETEN THE DEAL (JUNIPER)



I haven't hurt this much in—maybe forever.

My feet, my legs, and things I don't even want to mention are about to fall off, pounded into soreness.

The Sugar Bowl is finally doing well, bringing in steady traffic and fresh faces. But that also means three times the workload.

Even now, as I drag myself up the stairs to my apartment with my laptop tucked under my arm, my day isn't over.

Just a few more spreadsheets. A couple more supply orders.

Then I can sleep.

At least Catness is glad to see me, shuffling over and twining around my ankles with the same happy welcome mewl he always belts out.

I swoop him up and kiss his grey, stripey head.

“Silly boy, you're slacking,” I say fondly as he purrs and blinks at me with those big eyes. “How's that hole in the wall?”

Noticeably bigger.

Plus, there's a second hole just a foot away on the other side of the wall.

Awesome. The mice keep coming and Catness takes too many long naps to keep up real guard duty.

As if I don't have enough to deal with today.

Sighing, I microwave a can of chili and plod into the bedroom. I'm not usually a pajamas gal—I prefer sweatshirts and no pants—but today, I stuff myself into the fluffiest pajama bottoms I can find.

Bra off. Fully liberated.

Microwave dinging.

Now, for that boring admin work.

Thursday isn't usually a wine day, either, but for this one I'll make an exception. I crack open a bottle as I put the TV on in the background.

It's weird, you'd think I'd prize peace and quiet after being surrounded by loud customers and whirring mixers and rowdy teenagers all day, but I hate silence.

The disconnection.

The distant sound of a city getting on with its business while I'm stuck here alone, still working.

God, it's tragic.

I take another long sip of wine, like that'll help, and open my laptop. The shiny new computer still makes me smile, my pride and joy, second only to the furry beast who insists on nudging up under my other arm.

“Okay, okay. Just let me eat.”

I'm three bites into the least spicy Midwestern chili ever packaged when the intercom buzzer on the wall goes off.

I freeze, spoon halfway to my mouth, and listen again.

Sometimes, it's just a rando buzzing the wrong apartment. Usually, it's the wrong door. I don't have visitors.

But the buzzer goes off again, and this time there's a voice with it.

“Miss Winkley? Are you in?”

Dexter Rory.

Holy shit.

I shove the laptop aside and look around.

I never should've let him know my building.

The whole apartment's a disaster with clothes strewn everywhere and dirty dishes soaking in the sink and cat hair plastering everything.

*Crap, crap, crap, crap, crap—*

“Junie?” he calls again through the speaker. “I know you're pissed at me. Hell, I'd be pissed, too, but I need to talk to you. There's been a development.”

Oh my God.

If the moon were falling into the Earth, somehow, I think he'd announce it in the dullest, most nonthreatening way possible.

I bolt up as Catness scatters, stabbing at the intercom button.

“Come on up,” I say, trying to sound cool. “The elevator's acting up today, so you'll have to take the stairs.”

“Got it.”

The stairs and long, cramped hallways in this old building take me about four minutes to navigate from bottom to top. Maybe longer if I'm walking slowly like today.

But Dexter's devilishly fit, which means it'll probably take him half the time.

Not nearly long enough to do anything about the bombed-out mess I live in.

Still, I flit around the apartment like a panicked hummingbird, scooping up my dirty clothes and chucking them in the bedroom.

Bathroom's a mess as well, with hair still stuck to the shower walls from this morning, but that can't be helped. Hopefully he won't need it.

I'm on my way into the bedroom with the last of my clothes and a blanket I think Catness graced with a hairball this morning when he knocks on the door.

Of course, his knock is deafening.

I finger comb my hair into place without bothering to check the bathroom mirror. I probably should have changed, too, but it's too late for that now.

I just have to hope he doesn't mind me looking as frazzled as I feel.

"Hi," I say, opening the door.

There he is, magnificent and bulging at the seams in a suit that's ever-so-slightly crumpled, looking even more intense than usual.

Guess I'm not the only one who's had one hell of a day.

"Sorry for interrupting." His gaze travels down my pajamas and he winces. "I know I shouldn't barge in with no warning. If I had a choice, I would've—"

I reach for his sleeve, pulling him inside.

God.

This whole thing would be so much easier if I could hate him like I did on day one. But he's made that pretty much impossible, cutting me open with those big blue eyes swirling with regret.

"Come in and tell me what's up." I let him step inside fully, trying to imagine what a stranger sees when they first walk into this place.

First, there are the plants.

Potted plants everywhere. Nana sends them over regularly because she's got a green thumb big enough for a dozen people.

Flowers, little vines, even a Venus flytrap on the windowsill. All nice, nontoxic things that don't need a ton of light or much care.

It's how I cope with not having any outside space.

Then there's the nightmare kitchen, the spices crowding the counter from the last time I cooked and didn't have the mental energy to put them away.

There's the enormous old water stain on the ceiling and the paint peeling off the walls with spidering cracks around every window.

God, it's a mess.

*I'm* a hot mess, and he gets to see me at peak ugly.

"It's very... green in here," he finally says. A fair comment—it *is* green. And considering everything else, it's about the nicest thing he could say about the war zone.

Just then, there's a raspy squeak by our legs. I look down just in time to see the hairiest cat alive adding his fur to Dexter's immaculate pants.

"This is Catness," I say stiffly as the meower sniffs, rubbing his head on Dex's shin. "He's not usually good with strangers, so don't mind him. Much. If you need it, I can grab you a lint roller."

Dex crouches and holds out a hand to Catness.

Whatever else I expected, it's definitely not that.

"Nah, I like animals. They're easier than people," he tells me as my traitorous feline forgets his usual stranger-danger ways and plows his little face into Dexter's hand with brisk snorts.

*Great.*

The man who screws me up the most just has to have a magic kinship with cats.

"Do you want to sit?" I gesture to a sofa that's now laundry free. "Sorry about the mess, I wasn't expecting anyone."

"No, it's my fault." He sits and Catness immediately leaps on the arm of the chair beside him.

I retrieve my dinner and sit back down too, digging in to escape the embarrassment. “I hope you don’t mind. You kinda caught me at dinnertime.”

He nods.

Inwardly, I’m shriveling up into a prune. Humiliation of the Dexter Rory kind will do that.

Last time we met, I was so drunk I kissed his face off. Or let him kiss me into the next century. *Or something.*

And worse—I think we both liked it.

I know I did.

I liked it so flipping much that if he’d been anyone else, I might have invited him up when he dropped me off. Even now, I’ve been replaying the memory a thousand times over. God, I never imagined a man this cold could feel so hot.

I never thought anyone could make *me* feel so good, just aching to burst into flames and walk through the fire.

I stuff my face for a few bites, looking for a distraction.

That kiss is the absolute last thing I want to be thinking about right now, especially when he’s right beside me, his knee close enough to brush mine.

“Guess you didn’t get my messages,” he says.

Oof. I should’ve known he’d bring that up pretty fast.

“No, I got them. I answered the texts, didn’t I? The rest, I’ve just been... busy. It’s a sugar pusher thing you wouldn’t understand. The cupcake game doesn’t sleep in this city.” I force a smile that feels as flimsy as my pride right now.

Honestly, I’ve just been busy trying not to think about the kiss and failing. I’ve been busy ignoring my own feelings, where I can’t begin to sort up from down and right from oh-so-wrong.

The kiss that must be forgotten short-circuited my brain.

“Sure. I wanted to come over and apologize in person, anyway. You deserve that much after the shit I pulled over



dinner.” He scratches Catness’ head as my feline betrayer crawls on his knee and purrs.

I wonder if he can hear my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest. I’m afraid I already know what he’s going to say.

It’s what I want him to say, but having him actually say it hits different, somehow.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you, Junie,” he says, looking everywhere but me. Guess he’s all kinds of tangled up, too. I should be glad we’re embarrassed together. “It was unprofessional and wrong. One big damn mistake after the last one dragging you into this. We were both stressed about the situation and we screwed ourselves over—and I admit I did most of the screwing.”

*One big damn mistake.*

He couldn’t have just left it at *mistake* period?

Did I just get too into it because, unlike him, I drank four glasses of wine over dinner?

And here I am with more wine...

“Yeah. We were swept up in the moment,” I say slowly.

“It was intense,” he says. “Still, I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you. I’m sorry.”

Taken advantage of me?

Oh, hell, no.

I pivot around to face him, tucking my legs under me.

“Okay, hold up. First of all, I might have had a few drinks too many, but I was just as present as you were.” I jab my spoon at him. “You suggested it as a way of persuading Gran and it worked. She’s a believer. She’s thrilled for us. We accomplished our mission and there’s no shame in that.”

“You make a good case.” He frowns slightly.

“Right. So...” I take another mouthful of chili before I say anything to embarrass myself more, like admitting how much I liked it when he *clearly* didn’t.

“Sorry I interrupted your evening.” He glances at the laptop on the floor. “You were trying to work, weren’t you?”

How is he able to read me so easy? Is it some weird superpower?

“It’s fine, Dex. Wrapping up orders and expenses feels like a stretch now. I don’t have a head for numbers past eight.” Or anytime, really, but Nana hinted at how bad I was at business over dinner. No need to make it worse. “Since you’re here, do you want a drink or anything?”

“A glass of wine wouldn’t hurt.”

“For sure. It’s not your fancy stuff,” I warn. “In fact, it’s kinda cheap. Nasty drunk-girl-after-bar-hopping stuff. You’ll probably prefer cough syrup.”

“I’m no wine snob, sweetheart. Until my late twenties, I got along just fine with cheap beer and booze and only came back to wine when I decided to behave like an adult.”

“I don’t believe it,” I mutter, pouring him a glass. “But here you go. And while you’re here, you might as well tell me what else sent you over. What’s wrong now?”

He accepts the glass and takes a sip, not even making a face at the ten-dollar wine I’ve just handed him. “Do I smell like disaster or what?”

“You could have apologized on the phone. And you said there was a ‘development.’ That has me a little freaked.”

“In my defense, you weren’t answering the phone,” he points out, and I shuffle back to my corner of the sofa. He’s got me there. “But as it happens, you’re right.”

My gut tightens.

What else could he possibly have in store?

More dates?

More kisses to feel bad about later?

More *pretending*?

Dexter sticks a hand in his pocket and toys with whatever's inside, frowning at the wall like he can see the mouse village inside that Catness is too chicken to shut down.

I resist the urge to tell him to spit it out.

"There have been a couple developments since I last saw you," he says.

"Dude. You need to stop using that word." Looks like I needed that wine after all and I throw back half my glass in one gulp.

"For starters, you remember Forrest Haute?"

"You mean the entire reason we're a fake couple? How could I forget?"

"I met with him this afternoon to go over the property. He mentioned how keen he is for his wife to meet you."

"Oh."

"Oh, indeed," he says grimly, drinking his wine. Catness curls up on his lap and he strokes him absently, not seeming to notice the thick fur slowly fastening itself to his suit. "We need to get that dinner done. There's no putting it off forever."

I tap the edge of my glass with my nails, giving myself a minute to come to terms with everything.

Fine, whatever.

The last time we had dinner, we wound up spontaneously making out in front of my grandmother, but he clearly regrets it and so do I. *I think.*

But I've been sufficiently shamed now.

It won't happen a second time.

And if I drink less and stay sobered up, I won't *want* it to happen again, either.

I'd rather walk on nails than have this conversation again.

Never mind the fact that I've had a few sips tonight and he still looks way too delicious for his own good. No man should

be blessed with that jawline, those cheekbones, and eyes like the Atlantic.

And now I know what those lips taste like—lips that I’ve seen go hard with contempt and strangely soft with surprising sweetness. Lips that kissed me until I was drunk with desire.

He frowns at me again and I force my mind back into the conversation.

“That’s fine,” I say. “We knew it was coming. If he likes my baking, then we’ve got something positive to work with. After Nana, it should be a cakewalk. Maybe literally. Oh, should I bring him a cake?”

“Cool it, Sweet Stuff,” Dexter says, his blue eyes glinting like knives. “Believe me, he might sound unthreatening, but he’s more dangerous than he looks.”

“Dangerous?” I echo.

“Never mind.” But Dexter just glances around the apartment again, keeping his mouth shut.

“What kind of dangerous? Like do I have to worry about him stalking me home?” I press. “When you say dangerous, do you mean he’s—”

“I just mean he’s clever. A bit of an egomaniac, like most guys with his money and his record. He stomps around for his own amusement. He doesn’t always care who he steps on,” he explains. “Fooling him won’t be as easy as you think. Thank God for the sweets, though. You’re right about them giving us a huge leg up.”

“Oh, if *that’s* all.” I roll my eyes. “We did fool Nana. If we did it once, we can certainly do it again.”

“She wasn’t the person this entire deal hinges on.” He rubs his hands across his face, and for a second I feel sorry for him.

Yes, he’s a giant dick sometimes, but I can almost see the stress piled up on his shoulders.

“Hey,” I say, reaching out and touching his arm. “We’re old hats at this now. I’ve even met your brothers and didn’t die. It’ll be okay.”

“Who the hell else says *old hats* these days?” A tiny smile pulls at the corner of his mouth.

“Oh my God, Dex. Be serious.”

He pats my hand affectionately, his palm warm and calloused. I wonder what he’s done to make it that way. Maybe it’s all that working out he does, his need to hit things.

Sigh.

And there I go, thinking about him exercising again, working his hard, corded body like a fine-tuned machine.

I need to stop thinking about him sweating, straining, groaning with exertion.

I definitely don’t need more of the image that’s been living rent-free in my head since Nana’s dinner.

“You’re right. We’ll survive. I wish I could say it’s the only worry.” He sighs. “My little brother left me with a family complication.”

“Patton?” I recall the brother he’s talking about—the bright-eyed one with the sharp smile and ruthless charm.

“The one and only,” he snarls.

“What did he do?”

“He told my mother about us.”

*What the what?*

I chew my lip as I watch about fifty emotions flick across his face. Every shade of frustration and resignation known to humankind surfaces.

God, he doesn’t want this any more than I do.

“Oh. Ouch. Um, so you mean there’s one more person we have to fool?” My stomach twists.

“I know,” he says, glancing up at me with a wry smile. “It’s what I deserve after getting your nana involved. Payback’s always a bitch, but fair’s fair.”

“I never said that.”

“No, but you’d be right if you did.” He heaves out another soul-grinding sigh. “The thing is, just like Jo, my mother will want to meet you. She’s insisting on it.”

That shouldn’t be so scary.

But for some reason, I’m instantly peppered with goosebumps.

Another date.

Another important family member to impress.

Another lie.

More people we have to deceive to keep this big ball of crazy going.

Even if we’re getting better at this, something’s got to give.

You can only stack up lies high enough before the whole tower comes crashing down, and if it lands us in a world of hurt, what then?

“There’s something else I had to bring in person,” he says slowly, watching me warily. “For your trouble.”

What’s he talking about?

His hand drifts out of his pocket, clasping a small grey box with gold lettering.

*Oh no.*

*Oh no, no, no.*

When he opens it, revealing what I’m dreading, I don’t remember how to breathe.

A freaking ring.

And not just any ring.

No, this is a ring from Dexter Rory, a man who never learned how to do anything without going all out.

Of course, it’s gorgeous enough to make me stupid.

All diamond-studded white gold with a sparkling blue stone in the middle. The whole vibe is both delicate and totally

over the top.

I'm already in love with the wretched thing.

And I *hate* that I love it.

“There’s no sense in being subtle anymore. Counting my brothers, a shit ton of people know we’re engaged,” he explains. “No one will believe I’ve proposed without a ring on your finger.”

“Oh my God.” I’m hyperventilating. “You just... you went and... you bought me an engagement ring?” I say faintly, knowing full well there’s no doubt.

*An engagement ring.*

Those three little words feel completely alien.

His face blanks, but he’s smiling with his eyes, midnight-blue apologies sparkling like stars.

“Forrest Haute’s one thing, but my mother’s another. I’m sorry if it’s not your style, Junie. There’s still time to swap it out.”

“Are you insane?”

I could have searched the world twice over and not found an engagement ring half this magnificent. This man, who doesn’t even know me, is some sort of psychic jewelry genius.

“It’s really pretty,” I whisper.

“It’s yours to keep when this is over. Don’t even fucking ask how much it costs,” he says. “Sell it, keep it, give it to your cat, whatever. I’m sure this isn’t the type of engagement you ever wanted—and technically, it’s not. I’m just goddamned grateful you’re willing to go along with it.”

*Technically, it’s not.*

Why does he sound like he’s trying to make himself believe it?

My brain sputters.

All I can see right now is that ring in its little grey box, the blue velvet inside cushioning the precious diamonds and

stillborn promises.

I don't doubt for a second they're real, and they're spectacular.

Oh, and its resale value will probably break my jaw when it hits the ground. He's paying me a massive premium in jewelry on top of the six figures hitting my account.

The bigger the lie, the more I earn.

That should thrill me, coming into a small fortune I never imagined, but it doesn't.

Not while I'm staring at something that shouldn't exist.

A ring from a man who's hilariously out of my league. The one thing I never thought I'd get with a monster catch.

A fake fiancé.

A man who doesn't want to marry me.

Of course, he shouldn't. He doesn't even *know* me.

*Still.*

Still, I can't help feeling it bone-deep like a surprise sucker punch, knowing that the only ring I'll ever get is just a whacky business transaction.

Not because I'm lovable.

Not because it means anything.

Not because I'm someone he'd ever date, much less marry.

"Dex," I start, trying to figure out how to respond, but he presses a firm finger gently against my lips.

"I'm not done. Since your grandmother was on board with me lending some advice, I want you to know the offer stands. I'd be happy to look over the Sugar Bowl's financials and business practices anytime." He glances at my laptop. "I'm decent with numbers, if you need a hand."

My face heats.

Oh, boy.



It feels too much like the cute boy in class offering homework help and suddenly I'm a mess of butterflies.

"You'd do that for me? My records are a crapfest, fair warning." For the first time, I look back up at him and meet his gaze. It's so unwavering I shiver. "You'd really take time out of your day to see if you can improve my business?"

"Sure. I've been doing this for a long time, analyzing cash flow from top to bottom. I don't know much about baking, but I know a hell of a lot about business."

"Shit." I might cry.

That meltdown I've been putting off hits full force.

This whole thing keeps snowballing. I don't know what to say or what to do. Now we're fake engaged with a ring and he's going to be my tutor. No doubt pinpointing all the dumb mistakes I've been making along the way.

I should be soaring, but there's a weight in my chest that keeps me grounded.

"Shit," I whisper again because I've run out of other words. What's even the right response to this?

"Junie?" Dexter's voice is soft, and when I look at him, there's concern flashing in his eyes.

"It's nothing. I'm fine," I say automatically, wiping one eye.

"Ironing out money issues is what I do," he tells me. "I don't mind. It's second nature."

My lips twitch mockingly. "No, I'm not freaking out because you said you'd help me with the business, Dex. You... you got me a *ring*. I'm stuck on that."

He frowns.

I wonder if he remembers how bitter I sounded at his house when I toasted the only engagement I'd ever have.

I hold out my hand for the box.

“Can I see it again?” I try to keep my voice light to avoid a total ugly cry meltdown. “I might as well have an idea what I’m getting into, right?”

“One second. Down you go, big boy.” He lifts Catness off his lap and stands while I look at him like he’s sprouted a second head. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it properly.”

What’s he doing now?

Breaking me, apparently.

I’m dizzy when I realize what’s happening.

“Dexter Rory, don’t you dare.” I tremble.

A wild smile lights up his face for the first time. Even bolder and more mischievous than the throwback to Nana’s garden and the way he looked at me then in the golden light like I could actually be someone he’d love in another life.

The look that hurts.

Unrestrained.

Overflowing with humor and warmth that made my heart clench.

My heart has totally lost the game now. Sinking and cartwheeling and lurching in my chest.

Then he goes down on one knee in front me, holding the box like a sacred offering.

“Juniper Winkley,” he says, mock seriously. “You’ve been the best fake girlfriend a man could ever want.”

“Dex—”

“Don’t interrupt my proposal,” he growls.

I mime locking my lips shut and throwing away the key.

“As I was saying, you’ve been the best fake girlfriend a man could hope for. You haven’t gone back on our deal, you haven’t backed down, and you haven’t even found a hitman to haul my carcass down to the Ozarks and be done with my shit—though I know you’ve thought about it plenty.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying not to laugh.

“So, Sweet Stuff, fake lover and real partner, will you accept this ring? Will you save my balls from getting crushed like grapes one more time?” Without waiting for an answer, he grabs my hand and slides the ring on.

Holy, holy hell.

My entire existence starts spinning.

It’s all so unexpected, a jittery laugh bubbles out of me like champagne, light and airy, clearing space in my chest so I can breathe again.

I should just accept this twist of fate and have fun with it like he is.

How many women ever get to see an obscenely handsome man kneeling in front of them—and the ring really is pretty stunning.

“I would be delighted,” I say. It’s not even a lie. Not really. The ring has me converted. “Until death do us part—or the contract expires, I guess.”

In a gesture as sweet as it is unexpected, he grasps my hand, kissing my knuckles.

“And not a minute longer,” he promises.

Yeah, way to completely detonate my heart.

Sighing, I smile.

“Until then, Junie, I promise I’ll do everything I can to make it as painless as possible.”

“How romantic.” I wiggle my fingers so the ring catches the light. Damn, these diamonds are enormous. “You didn’t need to do this, you know. You could’ve just sent the ring with one of the letters you love sending.”

“Call me old-fashioned. I believe in doing this romance shit properly.” He leans down to stroke Catness one more time.

But there’s nothing proper about this. I zoned out on him, and he was probably worried I was about to send him packing with his ring and bow out of the whole thing.

Maybe that's why he came over in the first place. To make sure I wasn't going to bolt and toss the ring in the trash.

"Well, thanks," I say, following him to the door. "At least now I can honestly tell people I've been engaged, though with this thing, they won't need to ask."

"I won't ask you to wear it all the time. Just keep it with you." For a second, he looks troubled, before a thin smile crosses his face and warms his eyes. "Just in case."

I hold up my hand. "Um, there's no way I'm losing this thing. It's worth more than my IRA."

"Thanks again for humoring an idiot who ought to know better, Sweet Stuff." He leans forward and kisses my cheek before turning and heading out the door.

I watch it close behind him with my heart skipping.

But as soon as he's gone, I flatten myself against the door, idly slumping down to pet Catness as he rubs my ankles and purrs loudly.

Once upon a very stupid time in my life, I dreamed Liam would propose like this.

Well, not exactly like this, maybe—I dreamed of grander settings—but with the same sort of ring and the same heat in his eyes.

With the same sense that my life is finally going in the right direction and he's ready to share it.

Instead, I get Dexter Rory.

Gorgeous, rich, totally unobtainable Dexter, whose proposal is just a joke to keep the biggest scheme of my life going.

I wasn't good enough for Liam. I'm barely good enough for Dexter to use as a prop.

A glittering, bright-eyed prop with diamonds on my finger just to prove a point.

I can't forget that.

I can't forget this ring is nothing more than a weird gesture of gratitude, however amazing it looks.

So I pull it off before it inspires any other bitter thoughts and return to my cold chili, trying not to collapse into the hole in my heart.



## SWEET CELEBRATION (DEXTER)



**B**usiness doesn't stop just because I've got a bone to pick with my dumbass brother and the deal with Haute now hinges on a pretty redhead with another large investment on her finger.

I drive across town to another Kansas City rental—Parisian Oasis—one of our acquisitions last year. It's a beautiful condo that's about to welcome its first guests after extensive renovations.

Archer wants all of us there at the opening for PR. Something about that personal family touch going a long way in a city where the Rory name still carries weight.

He's probably right.

Regardless, I'm busy planning Patton's funeral.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as I grind my teeth.

He knew.

He fucking *knew* exactly what he was doing when he blabbed about Junie to Mom, and he knew I'd be the one picking up the pieces with another meeting between my mother and my not fiancée. All because he knew Mom would take Archer's side in that scuffle.

She usually does.

Thanks to his bullshit, my own mother is one more person we need to deceive.

Which is why I bought the damn ring and spent more than I ever fathomed on a piece of jewelry.

Junie's face flashes in my mind while I stop at a red light.

The way those big green eyes blew up when she saw the box.

The vulnerability lurking in the tight press of her mouth.

The frantic way she laughed and then looked at me like I hung the stars in the sky when I did my little mock proposal.

She likes the ring, sure, but that wasn't the whole story.

Deep down, she must hate the fact that I'm the jackass who gave it to her.

Does she seriously think I'm the only one who's ever going to give her a ring?

She's young and gorgeous and full of life, sunshine on a stick. I'm not the only one who notices.

Hell, if she took a little time off and let people in—

I huff a sigh and force my attention back to today.

Junie's love life isn't my problem.

She accepted the ring, I made her laugh, and she knows the full extent of the deal. When we're done, she can sell it for a solid boost to her savings and I'll be a distant memory.

That shouldn't make my blood storm.

Even if the look on her face when I presented the ring made me feel like the biggest bastard this side of the Missouri River.

Goddammit, I need to focus.

*Work.*

The condo is a sleek and desirable addition to downtown Kansas City. Although upscale, they're a great option for folks on a tighter budget who still want some pampering, a traveling couple or a lone business wolf who wants more than a basic hotel.



At least, that's how we're selling them.

*Affordable luxury. Awesome amenities. Impeccable location.*

Of course, we're talking elite affordability, with all the perks they ought to expect from an outfit like Higher Ends.

Before, it didn't bother me, but after seeing Junie's apartment, the whole idea stings a bit.

It's just business, sure, but we're the rich feeding our peers while ordinary people like her get left behind in crappy apartments that aren't even climate controlled.

Sad places with the peeling paint and the water stains creeping down the walls and the perpetually broken elevator. The place seems like a disaster waiting to happen, and we're over here spinning high-end properties she might never step foot in unless she sells a lot more cakes.

I shake my head to clear it as I step through the door.

Archer's already there, going over the last-minute preparations. We've invited the usual load of local bigwigs from real estate and travel to the opening presentation, and the press is coming out our ears.

Tables overflow with buffet food, brought in from the best catering company in the district. Plus, a generous sampling of Junie's cupcakes and turnovers with a stack of her business cards next to them.

"Hey," Archer says when he sees me. "James just told me there's an electrical problem in the model unit."

For fuck's sake.

"What problem?" I snap, grabbing a skewer of olives and cheese. "I thought he inspected the place and did a final walkthrough last week? The man never misses."

We pay through the nose for the best contractors and it's worth every penny.

"Exactly. He made the call and he's not wrong after seeing how the lights were flickering. The wiring's fucked in the

kitchen. Those backlit cabinets Patton insisted on are the culprit. He shut the breakers off.”

“How bad is the repair?”

“Simple adjustment, he says, but it’ll take some time,” he says, pulling out his phone and bringing up a floor plan to show me. “We’ll need to rip out the plastering to get to the wiring.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep.”

I rub my head. Half the guests are already here, and Patton’s late as usual. “When can they start?”

“I have our usual guys coming and an electrician on standby. They can start in thirty minutes. Patton wanted to go ahead with it anyway and I shut that shit down,” he says.

Yeah, fuck Patton.

“We can’t show off the model in that condition,” I agree. “We don’t want anyone else to know there’s been a problem, either.”

“What if the work doesn’t get finished in time?” he asks.

“The crew knows we’ll pay whatever it takes to get this done fast. Whatever it takes to polish our reputation. Until it’s fixed, I say we keep people here.”

“Right.” Archer scowls at his phone. “It’s a certified fucking nightmare.”

He doesn’t have to tell me.

The repair could also blow our opening budget slightly, but that isn’t my screwup.

Speaking of screwups, Patton swaggers up to us just then, swiping one of those god-awful custard cupcakes on his way.

“Should’ve known you’d be over here looking like the world just ended,” he says, stuffing a big bite into his mouth. “Ever heard of turning on the charm?”

“Fuck off, Patton,” I say.

He grins at me. “What happened to your party face, huh? I thought this was reason to celebrate.”

“Don’t talk to me.”

“Aw, hell. You’re still sore because I told Mom about the wedding?” He shoves the rest of the cupcake in his mouth and chews loudly. “Don’t tell me you’re holding a grudge over that.”

“I swear to God, Pat, I will chop you up and feed you to your squids.”

“They’re cuttlefish, dear brother. And murder, all over a girl you’re not really with? Didn’t think you’d be the jealous, overprotective type, Dex. Damn, she must’ve made quite the impression.” He shrugs and licks his fingers, officially turning my stomach.

“I said don’t talk to me.”

“To be fair, I made you step up your game,” he says. “Mom bought it, so now you have to shore up your little wife lie. Everyone comes out of this a winner.”

I grit my teeth. “Dragging Mom into it wasn’t part of the deal, jackass. I’m blaming you when it’s over and she has her heart smashed up over it.”

“I know, I know. Fuck. You wanted to keep this whole thing quiet, but do you think Haute’s really going to buy that if our own family doesn’t know?” His grin has never looked more punchable. “Look, Bro, she’ll get over it.”

I don’t want her to *get over it*.

I especially don’t want to involve Junie in any family drama more than strictly necessary, but that ship has sailed. And knowing my luck, it’s about to catch fire and capsizes.

“I don’t know what your problem is,” Patton continues, snagging a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “This is a big night for us and Parisian Oasis. Looks like I’m celebrating alone.”

“You want to know my problem? *You’re* my fucking problem, Pat—”

“Guys.” Archer shoves a glass of champagne at me. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but Pat’s right, Dex. This isn’t the time or place. We’re here to kick off a success, never mind the quirks. Let’s not blow it over personal shit.”

The man is right, but that doesn’t make me any happier about my little brother’s fuckery.

“Yeah, okay. It’s all good, wiring aside,” I say.

Patton frowns. “Wiring? Oh, we’re not just going to roll with it?”

“This is a win,” Archer continues, ignoring him like the ass-clown he is. “And we’re toasting it, all right?”

“Fine,” I say, throwing the champagne back. “Look at me, celebrating.”

“As for you, Pat,” Archer says, turning to Patton, who frowns, disconcerted, “you need to stop letting your big mouth get you into trouble.”

“Oh, so it’s my big mouth that’s the problem?”

Archer raises an eyebrow and glares at him.

“Fuck,” Patton says, good natured all over again. “I guess you’ve got me there.” He sends me a quick, unrepentant look. “Sorry for telling Mom you’re engaged and getting you in waist-deep shit, I guess.”

“The engagement is as real as your half-assed apology,” I snap.

“Oh, right. Sorry for telling Mom you’re *fake* engaged and getting you in deep shit.” The smile slides from his face as he grabs a martini from a passing tray. “Man, this Haute deal is a giant pain in my ass.”

“Don’t you know it,” Archer says.

“A pain in all our asses,” I agree, setting my empty glass down. “If we didn’t need Haute to sign off on this, I’d be tempted to find one of his old friends and have him bumped off.”

“Dex, not funny,” Archer snarls, gesturing to the growing gaggle of people milling around a short distance away.

“Bad joke. Sorry.”

We should be milling, too, but I’ve never been less in the mood for casual conversation with strangers.

I roll my eyes and Patton grins at me. I don’t grin back, but it’s something.

Almost like we can share the same oxygen again, or at least band together against Archer when we need to.

“You know,” Patton says, “if I could do it again, I might have thought a little harder about the whole deal.”

I try not to snort.

That’s about as close to humility as Pat gets.

My family doesn’t do big apologies. Not like most people.

We’re all stubborn as fuck—Mom included in her own bless-your-heart way—and a genuine apology is rarer than a visit from the goddamned tooth fairy.

Archer swings his attention back to us.

“You might’ve been right to go for it,” he says, folding his arms. “I’ve been combing the public records, tax records, anything on Haute that’s out there. Went through it all and I’ll admit, I can’t find shit.”

Am I getting a two-for-one?

Two almost-apologies from my terrible brothers in one night. I should’ve bought a lottery ticket with this luck.

“My gut says I should see it, but there’s nothing there. Just the same old rumors that Haute climbed into bed with the mob for some casino somewhere in the Ozarks. A lot of shady business goes down there, but it’s not our turf.” Archer shrugs. “Didn’t mean to add to the stress about this whole deal, but I had to be sure.”

Half of me doesn’t want to accept it’s just this easy, even though there’s nothing to be *uneasy* about if Archer hasn’t

found anything.

I let it go.

Although I won't be happy until I've got a signed contract in my hand and no more uncertainty.

Soon, one of our main investors comes over to talk with us.

Showtime.

I force a smile I don't feel while I take another good look around this place. We had the whole thing gutted and revamped, right down to the gold-edged glass doors that lead into the lobby.

Everything about it screams money. Passersby on the streets look up at the building and peer inside with yawning curiosity and sometimes a little jealousy.

This isn't even close to the grandeur we have planned for the Mill, if we can just push this damn thing through. And the revenue from these condos will certainly help jumpstart us there.

I grab another drink and let it douse my guts with flames.

After what feels like forever—and Archer gets a good-to-go text from James—we guide the guests through the elevators leading to the top floor.

The setting sun glows orange against the winding Missouri River and the edge of the nearby market through the large picture windows.

This is a view people will pay obscene money for.

It's also a nice-sized unit, fully furnished with a large kitchen with all the modern name-brand bells and whistles.

I made sure of that. Kitchens are one of the first things people look for in a place these days, even if they barely intend to cook.

As the guests move to the window and admire the view—admittedly, spectacular—Patton clinks his glass on mine.

“Cheer up,” he says.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I throw back the rest of my wine.

He holds up his champagne like he needs to prove it to me. “I’m toasting your success, Dex. *And*, because I’m the world’s best brother, I’ll even come with you to Mom’s art thing this weekend.”

“What art thing?” I frown at him.

“Oh, you know.” He waves his hand vaguely. “The River Art collab. She does it every year.”

Shit.

Now that I think about it, I knew it was this weekend, but I hadn’t given it much thought. He’s confusing me.

“What does that have to do with you being a good brother?”

“Oh, she didn’t tell you?” Archer arrives on my other side, a matching glass of champagne in his hand. “That’s when she’ll be meeting your fiancée.”

“Junie?” Now I’m confused. “Stop being so fucking obtuse. Why would Junie be there?”

Patton smirks. “Oh, *Junie*, is it?”

“Shut your mouth before I shut it for you.”

He rolls his eyes and wanders back toward the window.

Archer slaps me on the back.

“I thought you knew,” he says with forced joviality. “Mom went to the bakery today—Sugar Tongs or whatever it’s called—to meet your lady and invite her in person. Pretty sure she’s on her way right now.”

“Now?” My mouth goes desert dry.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Of all the times Mom had to strike, this is the worst.

She’ll be as overly excited as a damn dog with a bone.

And Junie doesn't have any warning.

She'll probably be pissed at me, and for good reason. The art show she's supposed to attend is this weekend with basically no notice.

"I need to go. Make my excuses," I tell Archer, shoving my glass at him and charging out the door. The elevator will probably take too long, so I barrel down the stairs, throwing myself around corners with the help of the handrail so I don't go crashing down and breaking my spine.

Goddammit.

One day.

I leave Junie alone for *one day* and my overexcited mom has to come along and ruin everything.

I just have to hope I can still get there in time.





## SWEET NOTHINGS (JUNIPER)



**T**oday's been a crush.

Actually, every day this past week.

Business keeps picking up since I signed that deal with Dexter—as much as part of me hates to admit it—and I'm even looking at hiring a few new part-timers to keep up so I can extend the store's summer hours.

I'm way over capacity keeping up with these orders coming in, cupcakes and pastries for what feels like half the real estate and travel offices in town.

That's the Dexter Rory effect again.

Honestly, I'm not complaining.

For the first time since opening this place, I've got plans. Real concrete plans that just need finalizing, but they're visions of where we could go.

Where *I* could go.

I lose myself in ideas as I fly around the kitchen, supervising our endless custard supply, setting several mixers going as I make three more cakes and some pasty for the lemon tarts that need to go in the oven soon.

Thank God the cheesecakes are no-bake since we're at capacity.

One of my many alarms beeps.

I look around frantically for a tea towel so I can get the old-fashioned chocolate cake out of the oven before it burns.

“Junie?”

“Not right now. Hang on, Sarah,” I say, finally finding that damn tea towel and almost burning my fingers off as I pull the cake from the oven. I think it’s not quite finished, though, so I reset the timer and shove it back in again.

“Junie,” Sarah repeats, tapping on the kitchen door to get my attention. “There’s someone here to see you.”

Ugh. Of all possible times, this is the worst.

“Let me guess, Big Fish?” I ask, throwing the tea towel over my shoulder and rummaging around in my pocket for the ring that still drives me insane. No one at the store knows we’re engaged yet and I don’t want to tell them unless it’s totally necessary.

The fewer people who know before the inevitable ‘breakup,’ the better.

“No,” Sarah says with a frown. “It’s a lady. Kind of older. But she looks intense. You’ll want to come and see.”

Huh.

Probably an actual customer. It almost feels like a relief to have a boring old, disgruntled customer to set right.

At least if she starts hurling complaints, I’m emotionally secure enough to handle it with the store doing well. I can actually offer small store credits in the cases where we screw up, on top of making their order right.

I shove the little box back in my pocket, telling Sarah to get the cake out of the oven when it’s ready, and head to the register.

Sure enough, there’s a woman waiting like Sarah promised.

My first thought is that she’s beautiful, tall and striking with a certain regal vibe swirling around her.

Older, yes, but she carries herself with a grace makeup alone can't give.

Oh, and her *style*. She's wearing a breezy white dress with a red scarf that matches her lipstick for pops of color.

Her blonde hair is almost platinum and exquisitely maintained.

My hair frizzes like a scared cat, feeling inferior.

"Hi," the woman says, extending a hand. "You must be Juniper."

I look down, surprised she knows my name even though my nametag isn't attached, and wipe my hands on my pants before shaking.

"At your service. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Delly," she says like that should mean something. "Delly Rory. I'm terribly sorry to barge in like this, dear, but I just couldn't wait another minute to meet you."

*Delly Rory.*

Oh, God.

She speaks with the kind of rare old Midland accent and a Southern twang that still screams old money in this city.

I guess that explains a lot.

She's his mother, after all.

Dexter's flipping mom is standing here in the store, drinking in her first impression of the woman her son is engaged to and I'm—oh, shit, I'm panicking.

My palms go clammy. I wipe them on my thighs, praying I don't have flour lodged under my fingernails.

"I'm sorry to drop in again," she says, correctly reading the expression on my face. "But if I had to wait for my lump of a son to make an introduction, I'd be here another five years. How long has it been?"

*Yikes.*

What do I even say?

If we stick to our original story, it's too fast for any reasonable person to get engaged. But she knows we are, so I can't deviate from the original story or we'll be doubly screwed.

"Um, a while. It's easy to lose track!" I manage. "Why don't you take a seat while I finish up with some stuff and join you? Would you like a coffee? On the house, of course. And the caramel-apple tortes are delicious if you're interested in having a bite."

She looks at the cases filled with treats so perfectly glazed they shine, and I wonder if she's like Dexter.

I might shrivel up and die.

If she hates sweet stuff, if she's a health freak like her son, I shouldn't have said a word about those tortes.

"That would be lovely," she says with a million-dollar smile as her eyes meet mine again. "We can't live the low-carb life every day. Where's the fun in that?"

I laugh a little too loudly, relieved, and catch myself before I look like a crazy person.

So I put the kid on the register in charge of the coffee, grab a couple tortes, and stick my apron in the back before I pop into the bathroom.

My hair's a lost cause, so I just run my fingers through it to comb out the snarls before taking off the cap and pretending like I haven't been sweating in a hot kitchen all day.

"Sorry, Mrs. Rory. It's been busy today," I say as I join her at the table in the corner.

"Please, call me Delly, and don't you dare apologize." She accepts the torte with a grateful smile. "Looks like business is booming."

"Things are looking up," I admit.

"I'm so glad. Dexter skips out on dessert, but it's my opinion that dinner isn't complete without a sweet escape at the end." She takes a tiny, delicate bite and her eyes widen. "Wow. Oh, wow, dear, this is *incredible*. Why did I ever put

off coming back here? I'm sad to say this is the first time I've been to the Sugar Bowl since I was a child. My father adored this place, back when Jo Winkley was always in the papers."

"Better late than never! And yeah, that's my grandmother. She's enjoying her retirement now." I laugh brightly, still too aware that Delly's grace outshines any words I can string together. "And yes, it's been too long coming, meeting like this. But you know Dexter, even better than I do..."

Monster understatement.

"Yes, sometimes to my own detriment," she says flatly. "Can you believe he didn't tell me he was dating? If my youngest hadn't opened his mouth, I might not have found out until your wedding day. Oh, is there a date yet?"

I shake my head furiously.

"Um, no. We've barely started planning. Things only got serious pretty recently, I guess, so you weren't missing much."

She glances down at my hand—and my bare ring finger. "It must be very recent indeed."

Shit, I regret not putting it on.

"Oh, yes, yes, *extremely* recent." I follow her gaze and a flush runs up my neck to my cheek. "I'm still not used to wearing the ring at work, if you wondered, but I always keep it on me." I reach into my pocket and pull out the box, opening it and showing her the ring inside, praying no one at the register can see. "Isn't it gorgeous?"

Her eyes widen with awe as she takes in the blue stone surrounded by its halo of diamonds.

"Magnificent," she breathes. "Let's see it on."

My stomach tightens, giving me the same feeling I had when Dexter slipped it on my finger for the first time. This is getting way too real for a fake out.

It still fits perfectly, of course.

The blue complements my skin nicely in the daylight. Again, I'm reminded just how perfect this ring is—and how

brilliant Dexter Rory is at picking out jewelry that makes my heart skip.

“He chose it himself. I never asked or gave him ideas,” I say honestly. “I had no idea he had that talent.”

She glances at me. “You really didn’t know he was going to propose?”

“Honestly... no. It was a big shock,” I say dryly.

“Well, my son always did have excellent taste. But wow, a proposal,” she says with an airy laugh. “I just didn’t know he had it in him, bless his little heart.”

I’m freezing up with my face on fire.

God, I must be blushing so hard she’ll probably worry about heat stroke.

I’m no good at acting.

Even with Nana, I would’ve been sunk without Dexter filling in the blanks, and at least I had an idea what she was going to say. Here, I’m flying blind.

“Call it an instinct, I guess. The man knows what I like.” I smile ear to ear, hoping it covers up my awkwardness.

“Certainly. I suppose I’ve never seen him in love before. Frankly, I never imagined it. After everything he went through, I—I just didn’t think it was in the cards,” she says thoughtfully before laughing again. Then she grins at me and takes another bite of her torte. “He really must be smitten to know you so well and pick something so beautiful.”

Smitten—*him?*—the idea is ludicrous.

Except for the way he laid down that soul-stealing kiss.

The ring’s a showstopper and expensive as hell, no argument, and those are the only two things he’d have thought of before buying it.

But the idea that he’s never been in love before cuts deep, and that cryptic comment about ‘everything he’s been through’ makes me curious. Has his mother never really met another girlfriend?

I'm his first, and we have an expiration date.

I can't be the *first*.

My mind stumbles over the whole idea.

Ultrarich Dexter Rory has never brought a girl home and now it's me and we're going to break all their hearts when everything falls apart.

No wonder he didn't want his family to know.

I want to run and hide. To lock myself in the bathroom. To panic some more.

I want Delly to disappear, to wipe her memory, to stop piling pressure on my shoulders until I feel like I'm about to snap like a tree in an ice storm.

Distantly, I hear the door open, but I don't look up until heavy footsteps stride toward me quickly and someone pulls out the empty chair next to me.

"Junie," Dexter says, catching my hand in his when I jump. "Didn't mean to startle you, sweetheart. I came as soon as Arch told me Mom was plotting an ambush." He leans in and presses a kiss to my cheek.

Just a peck—God, how can a peck be so intense—and it sets my face on fire.

I don't know how I keep smiling as he slides an arm over my shoulders.

This is normal.

We're normal.

A nice, normal, happily engaged couple.

*Hahaha, yes.*

Although, if you'd look at Dexter, you'd actually *believe* it. His performance is still on point, freakishly casual and organic.

"I did *not* come to ambush her," Delly says indignantly. "But just look at her. And you didn't think to introduce her to the family sooner? Where are your manners, boy?"



The sheepish look he gives his mother makes me smile.

I smooth my hair down, wishing I could just disappear. But Dexter pushes in closer, enveloping me in his arm and that rich manly scent like leather and teakwood that makes me tingle.

“I couldn’t risk your enthusiasm, Mother,” he says. “Don’t scare her off. I warned her you’d be starting a fan club damn near instantly.”

“It’s cool, Dex. She’s awesome.” I look up at him shyly and put my hand on his leg.

It’s a deliberate movement, and he smiles down at me, even though the muscles under my fingers tense.

“It’ll take more than a conversation with your mother to scare me off. And I’m a little mad you dragged your feet with the introductions, seeing how lovely she is.”

“Yes, you’ve been keeping her hidden away far too long,” Delly says, sending me a wink. “This simply must be the best torte in the state, by the way.”

“Call me Junie, please.”

“Well, we *are* family now, or near enough.” She beams at me, oblivious to the way every muscle in my body locks up at the idea.

Dexter trails his hand along my shoulder and down my arm, and I exhale, forcibly relaxing.

“Coffee,” Oliver says, putting two cups down in front of us. His brows shoot up when he sees us, but he knows not to say anything. “Would you like anything else? Anything for you, sir?”

“Nothing right now, thanks.” Dexter smiles up at Oliver like I’m not already mortified enough.

Holy hell, I need to know where he went to acting school. I could use a tenth of his superpowers.

Also, the gossip from the staff is going to be brutal tomorrow. As our newest hire, Oliver never misses a chance to blab to the others and build his cred around here.

Delly takes a long sip of coffee and sighs as she sets down her cup.

“I’m beginning to understand how you lured him in.” She gives her son a quick, sharp smile. “He loves his coffee. *Especially* good honest coffee like this.”

“We only source the best. Right now, we’re serving up a crowd pleaser from this little shop in Heart’s Edge, Montana.”

“Heart’s Edge?” Delly echoes warmly. “Sounds like a romantic place. You two should add it to your honeymoon list.”

Honeymoon?

My heartbeat doubles.

Good thing we’ll never get that far.

I store that little snippet away for the future, though. Understanding Dexter Rory is like peeling back an onion. It can’t hurt to know the very few things he enjoys, especially if I’m going to convince his family we’re madly in love.

“Actually, I didn’t even know about this place until—” He stops and glances at me like he can’t remember. “Was it the third date? After we finished fighting over AI art?”

I get what he’s doing. Together, we’re weaving our narrative, just like we did with Nana, and he needs me to play along.

“You mean after I kicked your butt when you couldn’t show me an AI art engine that can make human hands? And then you told me you hate all things sugar and I considered walking out right there?” I smile, praying it doesn’t look too fake. “Yeah, I remember. Third date.”

Delly leans forward, clasping her hands together. “So how *did* you meet? Dexter said something about a museum?”

“The Nelson-Atkins,” Dexter says. “She’s an art nerd just like you.”

“Oh!” I think Delly’s eyes blow up like golf balls. That’s where Dexter gets his charm, I think, even if on the surface it

comes out very differently. “How lovely. You see, the very reason I came here, dear, was to invite you to my art show this weekend.”

“Art show?” I glance at Dexter, whose face stays impassive, though his fingers dip gently into my flesh.

This must be it.

The thing he warned me about, the inevitable formal introduction to his family, and I certainly can’t back out now.

“I’d love to, Delly. I’m no art snob. I just love our local scene.”

“You’ll fit right in!” She beams, and I look away. Seeing how happy she is doesn’t make this any easier. “It’s a casual affair. I do like to hold these little fundraisers sometimes. Dexter’s brothers have already said they’d be there, and I would love to make it a family event.”

“We’ll be there with bells on,” Dexter promises so gruffly I laugh. “Though next time you want to pounce on Junie, Mother, give me fair warning first.”

“Oh, stop. It’s fine,” I say hurriedly, digging my elbow into Dexter’s side. *He’s* not in any position to complain about unexpected visits. And judging by the wry smile he aims at me, he’s well aware. “It’s been fun meeting you, Delly.”

“And you, Juniper.” She finishes her coffee and rises. “I really should go and stop disturbing you at work. I can’t wait to see you on Sunday.”

“Same,” I manage as she floats out of the store, somehow managing to command the attention of every single person there.

Not that there are many now—we’re coming up on close and we don’t have extended hours today, so the only people left in the store are being politely herded out by Sarah.

She glances my way and nods politely at Dexter, then twists the sign and switches off the lights.

Lights that are now fixed thanks to his money.

I slide the ring off my finger and sag back into the chair. Dexter removes his arm, and I try to pretend I can't sense the eyes of every Sugar Bowl employee glued to us like we're a freaking live reality show.

I'm never, ever going to live it down.

"Sorry about that," Dexter says. "I came the second I heard. Didn't have much notice she was going to descend on you."

Descend is the best word for it.

I can still smell her perfume, something expensive and tropical.

"She's nice. And really intense."

"She's a Rory," Dexter says with a shrug, "which means I know she's a lot. If I'd had more notice, I wouldn't have left you alone with her."

"Does that mean you're a lot to handle, too?" I meet his eyes, bright as the evening sky.

"That's up to you, Sweet Stuff," he snorts.

"I don't know if I'm qualified," I murmur, pushing my chair back and assessing what's left to do.

Too much, unfortunately.

There's still a lot of cleanup after getting those last-minute orders out the door. I'm on closing duty alone tonight after Sarah leaves because Oliver has an evening study group and Emmy called in sick.

And that's fine. I don't mind manning the ship by myself. I'm not the kind of boss who forces her employees to drag themselves to work just so they can shower our customers with germs.

"Since I'm here, I was hoping we could talk about the Sugar Bowl's day-to-day operations," Dexter says.

When I turn to face him with a frown, he just shrugs.

“Look, woman, I don’t know a damn thing about bakeries, but I intend to keep my promise. If I can advise you in any way, I might as well start now.”

There goes my face again, morphing into a cherry tomato.

“Oh. Well—”

“Bye, guys!” Sarah calls, waving with a wicked, knowing smile as she darts out through the back. Oliver picks up the trash as he takes off his apron, excited to leave. Probably because he has a life after his studies on a Friday night.

I have a business date with a bad-tempered beast who only touches me when it’s time to lie.

Dexter watches me from where he’s still sitting, a frown deepening between his eyebrows. “You’re cleaning up by yourself?”

“It’s not so bad. Nothing new here,” I say bracingly, even though my back aches at the thought. “I just need to disinfect and sweep up. It’ll be over quick. If you can’t hang out that long, we can just do this another time.”

“Bye, Junie!” Oliver calls as he, too, leaves out the back. The door closes and we’re alone.

“How often does this happen?” he asks. “How fucking often are you stuck here after close?”

“Oh, it can’t be more than...” I count in my head. “Three times this week?”

“This week?” He folds his arms and his eyes rip through me. “How many hours do you work, Junie?”

“A lot. But the good news is, if we keep doing this well, I’m thinking about hiring a few new part-timers to handle the evenings we’re open later, so—”

“That doesn’t answer my question, sweetheart.”

Sweet Jesus.

Even the way he says *sweetheart* makes my heart flutter, just as much as it stalls me in my tracks.

I need to get a grip.

But then he rolls up his sleeves and I lose my last hope of having any coherent thoughts.

He's obscenely muscled, but I already knew that.

What I didn't expect was the detailed mess of military tattoos spiraling up his forearms, all black and stark and a little dangerous.

He was in the Army, I think, judging by the eagles.

Now the indoor gym routine from hell makes sense, and so does that physique. The military honed him into a human work of art, and Dex hasn't stopped honing.

"Junie?" he asks.

I realize I've been staring. Maybe drooling.

My heart rockets up my throat. I'm pretty sure I'm reaching new levels of death-by-crush.

I really wish I could figure out how to not spend my life blushing around this guy.

"Right. Um." I need to find some chill before he thinks I'm utterly insane. "Yes, well, I work a lot. But so do you. Where's the harm in that?"

A sad smile touches his mouth. "There's a difference between burning the midnight oil and burning yourself down, Junie. When you're this worn out, you need a break. You need to delegate. That's where you can help yourself, by bringing more hands on board."

Jeez, he's being nice.

I mean, what counts for *nice* in his own growly, overprotective way. But there's real concern in his voice.

He cares, and that leaves my heart that much more wrecked.

"I'll be fine, Dex. But maybe we can talk another time? I really don't want to make you wait around."

“What do you mean?” He spreads his hands. “I’m here now, aren’t I? Put me to work. We can talk specifics while we clean up. Show me what goes on behind the scenes. I don’t know jack about bakeries, but a man can learn.”

How?

How is he so perfect he renders me incoherent?

“You... you don’t need to do that. Honestly.”

“And you don’t need to drag yourself home to another cold bowl of chili,” he rumbles with a knowing look. “Tell me what you need.”

Out of arguments, I point him to a broom and start on the tables, swiping the crumbs aside so he can catch them as he goes past.

As we work, we talk about the Sugar Bowl. I run him through the routine, from the pre-opening prep to closing cleanup.

He asks probing questions.

Like where we source our ingredients, how often they’re delivered, whether we have a website and what state it’s in. The last one’s pretty embarrassing—we *do* have a website, but it hasn’t been updated in seven years, and it shows.

We’re barely equipped to answer emails, much less handle mobile orders. And when it comes to having a nifty app, I might as well wish for a unicorn.

An hour later, I can’t say I mind the extra muscle.

Working together, we blow through everything a lot faster than usual. I set Dex to mopping the front while I clean up the equipment in the back.

“What about your plans for upgrades and renovations?” he asks as I exit the kitchen. The floor’s almost finished, too, gleaming wet and smelling like fresh lemon. A floor that we’ll have to do *something* with eventually if we ever want to shake off decades of wear and grout grime. “I made a tentative inventory last night of the stuff I’ve seen here, but I was wondering what you were thinking.”

He made an inventory? Last night? On his own time?

He needs to stop before I cry.

“We don’t have to talk more business,” I tell him. “It’s getting late and we’ve got a good start.”

I hang my apron up and switch off the lights, plunging half of the store into darkness. He looks diabolically good when he works like that, the shirt tight against his back with his biceps bunching.

*Damn, those muscles.*

I shouldn’t be looking and I know it.

He’s my fake fiancé, not a piece of red meat.

I close the distance between us, trying not to check him out obsessively, even though that’s totally what I’m doing.

“Well, if you really want to know, I’m thinking about replacing the mixers and ovens first and—”

I’m not paying attention. My feet slide out from under me and the next second I’m windmilling violently, flapping my arms and trying to catch my balance.

For a hot second, everything slows down.

I hear Dexter swear.

I feel a thick, strong hand grabbing my arm and jerking me up.

Before I can blink again, he hauls me upright and suddenly I’m against the wall in front of him, barely breathing.

Yes, it’s every cheesy rom-com scene come to life, complete with the clumsy almost-fall where the hero literally sweeps you off your feet.

In the movies, this is where Prince Charming kisses me like he can’t live without me. And I’m flustered but I’m able to breathlessly confess how much I want this, how I’ve been dreaming about him nonstop.

Oh, I’ve definitely done some dreaming, all right.



But since this is real life and not a dream, I'm just an overheated mess.

I'm pressed against the wall with Dexter Rory leaning over me with less than an inch of space between us, that firm hand still on my upper arm, his heat impossible to escape.

He smells so intense, that teakwood cologne doused in testosterone.

I lick my lips, trying to convince myself that jumping his bones in the middle of my store might *not* be the best decision.

Then his gaze dips to my mouth, studying my lips like they're a ripe strawberry.

My breath catches.

I'm so dizzy that if he wasn't holding me up, I think I'd fall right over again.

Oof.

Like he needs another chance to notice how pathetically into him I am, craving against my better judgment—against *any* judgment—and how much my body wants him with an ache that's obscene.

The desire sinks to my core.

The thought of kissing him again feels like warm water, this steamy liquid gravity pulling me under.

He looks up at me again and the heat in his eyes strips the oxygen from my lungs, brandishing a hunger that ties me in knots.

Holy mother of God.

Worst of all, I think we're both dumbstruck, too drunk on the moment to even speak.

His breath is too heavy.

It falls across my lips until I can't think past the urge to let him devour me, to find out what that rough, scary mouth of his can do to me.

What would his kiss feel like on my skin?

What would he do if he knew he could just strip me down and let that evil mouth roam wild and—

His lips slam into mine with a groan erupting from his depths.

I'm toasting a human volcano and it's as delirious as it sounds.

I can't feel my legs anymore as he lifts me up, the better to taste me, melting me down in his arms for a heavenly second.

Then he jerks back like I'm electrified, his eyes flicking to mine, stormy and troubled.

"Junie, you can't do that shit." He's snarling when he releases my arm and veers away, cursing under his breath. "I'll pick you up this weekend. We can talk in more detail after the art show. You're right, this isn't the time or place," he says, his voice burned.

"Dex, I... okay, yeah. This weekend."

He clears his throat and heads to the door. "I'll bring you my full report on the Sugar Bowl then. Just send me a few of your financials like we discussed and I'll throw it back."

My heart sinks like a dead balloon.

There are other things I'd like him to throw. Namely me.

*Be nice, girl. He's being the adult here since you can't.*

"S-sure thing. Thanks for... catching me. That would've left a nasty bruise," I call after him, wishing my voice wasn't so ragged. "See you Sunday."

He raises a hand to wave as he almost runs to his car, but he doesn't look back at me.

My face falls.

I'm the one causing this confusion.

I'm almost certain he's sporting the world's largest hard-on and it kills me. Which is only fair, considering my lady bits are one more kiss away from starting the place on fire.

I pick up some glass cleaner and a cloth and throw myself into wiping windows, scrubbing harder than I need to, finishing what we started cleaning and wishing viciously that *he* could finish what we started, too.

When did I get this pathetic?

Good God.

This whole thing would be easier with a man who was even marginally less attractive. But really, I got lucky.

I'm doing an incredibly stupid thing with a man who's not the uptight, money-addicted monster he seemed to be at first.

In fact, he's such a gentleman it's driving me bonkers.

I scowl at my reflection in the clean window like it's about to put a hex on me.

This was a crime of passion.

A bigger mistake barely averted.

So why do I wish so badly we'd made it again?

Because we'll see each other on Sunday. Then we'll have to pretend we don't know the *meaning* of sexual tension while it's eating us alive.

In other words, I'm so comically screwed I have to keep laughing through the rest of the night so I don't break down in a crying fit.



## SWEET MOMENTS (DEXTER)



**S**unday morning I arrive at Juniper's place, a bag from the tailor's in my hand and the other on the buzzer for her apartment.

I texted her this morning to say I was coming with a surprise, but I don't think she's seen the message yet.

I hope she's awake.

She'll probably think I'm overstepping my boundaries as usual with this dress—and maybe I am—but if she's going to fit in with my family, she should look the part with a killer outfit to match that overpriced ring.

I glance back at my vehicle, ever alert for break-ins. The crime report for this area says auto thefts happen regularly around here.

My blood heats.

No fucking way should a single woman be living here. At least she doesn't have her own car to worry about, though.

As for the building, I look up at it as I press the buzzer again.

The whole foundation looks like it's about to cave in. I know these old buildings are stronger than they look, but this place is showing its age and bad health.

If I acquired it, I'd probably have it razed to the ground and start fresh with a new build, ignoring the fact that this location would be a desert for attracting quality guests.

Finally, the door clicks open and I start up the stairs.

There's no point even checking the elevator—this place has the sort of maintenance where repairs take six months unless the owner gets a court order from the city.

Goddamn, that pisses me off.

We can't all be in the high-end market, no, and lower-end housing runs on tight margins.

Still, I can't imagine a business that doesn't give a damn about its customer base, much less its own pride.

The last time I came here, I was so worked up on Patton's shit, I never noticed the damp spots or the black mold on the walls. Or the broken glass scattered across one flight of stairs.

Shit, how is this girl still alive?

If she was really my fiancée, there's no damn way I'd let her sleep another night here. I'd pack her shit and march her right out the door to—

No. I stop that thought before it has a chance to crystalize.

She's not my fiancée.

Her personal life is none of my business beyond the arrangement.

She's just a girl I've lured into helping me undo my self-inflicted damage. An *associate*. A sweet little pretender I wanted to devour last night, consequences be damned.

*Get it together, dickhead*, a voice spits in the back of my head.

I reach for her door and knock.

A deadbolt clicks and she opens up, revealing a vision of an angel with her hair mussed, dressed down in shorts and a tank that exposes an inch of midriff.

Goddamn, she still looks incredible.

Red curls spill down her shoulders, her green eyes hazy with sleep. Those shorts show off legs I want thrown over my

shoulders, hugging her every curve as she turns and gestures me in.

“Aren’t you early?” she says with a yawn. “I thought this thing wasn’t until noon?”

“It’s ten thirty,” I point out, walking in and setting my bag on her small kitchen counter.

When she sees it, her eyes narrow.

I try not to notice all the little things I shouldn’t notice. Like the way the material clings to her tits when she folds her arms or the way her top rides up, exposing more of her stomach.

Fuck me, what is this?

I’m behaving like some horndog who just found out he can do a lot more with his dick than piss out of it.

“What’s that?” she asks, a wary note in her voice.

“For expanding your wardrobe.”

“You bought me clothes?” She blinks at me.

I can’t help my smile as I look back at her.

“Unless you’d like to go without, Sweet Stuff. I might appreciate that, but my dear old mother wouldn’t.”

“Oh my God. You did not just say that.” A flush reddens her face as she snatches the bag. “These better not be hideous...”

I can’t promise anything, but as she lifts the dress out of the bag—a green-and-white silk maxi dress—she frowns. “It’s very... green.”

I gesture around her little conservatory squeezed into an apartment. The place is exploding with plant life I assume she can’t live without.

“I figured green suited you.”

“I mean, yeah.”

“So you don’t hate it?”

A shy, reluctant smile touches her face as she looks back up at me.

“I don’t,” she allows. “But how did you know my size?”

“Lucky guess.” That, and by selecting a store assistant with a similar shape to Junie, right down to the wide flare of her hips and her natural waist. I might’ve come off like a creep, but it got me a dress I’m fairly sure will fit and the assistant was tipped dearly for her trouble.

“Oh, wow. These are Jimmy Choos!” She pulls the matching shoes out and grins.

“You can keep them.”

“For my trouble again?” she asks.

I nod slowly.

“But they...” She trails her fingers along the crystal-embellished straps. “They’re just beautiful.”

“Glad you like them.”

“Dex, I can’t—”

“Don’t thank me before you make sure they fit. Go try them on.” I nudge her toward her bedroom and with one last glance at me, she goes.

*Finally.*

I run a hand through my hair as I sit on her sofa, joined by the cat.

If that ‘chonky’ word the kids use these days had a face, I’d be looking at the poster child.

Catness is a large, beefy creature with huge gold marbles for eyes and a penchant for leaving a thick coat of fur all over my pants.

I don’t have the heart to push the beast away as he jostles his way into my lap, curls up like he belongs there, and purrs. The sound thrums through me as I look around her apartment again.



As noted, it's overwhelmingly green, with ivy trailing from baskets hanging from the ceiling and what looks like huge ferns propped up against the wall.

A little messy, a little chaotic, but just like its owner with her feisty energy and wild auburn curls, it's charming.

Though the cracked window frame has a hint of summer mold growing along the edges, and frankly, the tiny chain across her door wouldn't stop a persistent raccoon from breaking in.

Damn. How has she survived here for so long without anything happening?

I'm not the kind of guy who's always looking over his shoulder, obsessing over threats I'm sure I could handle.

Still, there's no denying this place is a ticking time bomb, no matter how charming it looks on the inside. As for its location—

*No, shut up.*

*Not your problem.*

None of this is.

"Hey," Junie calls from her bedroom. "Okay. I'm done."

"Is it okay?"

She answers by floating into the living room with a smile that's pure mischief.

My jaw nearly hits the goddamned floor.

"You tell me," she whispers.

The heels add a couple inches to her height and her hair is piled on top of her head.

She's stunning as all hell.

The dress, which looked passable enough in the store—though the assistant insisted it would look better on 'my' lady—looks like it was made for her.

The sharp dark green brings out the color of her eyes, turning her into a lick of sunshine so vibrant I hate that I can't

have a taste.

I stand, gently lifting Catness off my lap so I can set him down, then walk toward her.

She twirls a full circle, smiling so shyly, letting me see just how the dress cups her ass.

The moment I've been trying to forget for two days blazes through my mind.

How fucking close I came to abandoning all common sense and reverting to a blue-balled primate.

I swear, if I hadn't stopped after that kiss, I would've stripped her in the back room and folded her over a table.

I would have fucked her like a man boiling over, knowing how badly she wanted it too.

*Shit, shit.*

I need to get a hold of myself before I rip that dress right off her.

"You look good," I tell her, clearing my throat. The lukewarm words are at odds with the erection from hell. She better not look at me too closely. "The color brings out your eyes."

Her lips turn up, wider than before.

Goddammit, this whole mess is worth it just to see her smile like that, with a lightness she hasn't had for ages, if she ever had it at all.

"I could never afford something like this," she confesses. "Are you sure I can keep it?"

"Only if you promise to wear it again."

A laugh bubbles out of her and my self-control frays more.

"Only if I have somewhere to wear it. This thing would be wasted on the store or Sunday dinners at Nana's."

"I'll take you somewhere nice, dammit," I promise. "Dinner, somewhere, when it's all said and done."

Stupid, really, to make lofty promises when we're supposed to revert back to being strangers.

Only, when she smiles at me like Aphrodite incarnate, I might just promise her the entire world.

"Hell, you could bring your grandmother along, if you want." I try to downplay it.

"Nana?" She comes closer, and I barely resist the urge to back away. Or better, march her straight into the bedroom. She's put makeup on, and the subtle matte shade on her lips makes me want to kiss her like mad. "I never thought you'd want to deal with that again."

"Right now, I can't say I want to deal with anyone but you, Sweet Stuff," I growl, my voice too raw.

Stupid fuck.

Because now she's looking at me with the same wide-eyed gaze that makes my cock demanding and way too prone to overruling my head.

"Dex..." She licks her lips. For fuck's sake. "Shouldn't we go? I think we're going to be late."

"Yeah. Good catch." It's like she knows it, too. If we don't get moving, we'll risk doing something we'll both regret. "The car's downstairs."

"You make a wonderful chauffeur," she says, accepting my hand. Now she's closer and I can smell her perfume. Floral, with a few sultry tropical notes that invite me to bend her over the back of the sofa and—

And it's definitely time to go.

"Pretty sure chauffeurs don't propose to their clients," I say, leading her out as she blows Catness a parting kiss.

She's put the ring back on her finger and it looks damn good.

"Neither do businessmen," she teases, sliding her hand in mine once more as we head for the stairs.

“You’re right, I make a terrible businessman. I’m pretending at that too.”

She giggles, and for a second, I forget we’re heading off to be roasted and fawned over by my mother.

“You sure this is the best place for you?” I ask as we step around the glass on the stairs. “You ever thought about something newer?”

*Something safer* is what I really mean.

Her face screws up. “I’ve been surviving off discount soup for the past three months. What area do you suggest that’s better and still affordable?”

“You’re the owner of a successful bakery. You shouldn’t settle for—”

“Look, I told you before,” she interrupts. “The kind of orders we’ve had the last few weeks are new to me. So is having money. Until now, we weren’t exactly thriving. I need to make sure my people get paid and equipment works before I dive into any personal improvements.”

Of course.

Selfless to a fault.

“I’m putting a real lock on your door, at least,” I bite off as we reach the door outside. “Are you ready?”

“To deceive your entire family today? I can’t wait! But yeah. Let’s get this done.” There’s something hard in her eyes as she glances up at me.

At least she hates this shit as much as I do.



MOM COMMANDEERS the whole park for her art show, letting local artists rent booths for a token fee and encouraging everyone to buy their wares. Junie’s eyes are wide as we arrive, darting from one booth to the next.

“Wow. It’s like its own little market,” she breathes. “Your mom organizes all this?”

“That’s right. She’s hopelessly in love with art.”

“Does she sell her own stuff too?”

“She considers herself more of a patron. She’s been known to show off her creations every so often, though.” Just like Archer and Colt, though they’re more into woodwork than painting.

The creative gene skipped me and I envy it sometimes, but I suppose I make up for it by being more grounded, more focused on hard numbers that make or break the future.

After sampling some Danish meatballs from a food truck—frikadeller—we wander across to Mother’s command post at a long table advertising the event and taking donations.

Patton’s already there, no doubt buttering her up, and he raises a hand in greeting as we approach.

Like always, her table looks subtle. She’s offering a few small watercolors of cardinals, the bright-red birds glowing like blood on sunlit branches and rural winter scenes.

“These are pretty!” Junie gasps at the sight.

I suppress a smile.

Hard to believe there was a time when I used to feel like that, too, when I was a kid. Like my mother was this superwoman, a force of nature capable of anything and totally invincible.

Now, her cardinals are bittersweet, knowing they damn well might’ve saved her life. I’ve also seen my mother break and plummet down an abyss, barely finding her way back from the bottom.

That’s what love does.

That’s what happens when the tether you’ve made to one person suddenly gets clipped, and I’d do well to remember it.

There’s a reason I don’t date, let alone pursue a real marriage.

And while I'd like to think I had something to do with saving my mother, I know the art was more important in the end.

Without it, after what happened to Dad, I don't think she'd be standing here, smiling and radiant as she greets familiar faces and talks about her work.

Time might've dimmed the excitement that used to make me feel, but seeing Junie's face reminds me of a more innocent time.

What it's like to feel awestruck by the world again.

"Junie!" Mom exclaims the second she sees her, hurrying out from behind the stall, not a hair out of place. "Dexter! I'm so glad you could make it."

"Of course. You think I'd miss it?" I tease, allowing a flurry of kisses on the cheek. She smothers Junie in kisses, too.

Although her hand tenses in mine, I'm relieved when she smiles up at Mom with utter sincerity.

"This is an awesome lineup, Mrs. Rory. Did you see those guys with the big crow sculptures coming in? Like something out of a fantasy book." Junie laughs.

"Ah, yes, that would be the Welters. They're brothers and they travel around the country, always bringing something new back home." The way Mother gushes makes it clear she knows everyone here. "Would you believe they used to do special effects for movies? Though the crow theme feels a little morbid, I'm afraid."

"...the birds did look really sad," Junie says, frowning. "Except for the two at the end, sitting on that big mansion or castle or whatever it is. A little hopeful, maybe?"

"That's their finale, 'Love Conquers All,' I think they're calling it. They've been at it all summer, ever since they came back from this little town called Redhaven."

"Redhaven?" I grind out. "Sounds like a nice place to get murdered."

"Dexter! Behave." Mother wags a finger.

“I can’t believe you’ve been doing this for years and I’ve never been over here. Not that I have a lot of free time,” Junie says.

“I’m just glad to have you here today, dear.”

“Did you paint all these yourself?” Junie glances at me with a strange, almost thoughtful look. “I saw some cardinals in Dex’s office.”

“I’ve painted specially for Dexter, yes.” Mom beams at her for noticing. “Think of it as a family symbol. Cardinals represent new beginnings, spring, devotion... There was a time when the whole family needed that and I found it in these beautiful birds.”

Oh, fuck.

My throat tightens, knowing she’s talking about Dad.

Knowing how far she’s come, learning to grieve and remember without blowing herself to pieces.

Cardinals also symbolize more esoteric things she doesn’t mention, like her belief that Dad’s spirit still visits in symbols sometimes, but that’s the kind of gritty detail you don’t just hand out on a second meeting.

“Well, they’re gorgeous, Delly. I’m jealous. One day, I’d like to express myself with more than food, too,” Junie says, clasping her hands adorably.

Patton leans closer, looking wilted in the evening heat. Why the idiot decided to come here in a suit, who knows.

He digs his elbow into my side.

“That’s a big-ass ring on her finger, Bro. Nicely done.”

“Shut up, Pat. Don’t even start.”

He grins. “You’re starting to make me think, my man. Having a woman is one way you can show off some money, huh?”

“It’s one way you wind up with no teeth left, little brother.” Before I can tell him to fuck off for the ten thousandth time, our mother looks at us.

“Oh, Patton, hush. He’s finally found someone who adores the creative spark like the rest of us,” she says.

“I don’t know shit about art next to Junie,” I say.

“Dex! That’s not true.” She glares at me. “You held your own in every debate about the modern stuff—even if you lost in the end.”

Everybody laughs as Patton nudges my side again.

I bite my tongue, holding in a growl, hating that this is a family gathering and I have to play nice.

“Fine, I don’t know much about painting,” I correct. “With art, I have opinions.”

Fake meet-cute stories aside, those opinions are real. I’ll always value the abstract, maybe because it’s such a welcome break from stark reality.

Mother knows better than to come after my artistic opinions—her cardinals are damn near the only décor in my office that’s not thoroughly modern and transitional—and after another minute of conversation, which feels oddly unforced, we move on.

“Archer and Colt are over there if you two want to say hello.” Mother points to a small table farther along the grassy hill.

“Gladly.” I eyeball Patton hard.

The red summer sun beats down on our heads as we walk with Junie’s arm in mine, hell-bent on stealing everyone’s energy.

“Your mom’s nice,” she says. “I didn’t think she’d welcome me so easily. I’m not... I’m not like the rest of you guys.”

“Looking like you do right now, Sweet Stuff, no one would ever know.”

A blush colors her cheeks, and she looks determined as we approach Archer.

He nods at us both and even gives Junie an almost-smile.



This is Arch at his nicest, though I don't know how much of it is an apology gesture and how much is because Colt's sitting right beside him. The boy brings out his humanity more than anything.

"This is Colton," I say, nodding at the kid. "My nephew."

"And a sculptor." Colt smiles up at her with a freckled grin I'm sure will melt her heart. "Are you here with Uncle Dex?"

"I am," she says carefully, sending me a quick glance before bending over the woodwork items on display. "Did you make all these?"

"Sure did," he says proudly. I'm not sure kids are ever in the cards for me like Archer, but I don't think I'd mind if they turned out like Colt has. "Do you want to buy anything? I'll give you the family rate if you're with Uncle Dex."

"Colt, ease off. Stop selling and tell them about your work." Archer leans back, tucking his hands behind his head and letting little Colt do the talking.

We listen to his little spiel, how he likes to challenge himself and how sculpting helps him blow off steam.

I check out the assorted items on the table. They're a little rough around the edges, but the kid has more talent in his pinky finger than I ever will for woodwork. They're mostly simple, everyday things.

A blocky-looking cardinal Mom almost died over.

A giant pencil as big as my hand, painted a dark green.

A saguaro cactus, probably inspired by camping in Arizona with Archer last winter.

"How about this?" I ask, holding up a giant cookie. He's painstakingly carved in all the chocolate chips.

"Uncle Dex, if *you're* buying it," Colt says with a twinkle in his eye, "that'll just be fifty bucks."

Junie bites her lip to stop herself from grinning.

"Fifty?" I toss the cookie and catch it again. "Kid, that's highway robbery, even if the cost of damn near everything is

like a runaway train these days. I'll give you twenty."

"Forty."

"Twenty."

"Thirty."

"Twenty-five. Final offer," I growl.

He stares at me numbly before holding out his little hand.  
"Okay, deal!"

"Demanding little brute. But I can't blame you, knowing where you get it," I say, tapping him on the forehead with the cookie while I lock eyes with my brother.

Archer holds out a basket with wadded bills and I drop my cash in. Then I slide an arm around Junie's waist and hand her the cookie.

"For the Sugar Bowl," I say.

The tension in her body dissipates as she looks up at me.

"Oh, nice! It'll be right at home on the wall," she promises. "I love it already."

"You better," I tell her. "It cost me a whole twenty-five dollars."

She and Colt laugh together, and for the first time, I think maybe this day won't end in disaster after all.

We wind through the park, visiting every booth, a couple dozen or more artists plus a few food vendors lined up in neat rows.

Junie's in her glory, snacking and encouraging me to spend my money on craft beer, laughing in pure delight at everything she sees.

Shit, how does it come so easy?

If I just had half her excitement, the whole world might feel lighter.

As the afternoon draws on and the art show winds down, I sit by the river on the grass. Junie talks to Colt, listening to his

latest obsession with some cartoon where Lucifer's daughter runs a hotel for redeeming souls.

The girl has more patience than I do, especially when Patton drops down beside me.

“You're still here?” He whistles in mock surprise. “Old Dex would've left as soon as he could get away with it to get home to his spreadsheets and punching shit.”

Looking at Patton, it's clear he's had more than a few of those craft beers. I don't blame him—they were decent beer—but there's no point cussing him out. It'll just roll right off him.

So I tuck my hands behind my head and say, “Figured Mom wouldn't mind the company. How often does the entire family ever spend a whole evening together?”

“She can't stop talking about it, dude. This. You. *Her*.” He waves a hand at Junie. “It's nice seeing you as an almost-married man, you know? Maybe that's what the family needs. Maybe it's what we've been missing for a while.”

“You're drunk, Pat,” I tell him. “Go home.”

“Not drunk enough,” he says. “And being drunk doesn't stop me from having eyes. I can still see what's going on. And hell, Bro, I like it. I like her. I like *you* when you're around her and that's pretty fucking shocking. Like I said, it's just what this family needs.”

“A pretty redhead?”

He glares at me and raises the bottle to his lips. “I'm talking about you having a beating heart.”

“Bull.” Does he even remember this whole thing is a ruse with an end that can't come soon enough?

I look over again at Junie, who smiles up at Mother. It's an easy smile, like she was born into this, and Mother laughs at something she says.

In another life, Patton might be right instead of coming off like his usual jackass self.

Juniper Winkley might have fit into the family geography for real. Another moving piece, another cog slotting seamlessly into our world.

Trouble is, that will never be reality.

Even if we had real feelings deeper than the need to rip off each other's clothes, there's no way it makes sense.

I'm not falling into the illogical killing machine called love, and I'm damn sure not dragging this innocent, dreamy-eyed young woman with me.



IT'S sunset by the time we get back to the apartment and a swollen moon rises above the city on the horizon.

This time, she doesn't object when I follow her upstairs, carrying the cookie and an ugly-ass vase she insisted I buy.

When we reach the top of the stairs, though, she freezes. I almost crash into her, but she just holds up a hand. And we listen.

Is that—trickling water?

Catness yowls loudly through the door, erasing any doubt.

“Oh, man. Oh, shit!” She lunges forward, almost tripping in her heels as she unlocks her door and opens it to chaos.

Water streams from under her kitchen sink, spraying across a floor that already resembles a small pond. Catness is perched on the couch, fur raised and hissing at the slow-moving flood.

“Shit!” Junie says again, surveying the damage with panic etched on her face. “And shit, my heels are getting wet...”

“Don't fuss about the heels—”

She pulls them off and holds them, the straps dangling in one hand as she splashes forward to save Catness.

I'm instantly on edge. This is the last fucking thing she needs.

Even if her scummy landlord pays for the damages, she'll have to fork out a good wad for the personal stuff that's ruined.

Fuck this dump entirely.

"You should go. I've got this mess to deal with," she tells me with sad eyes, her phone already clenched in her hand.

"You can't stay here," I tell her. "Come back to my place. I can spare a room."

*Your bedroom?* My dick throbs hopefully, but now is hardly the time.

Even if the broken way she looks around her apartment, the flowing water making a dramatic scene, makes me want to touch her.

Kiss her.

Pull her into my arms and show her there's nothing here worth worrying about.

I'm burning to make her forget.

She turns to me, her eyes wide and her mouth pressed tight like she's fighting back tears. "I can't intrude like that, Dexter. I—"

"You're not intruding on shit. I invited you." I stride through the water, ignoring the way it dirties my shoes, and grab a tall plant from where it's drowning on the floor. "You can bring Catness. Bring every plant worth saving. I've got the room."

She looks at me like I've just lost my damn mind.

Maybe I have.

Her throat tightens as she swallows, but then she squares her shoulders and nods. "Thank you. I appreciate it more than you know."

"Go pack up," I say briefly, glad that the flood hasn't made it into her bedroom yet. "Grab everything you want for clothes and personals. I'll start loading the car."

“But you’ll get dirty in this crap,” she says as I prop the plant up in one arm, a little dirt already smudging my shirt. “I don’t want you to—”

“I can afford to ruin one outfit.” I close the distance, using my free hand to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. I don’t care how her breath stutters.

I don’t care if we’re in the middle of a disaster zone and it’s *totally* the wrong time, I want nothing more than to lose myself in her.

Goddammit.

“Dex—”

“Pack, sweetheart. Don’t make me say it again,” I growl, ignoring the way she’s looking at me, all new awareness and heat and temptation. “Get moving before I toss you over my shoulder and carry you to the car.”

Catness interrupts whatever she was about to say with another miserable wail, and she glances down with a frown.

“Okay!” she says. “Let me just get changed first.”

I want to tell her not to worry about the dress—I’ll buy her another one if she wants—but she disappears off to the bedroom while Catness looks on in total disgust.

“You’re not coming back here, buddy, and neither is she. Sit tight and stay dry,” I tell him, grabbing another plant and heading down to the car.



## THE SWEET STUFF (JUNIPER)



**H**oly hell.

What even is this day?

This night, this life, this *man*?

He stands in the middle of my apartment with his sleeves rolled up, looking around at the piles of junk I've grabbed and parked in a safe, dry corner. Clothes, plants, a box of sentimental stuff, plus Catness' food, carrier, and a couple salvaged cat toys.

"We might need multiple trips," he says without a hint of annoyance. "Can you get him in his carrier without a fight?"

I frown.

Usually, it's quite a battle when we're going to the vet or anywhere else, but today Catness seems to know that if he *doesn't* get in, he's going to wind up as a mangy soaked cotton ball.

He shuffles in without complaint.

"Dang, that was easy. Good boy." I pass the carrier to Dexter with a smile and our fingers brush.

Every sense pings on the contact, although he doesn't seem to notice.

"Keep collecting everything you want to take," he says. "I'll be right back."

My heart sinks.



“Dexter, I—”

“No. I don’t want to hear it, Sweet Stuff.”

I want to fight the fact that he’s taking care of me better than Liam ever did—better than anyone—but he just heaves the carrier up and disappears out the front door.

I close my eyes against the endless spray gushing from the damaged pipe. I’ve put in three calls to the landlord and the maintenance guy and nobody’s answering.

Their loss, but it’s also mine.

Dexter already had a look at it, meaning his shirt is plastered wet to his skin in a way I find *distinctly* pleasing. He’s decided we’ll need new parts and an insane plumbing bill to get it fixed.

He’s promised to call one of the guys they use for their properties, just to shut this off and figure out the cost later. I don’t even know if he’ll be able to get to the main water shutoffs without somebody from the apartment to unlock that area, though.

God, how embarrassing.

I pause my frantic salvage job and put my head in my hands.

Of all the times for this to happen...

Also, I hate that we were plunged into chaos after a nice day.

A *really* nice day.

The kind of nice that had me dizzy, imagining what it would be like if we were dating for real and his mom adopted me, taking me under her expansive wing in that way she has. Like I *belong*.

The rest of his family wasn’t half-bad either.

The cookie Dexter bought me sits with my purse. I smile when I think of Colt, rattling on about how he had to immortalize his favorite cookie like a little Michelangelo.

Seriously.

I need to hold myself together, but right now, all I want to do is scream and cry and maybe scarf down an entire pint of ice cream.

My apartment is toast and I just *know* my landlord, Mr. Evans, will find a way to pin this on me. It'll be *my* fault the pipes burst because the plumbing hasn't been updated since Reagan was president.

My fault the unit is ruined.

My fault that all my stuff is destroyed.

My fault that I was out when it started and didn't call anyone sooner.

Mrs. Patty, the downstairs neighbor who sits up all night with her trash TV shows, raps on my open door.

"What in the hell's going on in here?" she screeches, her rollers and slippers hiding the fact that there's probably a gun in her purse.

"Pipe burst!" I say, like the spraying water isn't obvious enough. "I'm sorry, we just got home and—"

"Holy possum shit, you're soaked." She narrows her eyes at me. "There's fuckin' water dripping into my apartment. A lady can't even get on the toilet without it raining on her head!"

My brain revolts at the image.

"I'm really sorry." I fumble for my phone. "I'll call Mr. Evans again and—"

"Aw, why bother? He won't do shit."

"Well, yeah. What makes you think I can?" The stress makes me snap.

Bad idea. She might be a little old granny from the hills, but she's not a granny whose bad side you want to be on.

Mrs. Patty's eyes narrow and she's about to tear into me when another voice interrupts.

“Plumber’s on the way, just five or ten minutes out now.” Dexter, his shirt still slicked to his body and those blue eyes of his sparking dangerously.

The adrenaline rush of attraction floods through me.

I look away before I do anything embarrassing like blushing or making a fool of myself.

“Who the devil are you?” Mrs. Patty asks, shuffling around in her slippers to look up at him, all six foot plus of delicious male body with its military tattoos on full display. And even though she’s always packing out of paranoia, she backs away slightly.

“I’m Junie’s fiancé,” Dexter says simply, still with that warning note in his voice. “We need to sit tight. Until the plumber shows, there’s not much we can do with this sort of leak.”

“Dex—” I warn.

“Call your landlord if you want to expedite repairs. Maybe if enough people blow up his phone, he’ll realize there’s an emergency.”

Wishful thinking, but he isn’t wrong.

I hold my breath as Mrs. Patty looks him up and down before she sniffs loudly and waddles past him, yelling, “All right, all right, I’ll call!”

No flipping way.

Dexter won.

He defused a standoff with an obnoxious neighbor I’ve had to walk on eggshells with for years.

And suddenly, I’m freaking out ever-so-slightly less.

“Junie.” Dexter catches my arm, his face too close to mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just don’t want her as an enemy. She doesn’t just live here because rent’s cheap. She’s a few bananas short of a bushel. She stays up sometimes talking to ghosts.”

“She won’t bother you anymore, sweetheart. I’ll make sure of it.”

God.

When he calls me *sweetheart* like that, it’s enough to make me forget that there’s water pooling around my feet and dripping into the apartment below. Plus, the fact that I have to say goodbye to seventy percent of everything I own.

His eyes ignite as he looks at me.

His fingers tighten around my arm.

I can almost sense his temptation, and the potential tingles through me, but nothing compares to the heavy relief in my heart.

No matter how much time we spend together, I never think I’ll get used to his kindness.

*Kiss me*, I think erratically, beaming the thought at him like he’ll be able to hear it. *Kiss me until I’m sick of it and I can’t cry about anything else.*

“This everything?” he asks, releasing me and nodding to the collection of stuff I’ve placed on the sofa. “I think we might need to take two trips, at least.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure there’ll be a chance to come back here and get the rest tomorrow, especially if your guy stops the flooding.”

It’s not remotely okay.

Nothing about the situation is okay—including the way he’s helping me. He hasn’t complained once, let alone hinted that he might wash his hands of this and leave me to my disaster.

Dexter Rory, the biggest and grumpiest fish I know, has gone out of his way to look after me *again*.

The thought makes me warm and nervous and slightly dizzy. The anticipation plays in my stomach along with this terrifying lurch of attraction every time I look at him.

“Hey,” I say, touching his arm as he passes me. “Thank you again. And maybe I will throw together the rest of my stuff tonight while we wait for the plumber, if you don’t mind taking the first load over...”

He looks down at my hand, then at my face.

“You’ll be okay while I’m gone?”

“I can look after myself, you know,” I say with more boldness than I feel. Looking after myself is probably stretching the truth a little. But I know how to keep my head down and not cause more trouble. “I’ve lived here for years, and this is the worst thing that’s ever happened.”

A skeptical eyebrow rises at me.

*The worst thing yet*, he seems to say as he grabs another plant and kisses me briefly on the cheek as he passes.

He keeps doing that, and it steals my breath every time. “Shut the door and don’t let anyone in unless they’re from It’s A Wrench Plumbing,” he says. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

He heads back downstairs like the tall, silent beast he is.

I absolutely do *not* check out his butt as he goes.

Then it’s just me and my newly appointed swimming pool of an apartment.

I chew my lip as I rage dial the maintenance number one more time.



IT TAKES us hours to rescue everything important and ferry it from my apartment to Dexter’s house.

By the end, we’re both filthy and exhausted and miserable.

I wipe the back of my hand across my forehead and look around. My belongings are piled up in a pitiful heap in the

middle of Dexter's enormous guest room that's bigger than most people's master bedroom.

The last time I was here, I didn't have a chance to appreciate just how huge this place is, more imposing physical proof of just how insanely rich this man is.

Also proof of just how ludicrous it is that he's just spent his evening getting dirty and rescuing me and a bajillion plants from a flood.

"Sorry," I say. "It's chaos right now. I'll get some better bins ASAP."

"It's fine. Don't stress," he rumbles.

There's an instant peace in his voice, deep and rolling like a wide river rushing by. You know I'm in a weird state of mind when just listening to Dexter Rory makes this calamity tolerable.

"I'll get it all sorted tomorrow." Though, really, I don't know what I'll do.

None of my stuff belongs here, but I sure as hell can't go back to my apartment. Catness strolls around the room like he already owns it, circling his new litter box in the corner with his tail flicking.

"Junie." Dexter takes my shoulders and looks down at me seriously. "Quit worrying."

"But your carpet—I know the plants dropped some dirt when we dragged them in."

"A little," he says with a shrug. "Hardly the end of the world."

"...but Catness could cough up a hairball at any time. It's pretty much his superpower."

"And I can get my floor steam cleaned if it comes to it. I already have a cleaning service that drops by a few times a month." He half smiles, daring me to continue, although he's *still* wearing that partially see-through shirt and it's driving me insane. "The floors don't matter. Not like making sure you've got somewhere to put your feet up."

“I appreciate it,” I say again, gratitude breaking my voice. “You didn’t have to do this. It’s way outside the bounds of our little agreement...”

“No. I wanted to,” he whispers as he leads me away from the room.

Holy hell.

I follow helplessly, my feet sinking into the plush carpets I’m sure he’ll have to get cleaned no matter what.

He brings me into the nearest bathroom, all gleaming high-end tilework, warm wood drawers, and glass everywhere. The huge soaking tub looks like it’s designed to suck you down the throat of a balmy dream you’ll never want to leave.

The biggest shower I’ve ever seen in my life dominates one corner. It’s big enough to host a freaking cocktail party with a bench and multiple powerful-looking rainfall heads above.

But my mind isn’t on the shock and awe money aspect.

What Dexter could do to me in that shower.

What I *want* him to do to me.

“I’ll get your room set up while you clean up,” he says, like the thought of pinning me against the wall of the shower and fucking me senseless hasn’t even *occurred* to him.

“Dexter, I can’t.”

When he looks at me now, there’s defiance in his face. “You can and you will. I don’t care about the damn carpets, but I’m not letting you go to sleep grimy and worn out. Clean up, Sweet Stuff. I promise you’ll feel a million times better.”

Rude.

But he’s probably right.

“I mean, I should go somewhere else.” I fold my arms at the way his eyes narrow. “You’ve been too kind, but I can’t impose on you like—”

“Junie,” he says my name a little too quietly. “What makes you think you’re imposing?”

“This is your house. I can’t just move in.”

“Did I ask you to move in? All I’m saying is it’s late, I’ve got plenty of empty rooms, and you’re filthy.”

“We’re both filthy,” I point out.

The glint in his eye makes me think he’s also having fantasies about what we could do in the shower that’s infinitely filthier.

I don’t know how it got to this point, but all I want to do is peel that shirt off him and let him throw me around.

On the floor.

Against the wall.

Whatever it takes to release this roiling sexual energy currently stealing my soul.

I glance down, almost compulsively, but his body is angled away and I can’t tell if there’s a bulge in his pants.

*Oh my God, Junie. Stop.*

“I’ll give you an easy choice,” he says, this dangerous note thrumming in his voice—and *God*, why does that make me want him more? “Either you move your sweet ass, or I’ll drag you into that bath myself.”

I stop breathing.

Images of him dragging me into the bath, stripping me and having his way with me play across my mind in vivid detail.

I’m almost tempted to refuse one more time just to force him to make good on that threat.

*Will he be able to stop himself?*

I desperately want to find out.

I moisten my lips and he clenches his jaw.

“Make up your mind, sweetheart. Clock’s ticking,” he says, his voice too rough.



I've never wanted anyone as much as I want Dex right now.

Every glorious inch of him.

I want to know exactly what it feels like when he holds me down and pushes into me like he can't decide if I'm an impudent brat or an angel. Just as long as I'm the only thing in his world.

But forcing his hand is the single worst thing I could do right now.

This is pretend.

It's supposed to be fake, even if this crackling tension doesn't feel like an act at all.

"I'll stay," I whisper.

I want him to tell me he'll stay, too, and we can finally give in to whatever the hell this is, but with a tight-lipped glance at the fluffy towel and robe on the rack, he steps back.

"You should have everything you need," he says. "Let me know if there's anything missing."

*You.*

But before I have time to say another awkward word, he's gone, disappearing down the huge hall with its arches.

Now it's just me, alone in a palatial bathroom with a head full of lewd thoughts and nerves that are way too keyed up.

*Prick.*

It's for the best, I tell myself as I switch on the shower.

It's been hard enough keeping this unprofessional arrangement respectable.

Confusing fake romance even more with very real sex would be catastrophic. No matter how tempting it is in this odd moment.

And God, is it tempting.

This isn't how I am with men.

With safe, predictable, pre-heartstabby Liam, it was never like this.

I shake the thought off as I shimmy out of my clothes and walk under the delightfully powerful warm spray.

It feels like half my woes steam away in minutes, swirling away down the drain with the day's grime. I groan, feeling the pounding hot water in my hair, spattering my shoulders like a ghostly reassuring touch.

Tomorrow will be better.

Tomorrow, we'll figure out a saner, stable, longer-lasting arrangement that doesn't involve us being constantly around each other.

Tomorrow, I'll behave like a reasonable person whose fantasies don't involve a man who's paying me mad money to not confuse cruel kisses with honest feelings.

I take my sweet time in the shower. Since I've been forced into this luxurious bathroom, I'm going to enjoy it.

When I finally emerge, steam billows up to the ceiling. The heated floors make me wonder if I died in that flood and this is heaven.

Then the door clicks open.

I might have showered, but Dexter Rory hasn't.

He's still wearing the same smudged, sweaty shirt, though it's drier now, his hair still damp from the disaster at my apartment.

I, on the other hand, am as naked as the day I was born.

Full frontal X-rated movie naked.

"Junie," he whispers, his raspy voice throbbing warmth to my core. I resist the temptation to press my legs together. "Tell me I'm wrong and I'll go. Tell me you don't want this and I'll never bother you again."

My lips are sealed.

His eyes rake me from head to toe, drinking me in. He's like a human panther assessing its prey and liking what he sees.

He's so not wrong.

*Oh God, he knows.*

*He knows and he wants me.*

"Come here," I whisper, already trembling.

His nostrils flare as he steps forward, almost like he can smell me.

I step up to him and we collide in the middle of the bathroom, gliding into each other's arms in front of the foggy mirror.

Growling, he throws the towel in my hand over my shoulder.

His mouth impacts mine like a man possessed.

His hand greedily reaches down, pushing between my legs.

When his thumb finds my clit and stops, smothering me in a vicious tease, I'm gone.

My teeth sink into his bottom lip and a loud moan rips out of my throat.

It's everything we tasted before but so much more.

And this time, I'm one hundred percent sober, only intoxicated on Dexter Rory and the way he groans against my tongue.

"Fucking shit, Sweet Stuff," he breathes into my ear when he breaks away. "I'd better ruin you before you level me."

And his lips are back, hot and claiming, hellbent on burning me down.

This isn't a mistake anymore and it's definitely not for show.

His fingers thread in my hair, finding their way to the back of my head so he can tip my face back with a pull, the better to delve his tongue in deeper.

I'm melting like flipping caramel.

My legs shift and I offer myself up to him, teasing him with my tongue until he gives back another groan. In the fierceness of his kiss, I lose every doubt.

I forget about pretend.

I forget my insecurities.

I forget that he's a man so vastly outside my reach that this wouldn't be happening if it wasn't for a big reckless lie.

I think I even forget my own name.

All I know is him. *Him*.

The way he smells like teakwood and expensive leather and something else I can't pin down that makes every inch of my skin bristle.

His free hand grips my waist, fingers tightening, until he reaches up and trails a path of heat around my breast.

His thumb starts stroking circles while his fingers graze my pussy, taunting me to make him stop.

*I can't.*

*I won't.*

I've never wanted anyone to touch me like he does now.

It's a visceral thing, this forceful want.

So intense it fills me with a courage I've never had, guiding my hands up so I can rake my fingers up his shirt and over his abs.

Jesus, *his abs*.

They're a sculpted masterpiece, granite ridges and valleys screaming raw power. Inhaling sharply, I'm hit with an image of what a body like his can do to me, princely and wild in all the right ways that feel so wrong. So delectable.

I fumble with the buttons on his shirt, my fingers shaking and eager.

I want him to see what he does to me.

And if I'm going to be naked in front of him, we need to level the playing field fast.

Somehow, I manage to get the shirt off without tying myself in knots, tugged down his arms and discarded. I push back so I can look at him.

This is when it's time to say something witty or heartfelt, but I'm tongue-tied by a tattooed god.

He towers over me, staring down with blue eyes in flames, slowly working his fingers in and out of my opening and holding me up with his other hand.

The V of pure muscle at his hips would be enough to convert a nun, and I'm far less pious.

"Dexter." My voice is so rough I cough.

God, the expression in his eyes—dark and determined enough to strike a woman down—practically sends me off the rails entirely.

"Take off your pants," I force out.

"Bossy girl. You're lucky as hell I'm accommodating today." A long, slow smile spreads across his face as he drops his trousers, revealing a pair of dark boxers—and a dick print so large I wonder if he holds a world record.

Holy cock.

I want him inside me, but his size makes me nervous.

That's even less reason to rush, no matter how much I'm aching to be filled and throw caution to the wind.

I have the most perfect man worshipping me right now, and I'm going to savor this moment.

The tattoos stop at his arms except for one on his chest.

It's a bird—another cardinal is my guess—though it's inked in black, trapped in a cage. The tattoo is a small circle on his breastbone that almost resembles a coin from a distance, but the sight of it makes my heart squeeze.

“Junie.” His voice brings my attention back to his face. “My eyes are up here, woman.”

I laugh.

Right. This is no time to get distracted.

So I hook my thumbs into his boxers and pull them down, freeing an erection so big it might qualify as a lethal weapon. I go to take it in my hands, but he catches my wrists.

“Not yet.” The way he growls it sends shivers down my spine. “You forget I haven’t showered.”

Wow.

I’m not one to turn down shower sex, so I make no objection as he lifts me up and carries me into the shower. He switches on the water with one hand and I tighten my legs around him until his cock is positioned right where I want it.

He catches his breath as I start grinding, just in case he’s forgotten I’m ready and waiting and I’ve wanted this for longer than I care to admit.

“You’re so goddamned sexy it’s obscene,” he tells me as he kisses me again.

That hand finally palms my breast, hurling sparks through my nipples, heightening the tightening pleasure at my core.

*Yes, more.*

*More, more, more.*

His breath is heavy as I roll my hips, sliding across him, letting him feel just how wet I am.

The hot water streams around us like a comforting blanket. I use the opportunity to trace every inch of him.

His broad shoulders, the defined muscles of his back, the magnificent ridges of his ass, his rugged biceps, his iron jaw.

I love feeling the next growl that explodes up his throat.

Reaching down, I tentatively grab that massive cock in my hands, using my own slickness to slide my hand up and down a few times.

He's huge, but he won't do permanent damage, I think.

Right now, that's the only green light I need.

His groan unravels what's left of my brain and I pull him to my entrance, every breath leaving me a trembling mess.

"Don't even think about making me wait another second," I say, shifting down until the tip slips inside me.

Even that's enough to make me gasp.

The promise of what's to come, the way he stretches my entrance, the desperate desire to push down and take all of him inside me...

His wicked laugh rumbles in his chest as he presses me against the wall, eclipsing my mouth with his.

I barely have time to process the coolness of the tiles against my back before he's sliding in, pushing deeper, and my brain shuts down.

"What do you want?" he asks, pausing.

I don't know how he has the self-control, but pinned against the wall like this, I can't even sink the rest of the way myself.

"Junie, tell me."

"You," I manage, so red with anticipation I'm dying. "I want you, Dex. I want you to fuck me. I want it all. Please."

"If you insist," he teases.

And in one swift pump he thrusts the rest of the way in.

I moan, my eyelids fluttering.

Nerves I didn't know I had ignite, entire galaxies of pleasure rippling to my core.

Rough fingers squeeze my nipple as he pushes himself in to the hilt and holds us there.

His kisses come hotter than before, hotter than ever, hungry and so, so relentless.

It's like he has to own every part of me as he slowly finds his rhythm, working my hips against the wall with every stroke, and my whole universe condenses into this man and his devil thrusts.

Dexter Rory, ruiner of all future sex.

The only thing that exists here are his clever fingers—one on my nipple, the other finding its way to my center and the sensitive nub pleading for attention—and the way he's moving inside me.

Oh. My. God.

I'm not usually the kind of girl to lose my head over amazing sex, but this isn't that.

This is a rock concert made flesh.

The way his cock moves with a punishing rhythm, the way his tongue chases mine, the way his roughness explodes again on my tongue and his hand mauls my breast is infinitely more than a lust-drunk romp.

It's so good it's devastating.

Right now, I couldn't tell you which way is up.

The pleasure heightens, the steam oozes through my flesh, and I'm so close it hurts.

I rake my nails over his shoulders, loving how he tenses against me and snarls louder, pinching my nipple in response.

"Don't stop," I beg as I approach the edge, feeling his pace quicken. "Dexter, don't you dare."

"Shit!" Groaning, he bites my neck, sucking harshly at my flesh. "Do you know how fucking close I am?"

"Oh my God." My nails hook into his shoulders.

"Come for me, sweetheart. Right fucking *now*."

I couldn't hold back if I tried.

I just hold on to him for dear life as feral heat explodes through me in lashing waves that take me into white-hot



ecstasy and drop me back on my head, echoing straight to my fingertips.

And he's there the whole time, still grinding his hips against mine, roaring as he empties inside me.

He holds me as I shudder against him and curses as my orgasm heralds his.

He grinds out a "fuck" that ends the universe where we could ever go back to being strangers.

We both detonate, finishing together in a tangle of limbs and mingled breath and so many new unknowns.

After this, I don't know how I'll ever fake another breath with this man.



## THE SWEET SPOT (DEXTER)



I wake up next to a sun angel.

She's curled up with her head on my shoulder and her autumn-red hair splayed across the pillows like a tangle of fall leaves. The morning light makes her shimmer.

Her breath is cool against my skin.

She sleeps with one arm flung around my head and the other cradled by her chest.

Goddamn, what a sight.

What a vision.

I could stare at this woman for the next century and it wouldn't be nearly long enough. My memories of last night are contradictions, vague and precise and brutally dick-hardening.

The sex, explicitly detailed.

If I wasn't already waking up as hard as a rock, that would do it. But how we wound up *here*, in my bed, it's all a blur.

I'm sure I insisted on it after fucking her in the shower, the hallway, and again in the kitchen after pulling together a breakfast-for-dinner of bacon and eggs.

Last night, I was crawling out of my skin, pacing outside her bathroom like a deranged wolf until she was finished showering. Then her magnetic draw became too much to resist.

I made my move and now we're here.

Waking up together with infinite complications.

I expected to feel—shit, a lot of things, truth be told—but seeing her lying next to me like this, it's not the confusing mess I expected.

Mostly, there's guilt.

Then fear, then heartache, then a splash of good old-fashioned self-loathing for fucking up this much.

Is it really a fuck up if it feels this good, though?

Does it have to end in disaster like indulging some horribly addictive drug binge?

If we never had to leave this bed and deal with those questions, I'd be a happy man. Whether it's watching her sleep or fucking her brains out, she's stirred up some insatiable hunger, some madness that tells me I *need* to experience every part of Juniper Winkley.

Even my eyes grow hungrier the longer I stare.

There are faint freckles dusted across her nose. I never noticed them before.

Her long, natural lashes have the same coppery-red tint as her hair, and when she's asleep like this, her forehead is smooth. No sign of the creases it carries when she's awake and wrestling with a thousand worries about her store, her life, and the mess I've created.

She spends too much time worrying for a woman so young.

She's only in her mid-twenties, but when she frowns, she looks like she carries the weight of someone twice her age.

*That damn store.*

Not that I wasn't handling heavy responsibilities at her age, but looking back, they weren't exactly good for my health, physically or mentally.

Goddammit, I shouldn't care this much.

But when I can feel her every breath and after I've been inside her, it's impossible not to care about this beautiful, wild, impulsive slip of a woman.

Her eyelids flutter as she stirs, and I tighten my arm around her.

"Morning," I say.

"Dex?" If the soft morning sun had a sound, it would be like my name on her lips. She half sits up before she remembers she's totally naked and grabs at the duvet. Like I haven't already seen every inch of her. "Um... is there a reason you're staring?"

I tug the duvet back down.

"That ship has sailed, Sweet Stuff."

"Did we...?"

"You mean you don't remember?" My eyes go wide.

She glances at me, then down to the tenting sheets over my lap. Her cheeks glow delectably pink. The same shade they turned yesterday when I had her against the wall and mounted her from behind, groaning like a beast as I brought her off for the fourth time.

Yes, I fucking counted.

"I remember," she whispers. "I just didn't know if I was dreaming."

"Why?" I ask carefully. "Do you regret it?"

There's a silence, entirely too long, before she smiles and places a hand on my chest. "No. Do you?"

"Fucking hell, sweetheart, is that a real question?" I push her down so I can kiss her. "You're enough to drive any man wild for ten lifetimes."

She kisses me back with the same blooming passion she had yesterday, and as soon as I've thrown the duvet to one side, she slides a hand down my stomach to where my cock waits.

“It’s a new day and it’s my turn,” she whispers, breaking the kiss and trailing her lips down my neck, my chest, my abs, until they finally join her hands.

Shit, shit.

Holy fucking shit.

This hellion knows exactly what she’s doing with that mouth. And by the way she looks at me with such a wicked smile on her lips, she’s enjoying every second, tracing the crown around my swollen head.

She spirals her little tongue into the spot that makes me crazy. I grab the fucking headboard like a man drowning and groan.

Fuck, if she keeps this up, I’ll come like mad in her mouth.

I allow it for a few more minutes, enjoying how she works, how divine she looks with her mouth full of me, struggling to take as much of my length as she can fit.

As tempting as it is to finish and leave her face a mess, my dick has other ideas.

“Enough,” I growl, pulling her up before either of us loses our collective shit. “My turn.”

“Who said you get to call the shots?” she demands, pushing at my shoulders and forcing me back against the pillows as she straddles me.

“You’ll be the death of me, my sweet bossy girl.”

“You better mean that as a compliment.” She grabs my cock and positions it at her pussy entrance then, stroking the head lightly along slick flesh I can’t wait to ruin again.

She’s so fucking wet for me.

Bracing one hand against my chest, she uses the other to rub my cock on her clit, sometimes teasing it at the entrance before sliding it away again. That flush I’m obsessed with heats her cheeks and her breath catches.

“Junie, fuck. You’re playing with fire.” I’m breathless too, seconds away from taking her hips and sliding her onto me

hard enough to bruise. “I’m not made of endless patience.”

She laughs and narrows her eyes.

Then in one smooth movement, she drops, her hips falling as she pulls me in balls deep.

The noise I make is obscene, and she leans forward to kiss me, wearing nothing but a siren’s smile.

“Do... Do you like that?” she pants.

“Is the damn sky blue?” I growl back, smacking a crisp hand across her ass.

She shakes so deliciously when she jumps that I almost lose my nut instantly.

“I’m insane for you, Sweet Stuff, and it’s your fault. Don’t tell anyone,” I rasp against her lips before I devour them again, claiming her bottom lip with my teeth.

I bite her as my hips go to work.

The teasing made me so sensitive I can’t string together another sentence, so instead I kiss her harder and deeper, playing with her mouth the same rough way my cock fucks inside her, mimicking the rhythm of our bodies with my tongue.

She moans into my mouth, louder every few strokes. I can’t believe how much I enjoy stealing the breath from her lungs.

The sound alone is almost enough to bring me off.

I want her more than I’ve wanted anything in my entire life.

She tightens around me, her pussy clenching, and I grit my teeth, bracing for the storm in my blood.

My hands grab wildly at her ass, the better to fuck her, to fling her up and down, to ride me so hard she splits in two.

Her next moan reaches down my throat and stokes an inferno, and as she gasps my name, I know I only have seconds.

I wrap my arms around her as she shudders and bury myself deep before I'm turned inside out, heaving fire into her depths.

It's never been like this before.

My balls have never wanted to wring themselves dry in any woman more, and the way her face screws up, the way she clenches my cock, it drags me into a willing insanity I never want to leave.

For a second, we lie still, her head still buried in my shoulder before she looks up and gives me a wry smile.

“Good morning, Mr. Rory.”

I kiss her again with my entire soul, feeling like the luckiest prick alive.

“With mornings like this, why bother with the rest of the day?” I twine my fingers through her hair. “Whatever else you make me, Junie, don't make me lazy.”

“You? Impossible,” she flings back, smiling ear to ear. “I don't care what you are, just as long as you're happy.”



IT TAKES all day to sort out Junie's apartment and work situation.

For the first time in ages, she's taking a few days off to get everything settled. I had to threaten her pushy rat of a landlord with a lawsuit when he tried pinning the blame on her, and she spends the rest of the day collecting her stuff and getting it organized.

It takes me roughly as long to persuade her to stay with me without acting like I'm delivering a damn miracle.

Not just because I want to keep her in my bed—I do, selfishly—but because it makes the most sense.

Having her with me plays into the ruse, and it's still close enough to the Sugar Bowl for her to commute easily by



rideshare.

“I’ll cook tonight. It’s the least I can do,” she says at the end of the day. Her hair’s piled on top of her head and all I want to do is pull it back down so it cascades down her shoulders. “I’ve gotta do something to repay you, right?”

“You don’t need to do shit.”

She levels me a long glare that’s marred by the luscious way her eyelashes curl. There are so many things about her face I’m only just noticing.

“You can stop now. I know it’s not all roses having me around. I *heard* you calling a guy to spot clean your carpets.”

“And I told you I can afford it, didn’t I?” I stare back at her.

“Wonderful. Because *I* can afford to cook for you. I also have to keep my hands busy when I’m not at work.” She rolls up the sleeves of her plaid shirt and puts her hands on her hips, standing akimbo as she surveys my kitchen. I lean against the island and watch the way she opens the fridge, surveying the ingredients inside, and wrinkles her nose. “Okay, dude. Who just has lobster lying around?”

“I like lobster in salad and eggs when the urge strikes. No imitation, it’s sourced straight from a fishing company in Bar Harbor. A friend of a friend in Maine hooked me up.”

“Yeah, well, who doesn’t? But you don’t find real Maine lobster in my Missouri fridge.” The way she looks at me makes it impossible to keep my smile pinned down. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You are. Asshole.”

“The lobster’s free, you have to pay extra for nice. Those were the terms I spelled out when we started,” I tell her.

Amusement flickers in her green eyes, lighting them like emerald suns.

“You were an even bigger dick then,” she says, taking out the lobster. “The question is, was that you or is it *this*?”

“I guess I should just be thankful you think I’m more than a dick now. Not that I minded this morning when you were busy worshipping said dick.”

She points a lobster claw at me. “Not *as much* of a dick. Let’s not get carried away here.”

“With you, Sweet Stuff, I’ll never come back down.”

Her cheeks heat and she turns back to the fridge, her hands stilling for a second. The entire day’s been busy as hell. All the running around hasn’t left much chance to speak about *us*, or the fact that she’s been stuck in my head.

Her reaction tells me she’s not ready, anyway.

Fine.

Considering I don’t do serious relationships, it’s probably good we don’t try to put a label on this fuckery.

It’s enough that she’s here in my kitchen, safe and soon-to-be-fucked, racking her brain to figure out how to cook lobster when it’s probably new to her.

“How can I help?” I step up as she investigates my cupboards and fetches some potatoes, garlic, sprigged thyme, and lettuce.

“You can get me a drink.”

“You got it.”

There’s some chardonnay in the wine cellar, so I grab us a bottle and pour her a glass. She nudges me with her shoulder in thanks and takes a sip.

“I needed that. It’s been a day,” she says.

She doesn’t have to tell me. I’ve spent the whole day on the phone between her landlord, my brothers, and Haute’s secretary, but this isn’t about me.

I just lean back against the counter and watch her work. A lock of cinnamon-red hair falls over her face and she tucks it

back impatiently.

“Tell me about it,” I demand.

Junie purses her lips as she skewers the lobsters and lowers them into water. “I hate this part,” she says. “It just feels a little cruel.”

“They’re perfectly dead, woman. I’m not quite the monster you think I am.”

She smiles quietly and I wait for more.

“Sometimes I just wonder if I’m like these lobsters. You know? Struggling along before I’m caught and plunged into boiling water and—” She bites her lip and looks down at the pot.

I shove back the urge to take her in my arms. That isn’t what she needs right now. “You’re talking about the store?”

“I’ve always loved baking, ever since I was a little kid. I used to bake with my mom, and after she died, with Nana. It’s always been in my blood.” She shrugs and turns around, peeling potatoes with stiff shoulders. “I helped out with the store right from the beginning and I fell in love with baking. But now I’m its owner, and...”

“And the water’s boiling,” I finish.

The corner of her mouth tightens. “I’ve never had Nana’s head for business. I try, but there are so many things beyond my control, so much I still don’t know. Don’t get me wrong, the money has helped massively so we don’t sink. But it’s just a lucky windfall. At the end of the day, the store needs to drive business and make money on its own. I may be richer, but I still don’t know where to go, Dex.”

“Hey.” I step forward, running a hand down her back. She doesn’t look up, though her weight shifts so she’s leaning on me. “You don’t have to do this alone, you know.”

“I know.”

“Have another drink.” I kiss her neck, loving the shiver that runs through her. “We’ll talk about it over dinner. I’ve still

got that report I made for you. There are a few directions you could go, depending on what you'd prefer."

She blinks rapidly and her peeler stills. "Thanks, Dex."

"You haven't heard my suggestions yet."

"No, but... It's just nice, having someone on my side for once. Nana's amazing, but she always wants to move in and take over if she even thinks I'm stumbling. Sometimes I'm just venting, not asking for advice or for her to come rushing to my rescue." She sighs. "God, listen to me. Cooking lobster and complaining about owning a business at twenty-four."

Enough.

I curl both hands around her waist until she's locked against me.

That insane heat she breathes into my blood roars again, and I do my best to ignore it. "Give yourself some credit, Junie. The point is you're succeeding."

"Well, yeah. Maybe for now." She pauses and doesn't move again for more than a minute. "Dex..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm trying to concentrate and not flub my first go at lobster."

Fuck, that reluctant rasp in her voice is so devastating. I could turn her around and take her right here.

But she's right—we probably *should* eat sometime tonight, and she deserves a chance to prep her first lobster without making it an overcooked mess, even if all I want to do is forget the damn dinner, bend her over, and—

"Sorry," I whisper, retreating to the island where my wine waits.

She resumes cooking, her brow adorably knit together as she concentrates.

I work on mincing garlic to take my mind off all the sinful things I could do to her while we're waiting. As we make the food, we talk about little memories.

Flying kites in the park with my brothers when we were kids.

Junie riding her bike down the street, already delivering cupcakes and other deadly sugar payloads to customers when she was just ten years old.

Summer trips with her grandma and aunts and more extended family than I can remember across the state and then down the Mississippi, all the way to New Orleans.

We don't touch on our parents and I'm fine with that. Now isn't the time to dive into heavy shit.

Finally, when the lobster looks succulent and the potatoes are whipped, I refill our glasses as we sit down at the kitchen island. It's strange how warm the dining room feels with another person when I'm so used to eating alone.

"To your stay at the Chateaux Rory," I say, holding up my glass. "However long it turns out to be."

*Not nearly fucking long enough,* a voice growls in my head.

Smiling, she clinks her glass on mine, then glances down at her plate.

Lobster and garlic butter with whipped potatoes and a Persian Shirazi salad I threw together. It's a restaurant worthy meal, yet she doesn't look pleased.

"Something wrong with the grub?"

"Huh?" Her attention snaps back to me. "No, sorry, I was just thinking about... you know, the store. What else?"

"Dinner can't take your mind off work? News flash, the meat's tender and you didn't ruin it."

"I'm sorry, I—" Her eyebrows catch and she bites her lip, stricken.

"I'm joking, Sweet Stuff. I knew you'd go there again so I came ready. I said I'd give you some suggestions about where you can go with the store. Here." I grab the pages I printed out for her earlier and spread them across the table.

“Wow. You really went all out.” She picks up a page with graphs and stares at it intently.

“You’ll be able to make more accurate projections than me, but this is what I estimate your approximate costs and revenue increases to be from each strategy.”

“You think I should move the store?” She frowns at the summary on the next page.

“A new location was one suggestion, although I will say it’s my least favorite, given the Sugar Bowl’s history in the same place. It would allow easier upgrades and expansions, though, and if you had a larger storefront with more seating, you could expand your menu, which always has the potential to ramp up sales.”

“Hmm.” She chews her lip. “But the old store has history. Ugh, I couldn’t leave...”

“I agree, which is why a refurbishment is still at the top of my list, but you knew that already.”

“Yeah.”

“You have a couple other options.” I find the relevant pages and slide them across to her. “You can open another store closer to the more affluent suburbs—or even one outside Kansas City, if you want. Alternatively, with improvements in shipping and online ordering, you could sell your products virtually anywhere.”

“What, like ship them out?”

“Orders come easy with digital stores these days. You give people in other cities, other states the chance to get their fix at the Sugar Bowl.”

“But what about logistics?”

“You’d use a local company to handle bulk shipping.” There are a few around, but I give the first one that comes to mind. “You could use PackRat Post. I’ve heard they’re reliable and ship—”

“No.” Her face instantly shutters.

“No to delivery or PackRat?”

She swallows and runs a fork through her potatoes that scratches the plate.

“It’s just the company, I mean. It’s silly, really, but...” Her sigh feels like it comes from her soul. “My ex’s family owns it. Actually, Liam’s basically in charge now, and it would just be awkward.”

I nod slowly, already hating this loser.

“Obviously, you can use any company you choose.” I try to keep my voice neutral, but the way she shrinks in her chair makes my heart drum.

What the fuck did Liam do to make her look like she wants to disappear through the floor?

“Did he hurt you, sweetheart? Did he fuck you over?”

Wincing, she waves a hand that shakes slightly.

“I mean, it was a long time ago. I guess he did, once, but I’m over him now.”

That doesn’t temper the anger shooting through my blood.

Clearly, whatever the fuck happened still weighs on her.

I take another sip of wine and make sure my voice is tame before asking, “What happened?”

“It’s a long story.” She picks at her plate again before she glances back up at me.

“Lucky you. We have all night.”

“And I feel kinda stupid,” she says, her voice burned. “I just believed in him a little too long and when it ended abruptly, I should have seen it coming.”

“When you love someone, you’re blind. The end can be like a shot to the face.”

“Oh, but I should have seen this coming.” She gives a small, sad smile. “He dragged his feet for a year, telling me I was the one. He had a ring. A whole *year*, Dexter. Nothing but false promises. And then he got distant. Cagey. I thought

maybe he was cheating, but he was just getting cold feet. He decided he didn't want a future with me..."

Cold feet?

Cold goddamned feet over the thought of marrying *her*?

"Was this man institutionalized?"

That earns me a bitter snort. "He wasn't ready to 'settle down' with me. That's what he told me. I wasn't ambitious enough for him, apparently. I was pretty, but he needed more than that. He said he needed substance."

Substance.

Right.

I could show him that by wrapping both hands around his scrawny neck and seeing how long his lungs still work.

My hands ball into fists.

"He told you that to your face?"

"Yeah. At least he had the courtesy to be honest, I guess." She nods. "I should have seen it coming. His family owns PackRat Post." Her eyes are bright and glassy as she takes another sip of wine and places her glass on the table. "They're successful people. They're doing well for themselves. They're not struggling. So, yeah, why would he want to be tied down with someone like me?"

"Because that's bullshit," I throw back, waiting for her to look at me.

"...is it?" She links her fingers together. "He was nice enough and understanding when I first took over the Sugar Bowl. But he realized fast that I didn't know what I was doing. I was always tight on cash and... and he's older than me, Dex. He wanted someone at his level or maybe just a trophy wife—who knows—but it's all the same. The point is, he didn't want *me*."

Shit.

The roughness in her voice, the way she almost breaks when she says it, cuts me open.



I make a mental note to blacklist this company from ever working with Higher Ends. I don't care what kind of bullshit excuse my brothers need.

"Listen," I say, taking her hands and pulling them to my lips. Fuck the lobster—it can wait. I need her to know what I see right now. "You *are* successful. You're a brilliant young woman with an established business. You're running in the red. You manage with a skeleton crew and your own wits."

"Thanks, I think." She smiles weakly. "You just seem so capable, and I—"

"I'm thirty-two, sweetheart. I've been doing this shit for years with two and a half times the brainpower because Patton's a half-wit." She giggles at that, never mind the fact that I'm not joking. I squeeze her hands, wishing like hell I could find the right words to tell her what she means to me. "Last I checked, the Sugar Bowl isn't a flaming wreck."

"Not yet, anyway. Mostly thanks to you."

"Thanks to *you*." I stand up, circle the table, and pull her into my arms. "Do you really think I could convince Forrest Haute by myself? Without you, my name would be fucking mud in this industry."

With a heavy sigh, she rests her head against my shoulder and spears my heart.

"I don't know," she whispers. "You might have been able to do it with another bakery."

"Like hell. I've never heard Haute rave about anything like he does your stuff. Did I tell you he thanked me for twenty minutes for sending a box down to him in Florida?" I tighten my arms around her. "You're the reason this whole thing is possible."

She finally looks up with a warmth that tells me my words are getting through.

"Yeah? Well, thanks, Dex."

I hold her for a few heartbeats longer, sorting through everything she said, letting my body settle down without a

prayer of really settling.

I can't decide if I want to kiss her or run downstairs and beat my arms numb, but right now I need control.

"Is this why you fought my proposal so hard?" I ease her back, tipping her chin up so she meets my gaze.

Those jade-green eyes sparkle like a summer day, but her eyelashes are wet. The rage in the pit of my stomach flares, but I don't let her see any of it on my face.

I don't let her see anything except how precious she is.

"Part of the reason, when you first asked," she says softly. "I just... I didn't want to be anybody's backup or a big disappointment to Nana. Not until I had time to process."

"Fucking hell, Junie. Is that what you think you are?" I smooth my thumb across her cheeks, erasing the tears and hating every poison memory that's made her feel less worthy and beautiful than she truly is. "I'm only going to say this once—you are *not* a fucking backup."

Her nostrils flare.

She presses her lips together, shaking her head like she doesn't have any words left.

Hell, neither do I, not when I have a broken angel in my arms and I'll spend all night holding her wings together if I need to.

So I let temptation lead the way.

I push my forehead to hers, inhale her, and kiss her like a man possessed.

I mean to be gentle—to tell her everything I can't say with words—until I can't.

The second she wraps her arms around my neck and opens my mouth, my body reacts with volcanic need. Every slip of her tongue, the tiny noise she makes when I pull her closer, the way she digs her fingers in my hair—everything she does sets me on fire.

Juniper Winkley needs to know what she does to me.

How *special* she is.

For better or worse, she needs to wrap her pretty little head around how damnably hard it's going to be to ever let her go.



# SWEET COMPULSION (JUNIPER)



I desperately need my temperature checked.

I can't believe I just poured my heart out to *Dexter Rory*.

Dexter, who, instead of dismissing my dumb insecurities, listened and reassured me like a normal human being.

Dexter, who's now carrying me upstairs like I'm lighter than a feather.

But we don't wind up in his bed. We walk through the large, soothing bedroom suite with its modern Scandinavian wood and neutral colors. He's taking me to the balcony.

My heart leaps.

The air's still balmy as he sets me down and I grasp the railings, gripping them almost out of habit.

From up here, the entire city feels like it's spread out before me. A glowing evening buffet of multiplying lights and the stark red ribbon of sunset.

Dexter glows in the same brilliant shadows, his blue eyes rivaling the dusky sky when he looks at me dead-on.

"You're so beautiful it hurts," he says. The simple harshness of those words makes my heart ache. "Your ex is a brainless fucking worm for not realizing it."

The ring isn't even on my finger right now.

I took it off to cook, but I wish I hadn't, if only to have something physical grounding me as he sends me soaring.

"Woman, I know you won't believe me if I just come out and say it," he continues like he can read my mind, "so instead of trying to tell you, I'm going to show you. Right here in front of the world."

"Dexter—"

Before I can say another word, he kisses me again.

And I want to fight it, to deny his sweetness, to resist these lips that can't possibly be this serious about me.

But his rough, thick hands cup my face and his body feels too good and God, this man is a magician. One glance and I'm losing myself.

Liam never had a crumb of his magic.

Liam never sent my soul to the sunsets and the stars like Dexter does with one kiss.

He damn sure never listened or made me feel *heard* the way this gorgeous man just did.

He never made me feel valued.

Calling me beautiful, that might be a stretch, but it doesn't take away from the moment.

"People might see," I whisper against his mouth. "What happens if they look up?"

"Hope they do. They'll see the luckiest asshole in Kansas City," he mutters, sliding a hand up my top. And God, I really hadn't appreciated just what a calloused hand can do. Every scrape of his skin against mine tingles.

Today doesn't have the frenzied air last night did.

The desire that unfurls in my veins is different now, stoked by the gentle yet insistent way he explores my skin as he kisses me.

His cock rubs against me through his pants, but it's not in charge like the other times.

This is what lust feels like when it's charged with raw emotion and trust implicit in every movement.

When he growls and pulls my top off over my head, I let him.

When he strips off my jeans and panties, I don't fight, gasping and flushing at the feel of the warm evening licking every part of me.

I've never done anything like this before, yet somehow, I love the fact that it took this man to drag it out of me.

"Do you know I've had this on my mind all damn day?" he asks, unhooking my bra with one hand and freeing my breasts. His gaze is as reverent as his hands. "Perfect, so fucking perfect. Don't ever let anybody tell you different, Junie. Hell, don't let anyone else ever see you naked."

That's it.

The jealous thunder in his voice melts what's left of my doubt.

I let my head fall back as his tongue finds one nipple and then the next, sucking until they're soft and pulsing.

"Perfect," he growls again, sliding a hand down the flare of my hips and thighs. "Do you have any damn clue how much you're in my head?"

My stomach curls with anticipation and familiar holy hellfire.

"How much?" I whisper.

"Enough to want to take you in every corner of my house from the minute I brought you home." That hand on my leg draws lazy circles as he approaches my center.

I know what he'll find when he gets there, and I keep my gaze on him.

I want to see his face when he feels how wet I am.

I want to hear him groan with delight, imagining his cock sinking into me before his fingers leave me even wetter and aching like mad.

“That’s it? Only when you had to bring me here?” I tease, knowing the truth.

I still want to hear it from his mouth.

“Fuck no. When we were in my office, I could only see you on my desk, ass up and getting fucked senseless.” He shoves my legs farther apart. “In your grandmother’s garden, when we first kissed, it’s a miracle it didn’t turn into a porno. Shit, in your store—I was so close to marching you into the back room, throwing you on the counter, and eating your sweet pussy for hours.”

*Oh God. Oh God.*

I’m trembling with need, every filthy vision he describes mirrored in my head.

It’s ludicrous what he does to me, but my world has contracted to Dex, and nothing else.

His clever fingers.

His voice, intent on ruining me.

His cock, hard and ready to go to work, throbbing when I reach down to squeeze him through his pants.

In his office. In the garden. On the counter.

Hell, on the floor. I won’t ever think twice.

“And when you showed up at the art show, wearing that dress I bought you,” he whispers raggedly against my mouth before biting my bottom lip. “Do you know how fucking hard I was, Sweet Stuff? I could have driven nails with this dick.”

Another kiss.

Another boiling groan.

Another braising nip of teeth.

I’m so flipping gone I might never come back.

His fingers are *so close* to my clit now, and I buck my hips, inviting them in.

I need to feel him now.



To touch me, to worship me, to bring me off in screaming, clenching fireworks.

God, if there's anything I'd change about him, I'd make this man less of a tease.

But it's my turn to give it back, so I find him through the fabric again, gingerly stroking his bulge until his voice steams.

"Shit, shit. Tell me what you want, Junie."

"I want you to fuck me, Dex."

The corner of his mouth quirks as he grazes my clit.

I grip the railings behind me for dear life.

"Right here?"

"Yes."

"In front of Kansas City? You want everyone to see what a perfect little slut you'll be for me?"

*He's. Killing. Me.*

I stifle a moan as his fingers move, pulling a messy plea from my throat.

"Yes, yes!"

"Speak the fuck up. Tell me."

"I... I want you right here. I want you in front of the city."

The deranged hunger in his eyes is enough to devour me right here and now.

Fine.

I'll let myself be swallowed whole.

I'll let him use me any which way he pleases.

I'll give up my soul just to make sure he doesn't stop.

"Please," I whimper, shamelessly begging now. "Please, Dex."

I don't know how he's reduced me to this simmering mess, completely at his beck and call.

Before he swept me out here, if he even mentioned stripping me naked on his balcony, I would've hid for the next month.

But now that I'm here, naked and vulnerable, I'm aching for him to finish what he's started.

And his smile is a smug hit to my senses as he drops his pants and boxers. I turn around and offer myself to him, grinding against his cock in invitation.

He makes a noise somewhere between a chuckle and guttural delight.

And finally, as the city lights glitter like hanging garlands and the sunset fades, he grabs my hips, digging his fingers in.

He makes me breathe.

Then—*and only then*—he thrusts.

When I feel him, I scream, pushing back against him, engulfing his cock.

“Junie, fuck! If pussy could kill...” The way he rasps is almost enough to make me come instantly. “You don't know what you do to me.”

“Show me,” I grind out, squeezing the railings.

He starts moving, building the rhythm until he's a human piston, slamming into me harder and faster with every stroke.

If I wasn't in flames, I might be embarrassed at how fast I come.

But there's no room for that.

No space for anything else in my head except the white lightning surging in my core and short-circuiting everything from head to toe.

“Go, sweetheart. Come fucking hard for me,” he growls in my ear.

His rough voice accents every pump.

Every savage thrust.

Every lost breath as my orgasm throws me around on his cock.

And he's rolling my nipple in one hand, swiveling my hips back into his thrusts with the other.

Holy shit.

I'm not sure I'll ever have a functional sex life again. Not after this.

Honestly, I don't care.

I'm ready to be ruined by this bruising, relentless cock and the beautiful soul it's attached to—just like I'm ready to hand Dexter Rory my already shredded heart.

“Let them see you, Junie. Let the stars see us. Let them watch and come for me *again*,” he rasps, all hot breath and brutal intent against my neck.

His teeth play with my flesh.

It's almost unnatural how I respond.

The heat builds, tension tightening like a cord between us until I feel like I'll combust from the sheer force of it as his thrusts come faster.

Fiercer.

Harder.

My pussy clenches around him, deliciously greedy, and he presses a kiss between my shoulders before he gently bites the flesh.

“That's fucking right, Sweet Stuff. I've got you. I'm here. And I'm going to come inside you.”

*Screaming.*

I'm one long shriek of ecstasy as his hips collide with mine and the heat, the friction, the pleasure demolishes me.

“Junie!” My name sounds inhuman on his lips.

I explode again, and he finishes inside me, releasing hot and wild.

He doesn't pull out quickly.

Instead, he wraps his arms around me, turning me and holding me against his chest, pressing slow kisses to my shoulder.

There's such tenderness, such reassurance, that I close my eyes and melt away in his arms.

He stays inside me as we lose ourselves in the afterglow, bathed in the warm summer night.

I can't remember the last time I smiled like this as he gently leans my face back to taste me again.

And I worry that I'll never smile this sweetly and truly again.



THE NEXT WEEK is like a fairy tale come true.

Picture the perfect partner, a Prince Charming made flesh, a man who actually gives a damn about you every minute, and you have him.

You have the fever dream Dexter has become.

He's so considerate, gentle on the soul and rough on the flesh.

He also spends money on me like it's about to expire, burying me in fresh flowers and expensive wine and designer shoes that outshine the pairs I lost in the flood by a nautical mile.

What even is this life?

It's too easy to forget this is fake—and that's what scares me.

Sometimes, I catch myself forgetting. Like whenever I look at him cooking in the kitchen, working out in the basement, or doing normal Dexter things in his anti-normal life.

I'm afraid this is the sweetest dream.

I'm afraid the time will come for me to open my eyes again any day now.

And I'm afraid that even fake perfection has a karmic price—and it probably has something to do with that date coming up with his elusive business partner.

He leads me into his office—apparently a stunning work office isn't enough and he needs one at home as well—and sits me down on one side of the desk.

“We need to talk,” he says.

“This is corporate. Are we here to roleplay?” I raise an eyebrow as he sits in the leather power chair behind the desk.

“No. Not yet. This is serious, Junie.”

It's strange seeing him like this.

Gone is the gentle bear I've worshipped over the past few weeks.

His eyes are hard, his mouth harder.

This is the high-strung man who walked into my store all those weeks ago. Workaholic Dex. Moody Dex.

Type-A Control-Freak Dex.

“Okay,” I say, nodding. Reality always had to return sometime, right? “This is about our date with your partner, right?”

“Correct. We need to go over every detail. He's invited us to his clubhouse at the Liberty Trails golf course. If the man gets one hint this isn't what we say it is, the whole deal is fucked.”

My heart sinks.

Haven't our last few weeks together convinced him how good we can be?

“I thought we had our story straight?” I hold the ring up to the light so the diamonds sparkle. I'm almost used to its weight on my finger. The ring, like everything else, feels

*natural*. Proof that I'm going insane. "Oh, and we've definitely got the physical stuff down. Going above and beyond if you ask me."

He doesn't smile, looking at me with hard eyes that tell me he knows exactly what I'm thinking about. It's like he can turn off his tenderness.

"It's not the physical stuff that worries me, Junie."

"Fine." I tie my hair up and fold my arms. "You want to talk details, go. There's a lot I don't know about you yet, so we can start there."

"I wasn't asking you to interrogate me."

"No?" I raise an eyebrow. "What were you asking, then?"

"About us. We need a believable relationship. We need details," he tells me pointedly.

Here, at his desk, I can't take his hand or snuggle up against him. Just like I said, it's corporate, a sudden chill divide between personal and professional.

"I mean, I'm not sure it's details about our fake relationship we need," I say. "We can work that out on the fly. It's how well I know you, Dex. Because I still don't."

He runs a hand through his hair.

"Christ, Junie, what more do you need? You've seen it all. The good, the bad, the ugly. My house, my life, my faults."

"Yeah. Surface stuff." I lean forward. It's like this man has never been in a relationship before. "Look, your friend isn't going to sit us down in separate rooms and give us a list of questions. If we want to be convincing, we need to *know* things about each other."

"Like what?" he asks dryly. "What my favorite color is? What vegetables I spat out as a child?"

I laugh at the image, and again at how adorably irritated he is.

I also think back to the heady early days of my relationship with Liam, before work and life and *the future* became too

much for us to bear.

Before he became a ginormous prick.

They were filled with late car rides to nowhere talking about our past, our hopes, our dreams.

I was just a baby then. Twenty years old and dreamy-eyed about the future. I told him about my parents, my losses, my life with Gran. He told me about the heavy shoes he had to fill at his company.

“Couples talk,” I say after thinking. “And not just about the *now*.”

He holds my gaze for a few seconds, his blue eyes twinkling. I half expect him to shoot me down.

What’s more vulnerable than showing old scars?

But he just shrugs.

“What do you suggest?”

“I don’t know about you,” I say dryly, “but my best conversations don’t take place behind a desk. Come on.”

Hand in hand, I lead him through the house to his library.

When I first came here, I was blown away by how big it was. Bookshelves line three of four walls and a huge window overlooks the city, letting sunlight splash in on the cozy plush sofas and chairs in the center of the room.

“Here,” I say, nodding to the wall beside the door and the photos I’ve glimpsed before.

They range from old black-and-white images to grainy color to sharp modern photographs.

“Why don’t you give me a quick tour of your life? Tell me about these pictures.”

He sighs but reaches out and taps one of the black-and-white ones.

“These are my great grandparents,” he says. “My great grandfather was at the beating heart of the Kansas City machine in those days. He helped make Harry Truman a

senator, and then a two-term president. He was the only man not in the military or the administration to know something was brewing with the Manhattan Project before the bombs dropped.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded.

“You realize that’s insane, right?”

He shrugs. “It’s my life. We’ve had money and influence for a long damned time in this town. I suppose it’s like anywhere, though, thriving off connections and cliques. Here, there was always a Rory in the middle of the web.”

I can’t imagine.

Having his money or a history that involves that much crushing wealth and influence.

“So, these photos are like every generation of your family?” I ask, nodding to the next set in faded early color. Grandparents, parents, then finally the three Rory brothers. They’re younger in the photo, separated by a few years, but Dexter still stands out.

He’s this lanky boy, perched between his brothers. A perfect middle child in a striped shirt. Archer wears a tight half smile, and little Patton has the cheesiest grin ever.

“That’s right.” Dex pauses in front of the picture of his parents. They look like they’re on vacation or something and definitely not here. They’re skiing in the mountains, their glasses pushed up on their heads, huge smiles shining against a snowy backdrop.

From the way her hair looks, it must’ve been the nineties.

“They look happy,” I say.

“They were.” He glances down at me, his fingers tightening around mine. “I know how it looks to someone like you, Junie. All this wealth and prestige, ready to serve us the second we snap our fingers.”

“It’s a little crazy,” I admit breathlessly. “But you’re so levelheaded about it. And, um, big house aside, I think you could flash your money a whole lot more if you wanted to.”



He nods thoughtfully, his eyes still glued to the makeshift gallery.

“We were all born with silver spoons in our mouths, but my brothers and I never settled for the easy life. We had good parents and decent childhoods. We did well enough in school. We could’ve glided on our trust funds forever, and maybe that’s what would’ve happened once. Then fate intervened.” He pauses, a frown slashing across his face. “My father died in a plane crash when I was nineteen. Nothing was ever quite the same after that. The shock, I guess, it gives you a visceral idea of just how short life can be. You start to wonder what you’re doing here.”

I nudge a little closer, my own throat tightening.

“I’m sorry. I know how hard it is, losing a parent...”

“The shitty thing is, he insisted on flying that thing, this ultralight that could barely get off the ground. Terrible hobby and stubborn asshole. A lawnmower with cardboard wings would’ve been safer. Mom told him no and he went and did it anyway. It’s one of the reasons Archer’s so against taking big risks. He remembers it like I do, better than Patton.”

Catness strolls into the room just then, mewling loudly and swishing his tail as he looks at us. It’s like he can read the room as he struts over and twines between our legs before settling on the floor.

“What about you?” Dex asks, his voice low. “What about your folks?”

“Oh. Nana didn’t tell you?” I lose a breath. It’s been a long time now, but it still hurts like yesterday. “My dad, he... he left when I was young. After my mother died, I guess he couldn’t take it. He wanted a different life. He worked a lot and came home to me and one day he just snapped. About eight or nine years ago now. He dropped me off at Nana’s and never came back.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. That’s fucking despicable.”

Now it’s my turn to shrug and look away.

The less I think about my dead mom and daddy abandonment trauma, the better.

“What made you choose rentals?” I ask, relieved my voice is still steady. “Why real estate? Of everything you could’ve done with your brothers and that money, you chose this.”

Dex looks back at the photos, still frowning like he’s searching for answers.

I lean against him, wishing I could smooth away that expression and knowing it’s hypocritical when I’m hiding my pain from him.

“Traveling always had my best memories, growing up,” he says slowly. “For all of us, I think. You go away and leave all your worries at home. You go to Hawaii, Sicily, the Maldives, and suddenly you’re thousands of miles away from any bullshit. Arguments, flunking tests, petty kid shit at school, whatever. In the right place, you’re free, and it’s even more important when you’re an adult.” His frown deepens. “Plus, if you’re lucky, you get to make memories with the people who matter most.”

*Family.*

A slow, bittersweet smile crinkles my face.

That’s what matters most to him, even if he doesn’t come out and say it.

My eyes sting.

“Thank you,” I whisper, blinking back the tears—because crying now over this is the last thing we need. “Thanks for being honest.”

“You shouldn’t have to thank me for that, Sweet Stuff.” He tips my chin up and meets my gaze. “I’m always honest with you,” he whispers raggedly.

Then he kisses me deeply and doesn’t stop.

Catness head-butts my ankles, purring as we kiss like we’ve lost our minds in his library.

The evening sunlight spins across the ceiling, and I wonder if there's a chance he could ever trade his workaholic life for another.

Could he ever trade helping other people make memories with making his own? With making memories we share?

*Dangerous thoughts.*

If I let myself start believing there's an *us*, I'm setting myself up for a nice killing trip to heartbreak city.

His arms tighten around me, and I let myself drift away on a dream where this sweet insanity doesn't have an end date.

And when I let myself daydream, his kiss tastes ten times sweeter, and I fall a little more hopelessly into the imaginary blue promises in his eyes.



## SWEET HELL (DEXTER)



**T**he ritzy clubhouse is about as extravagant as I'd expect from Forrest Haute, complete with a mahogany bar and huge windows overlooking the golf course.

He's had Liberty Trails in his portfolio of properties for about twenty years, and it's the gem of his Missouri holdings.

The place breathes pure luxury, beckoning like a lighthouse to the best of the best. Word is there's even a building or two here designed by Beatrice Nightingale Brandt, the world-famous architect, back in her heyday.

There's no denying it's an impressive property.

If anyone else owned it, I might even like it.

Since it's Haute, I can only feel his smarminess and arrogance radiating from every surface and heavenly green acre of manicured lawn.

Not that he's looking particularly smarmy or manicured himself today.

He's gone for casual, dressed in a polo shirt slightly open at the neck. His greying hair is slicked back in a way that makes him look approachable.

And on his arm, his wife, Clara Haute. Her hair is a peroxide blonde and it's clear she's defying age with the help of a scalpel.

Next to Junie, she looks like she could be visiting from another planet.

I've spent weeks worrying about what happens if Haute doesn't buy this ruse.

This is the magic moment we've waited for. The time when everything has the potential to go tits up.

Any second now, Haute could sense there's something off. Then he can accuse us of lying and the deal goes up in smoke.

But if I'm supposed to be nervous, I don't feel it.

That's the scariest thing of all, maybe, because when Junie glances up at me with those big green eyes, half laughing at something Clara said, it feels easy. Calm. Relaxed, like this entire situation is natural.

"How long have you been together?" Clara asks Junie politely, clawing at her own engagement ring with a little too much enthusiasm.

"A little over half a year, give or take," Junie says, leaning against my arm.

"Ohhh, so speedy." Clara stares at Junie's ring again. "Although I can't talk. Forrest and I were engaged after three months, weren't we?"

Haute starts like he's forgotten we're all there, and he slides his gaze away from Junie.

"That's right. When you know, you know. A man shouldn't wait too long to pounce." He's eyeing Junie as he says it, and why the fuck is he wearing that smile?

"When you know, you know," Junie echoes flatly. "That's how it was for us. One little fight over art and here we are, engaged."

"How did you propose?" Clara asks brightly. "Was it romantic?"

I bite back a smile, knowing *how* unromantic it really was, and Junie pinches my arm.

"It was very sweet," she says. "He did the whole thing. It was private, which was fine by me, I'm not the type of girl for an audience. Flowers, a nice meal, then down on one knee."

The down-on-one-knee part sounds right, at least. A spontaneous joke, but one I'm weirdly happy about now.

Clara clasps her hands together. "How sweet. Where'd you go for dinner?"

"It was a picnic, actually," she throws out. We had a script, but now she's going rogue. "This lovely little spot by the river. Not far from the Mill you boys are so invested in, I think."

"The place couldn't be better for romance. I know how much Junie loves picnics," I say. A lie, but somehow, I'm sure they're something she loves.

I know better than a few scripted bullet points.

More than I should.

It's like I have a sixth sense for what truly gets her heart going or smothers her spirits.

When the hell did that happen?

"He made me cupcakes." Junie beams me a twinkling glance I can't quite interpret. "Pretty ones with butterflies on the top."

Cupcakes? From me?

It's so absurd I fight the urge to laugh in her face.

"Yes, cupcakes. It was my turn to bake her a treat, I suppose. Long story short, she said yes," I tell them.

"What did he say?" Clara doesn't even look at me, keeping her gaze fixed on Junie.

Haute sends me a long look that says he's as disinterested in the conversation as I am. I never thought it'd be his wife raking us over the coals.

"It's what he didn't say, that's the best part. He hid my ring in the middle of a cupcake," Junie says, holding out her hand and smiling as the diamonds catch the light. "It was like something out of a movie. Once I got over the shock of biting down on the little plastic ball holding the ring, he got down on one knee and told me I was sweeter than any baking and he just had to spend the rest of his life with me."

Clara looks like she's about to faint from swooning.

"You're just full of surprises, Rory. Never pictured you as a Casanova, though for her, I see why," Haute says, never taking his eyes off Junie. "A beautiful gesture, to be sure," he adds, almost like an afterthought.

Fucking creep.

It's like he's trying to piss me off on purpose.

Also, something about his tone suggests he doesn't think it's beautiful at all.

I grit my teeth, knowing I need to calm the mood here before I tell him to keep his fat eyes in his own head.

"It reminds me a little of your proposal," Clara says to Haute, fingering her ring like she needs the reassurance. The rock looks so heavy it must be a chore to wear. "Do you remember it, kitten?"

*Kitten? Him?*

A brief scowl flashes across his face, but after a second he smiles again, oozing that urbane charm he wields like a shield. "I wasn't nearly as eloquent as Dexter here."

"You, off your game? I'm surprised to hear it," I say neutrally. "You seem like a natural planner, and so am I. With romance, I was a little more spontaneous."

"It took me by surprise." Junie's hand tightens on my arm. "I wasn't expecting it at all."

"You were expecting me to propose," I say, because it's true. I made my intentions very clear right from the start. "At least we'd talked about it a bit."

"Oh, yes, I remember." She nudges me with her shoulder. "But that doesn't mean I was expecting you to pull a ring out of a freaking cupcake."

I think back to her jaw dropping shock when I'd offered her the ring like a total goon.

No strings attached, no need to give it back.



At the time, I thought her shock was down to its extravagance. Not because I'd offered her one at all.

I don't know what else she expected when we were launching a self-serving fake engagement.

Although maybe turning up at her apartment with it wasn't the best approach. Maybe I should've eased her into it and taken her out for dinner or something first.

What was it she said at my house that night?

Something about toasting the only engagement she'll ever get?

This weird regret washes over me.

When this really is over, I hope it doesn't hurt like a bitch.

Saddling this sunny young woman with any amount of heartache is too fucking much.

"I hope it wasn't too underwhelming," I say absently.

"Stop." She squeezes my arm. "You know it wasn't. Not at all. How could any woman be disappointed with this beauty?"

She wiggles the hand with the ring on it for emphasis.

There's no stopping the rough smile on my face.

Yes, I chose it because I thought it was the best compromise between her style and the extravagance my family would expect. I never thought she'd love it so much.

Shit, I never thought *I'd* love seeing it on her finger.

And that makes me boil every time Haute stares at her a second too long.

"I just can't get over how sweet it was of Dexter to use desserts to win you over. We'd all kill for a man who shares our passions—or at least knows what they are." Clara smiles fondly at Junie as the conversation drifts back toward the Sugar Bowl. "You know, I used to do some baking myself, back when I could scare up the time and energy..."

"What do you like to bake?" Junie's face brightens and I don't think it's feigned enthusiasm.

“A lot of traybakes. My family lives in England and they sent me recipes for millionaire’s shortbread and rocky road. Have you ever made it?”

“I can’t say I have,” Junie admits.

“Oh, it’s delicious, and such a hit with the children! If you’re ever looking to expand your kids’ menu, you could do a lot worse.”

It’s almost weird watching them getting along like this.

Like adults. Like humans. Like it’s normal and there aren’t eight figures riding on this very tentative contract with a man who’s still fucking *staring*.

If it were just me, I might call Haute out on his shit anyway.

But it’s Patton and Archer and Colt’s future at stake. It’s the entire future and income potential of Higher Ends, which is why I need to keep a lid on my shit.

Junie’s so good at this it almost makes me uncomfortable. In fact, it makes me cling to calm.

She does that.

My beautiful fiancée, who reassures me with soothing words by day and wandering lips and hands by night. Proof that pretend can be easier than I ever imagined.

Maybe because we’re not pretending anymore.

Not entirely.

The thought I’ve been avoiding completely fucks me up the second I acknowledge it, and I force my attention to the glossy wood of the bar. The vibrant shine tells me this place is well maintained.

There are many things I hate about him, but the glutton in front of me has a certain standard he imposes. I can still respect that.

What I can’t respect is the way he stares at my woman over his glass every time he sips, looking at her like she’s his next snack.

The women are talking about Clara's visits to distant cities and conservatories across the world to see rare plants. Junie keeps up the same enthusiasm that must have her feeling like an old friend, considering how easily Clara laughs.

Haute looks oddly disengaged, averting his eyes from the death glares I'm giving him, sipping an old fashioned that smells more like simple syrup than bourbon.

"They're getting on well," I say sharply, leaning toward him and steepling my fingers. "We should've done this a while ago."

He grunts. "Yeah. Clara's been a fan of your lady's baking since that box showed up."

"Hell, who isn't?" I ask, knowing full well I haven't been able to tolerate food that has the power to turn your teeth into Swiss cheese. "Another drink?"

"Sure. Straight whiskey. I'll drink to what a lucky son of a bitch you are."

I can't even fake a smile at that.

I'm too shocked he can drink alcohol without sugar.

I walk to the bar and order two top-shelf whiskeys and bring them back.

"I didn't know your Clara was a baking enthusiast," I say, taking a pull off my drink.

Haute shrugs and glances at his wife, who's busy talking about a trip to the Amazon rainforest years ago. Junie listens intently with a smile.

Most folks as strapped with work as she is might be jealous, listening to this rich woman prattle on about exuberant places and people she's experienced.

Not Junie.

She hangs on every word, a hopeful gleam in her eyes like she knows she might still make it there herself someday.

*You could easily take her, you loaded fuck.*

*You could island hop Hawaii and Fiji with her for a month without breaking a sweat, feasting on fresh coconut and Haleakala sunrises and worry-free kisses in paradise.*

I have to physically shake the thought from my head to evict it.

What the hell is wrong with me?

There's no time for long vacations and lazy days in the sun. Once the arrangement ends, that's out of the cards forever.

Daydreaming must be a nasty side effect of the best sex of my life with Juniper Winkley.

"Life passes by too quickly," Haute mutters. "The things I'd do if I were your age again, Rory."

There he goes again.

Laying his beady eyes on my girl like he's man enough to eye fuck her.

He fucking isn't.

I swear, if this heap of flattery over the bakery has been some weird ruse to invite Junie into a threesome or some shit, I'll shoot the deal dead on the spot. Then I'll be promptly dragged away in handcuffs for shooting Haute himself, too.

"No sense in living with regrets or wandering eyes. Take a cue from our women," I growl, forcing this back to the point. "I think their energy bodes well for our future. The Mill has big plans coming together."

Haute lifts his eyebrows and finally gives me his full attention.

Polite, but reserved.

"*More* plans since we last spoke? You must really want to impress me, Rory. You never take a day off, do you?"

I shrug, grateful he can't see inside my head. He'd know the only thing I want to do is grab him by the throat and throttle him.

“We don’t slow down once we have a green light.” I toss back my whiskey. “We want to make your baby the pride of Kansas City, just like the old days when it was an active grain mill. We’re out to combine living history with luxury rental.”

“As long as your lofty plans include a little sugar,” Haute says with a wink.

Goddamn, I can never read him well.

Does he ever stop thinking about pastries and drooling over other women for five minutes? Even to talk money and logistics?

“You know I made it part of the deal,” I assure him, trying to keep the impatience from my voice. It’s like he’s hanging back deliberately, although that doesn’t make sense.

With his current venture hemorrhaging money, he should want to get this whole thing underway as soon as possible now that he’s committed.

I don’t like the fact that he’s dragging his feet.

He turns his smile to Junie, though, who senses his interest and meets his eyes. “Miss Winkley, you must allow me to tell you how impressed I am with your baking, my dear.”

Junie flushes the same way she does every time someone gives her a compliment, though it must be the tenth time from him tonight.

Excessive, even for Haute.

Again, what’s he doing? Trying to piss me off?

“Well, thank you, again. I’m honored you enjoy it.”

“Modesty doesn’t suit you, sweetie,” Clara says with a loud laugh. “If I had your skills and your looks, I’d be at the next Arrowhead stadium home game, waiting for half the city to worship the ground I walk on. Not to mention throw money at my feet. You *are* making a bundle off this, yes?”

Junie’s face goes tight, clearly lost for words.

“She isn’t in it for the money. That’s not my girl,” I say, holding out my arm. She tucks into my side with pure relief

shining on her face. “Junie works better when people aren’t showering her with praise. Don’t you, sweetheart?”

Her face is unreadable when she looks up. “Uh, yeah. I’m just not used to being in the limelight...”

Haute chuckles. “And yet, here you are. You have such an innocent fresh face, all the better to sell your sweets.”

Junie stiffens like she’s not sure what to make of his enthusiasm.

I damn sure don’t like it myself, or the uncertainty.

But I hold my tongue in my teeth, knowing if I insult him, we can kiss the crown jewel of Higher Ends goodbye.

“There’s no one better,” I agree. I don’t have to try hard to put pride in my voice. “The Sugar Bowl has picked up a lot of attention lately. Her grandmother always told her, ‘do what you love and the money will come.’ I’m happy as hell to say it’s finally coming in.”

Haute smiles, shifting his attention back to me.

“And how are things going with the treats at your existing properties, Rory?”

“Extremely well,” I answer too fast. “Her goods are an excellent fit for an affluent clientele. We’ve had a ton of positive feedback. It’s an easy touch the guests appreciate, and it’s started showing up in our reviews.”

“People are reviewing my stuff?” Junie asks.

I realize I haven’t had time to mention the new success. With everything that’s happened, it’s been at the very back of my mind.

“Absolutely. We leave her business cards with every order so people know where to get their fix.”

“Ohh. That would explain the uptick in orders and people calling from out of town,” Junie murmurs.

“You’re a hit. Get used to it,” I say, looking down at her.

From this angle, I can see the freckles dusting her nose and the long curve of her eyelashes as she glances up at me.

I want to kiss her here and now, possessively as hell, just to remind Haute that she'll never be part of the deal even if her confections are.

Kissing her has become a damn addiction.

Familiar heat flares in her eyes and she looks away again, that demure blush creeping up her neck.

She's so delectable because she plays so innocent. Haute isn't wrong about that.

The chokehold she has over my libido is frankly ridiculous.

"Excellent news." Haute claps his hands together. I wrench my thoughts back to the discussion. The pastries, right. Always the pastries. "I was hoping you'd say that, Rory."

I look at him, raising an eyebrow.

"I've got a fresh proposition for Juniper," he says, fixing his razor-sharp focus on her. She shifts uncomfortably, but her expression doesn't change. "It was Clara's idea really, but I do hope you'll consider it."

"Of course. What do you have in mind?" Junie's fingers tighten around my arm.

"An extension of your arrangement with Higher Ends," he says, without even glancing at me. I can't read his face and I hate that I don't know what he's planning. "I may not have a large hand in the rental game here. However, I still own several large properties in this city. I'd love to feature Sugar Bowl products at all Haute properties, starting with this very restaurant." He sweeps his arm around like a monarch presenting his kingdom.

Junie's eyes go unfocused.

I hate to admit it, but her products would fit in very well here, assuming the store's up to the task. It's clearly a high-end establishment, and her stuff has the look, even if it's sweet enough to choke a man.

“It would be a trial program, of course,” Haute says smoothly. “I can’t make any grand long-term promises yet. However, if it goes well, I can see a long-lasting place for your sweets here.”

*Fuck.*

Maybe it’s Archer’s cynicism hitting, but something doesn’t smell right about this, coming out of the blue.

From a business standpoint, sure, it makes sense—but Haute’s strange smile looks more like he’s offering to lease her soul more than bully her into bed.

I don’t think he wants *her*, necessarily.

It’s not the grin of a lecherous pig twice her age looking to indulge his lusts.

There must be something more.

What else could he want with her?

Or maybe there isn’t and my mule of a brain is just standing in her way because Forrest Haute rubs me like a bed of splinters.

“Oh. Oh, well...” Junie’s cheeks turn pink, then red. She glances up at me, shock and nervousness vying on her face.

But she’s tempted by the offer—and who can blame her?

There’s that telltale gleam of opportunity I recognize because I feel it too.

Hell, what harm can a jump in steady income do? Especially when it’s coming from places like this golf course, another hub for the rich and well connected.

I nod, and she turns back to Haute with a smile, accepting the champagne flute he offers her from the waiter.

Haute raises his glass in a toast while I order another neat whiskey.

We’ve won Haute over and that’s worth celebrating.

Whatever else he’s planning, he’s all charm now, putting one hand on Junie’s arm and telling her how delightful her



peach puffs are.

It's weird, yeah. Really fucking odd.

Still, he's bought our illusion. I wonder if it's just a show of good faith.

Maybe he just really, shamelessly admires sweets more than life itself.

Junie smiles up at me and I force a returning smile for her sake, even though the knot in my stomach makes me want to punch something.

*Calm the hell down.*

This should be good news, even if I can't help feeling it's more like a prison sentence.

I look at her with her red hair coiled up and a pretty blue dress hugging her curves. She bought that one with my money, and I stood back and let her.

I already want to rip it off her with my teeth the second I get the chance.

I'm in over my head, and I don't just mean this deal with Haute.

Also, if the bakery keeps getting tangled in my business, how do we ever end this arrangement neatly?

I don't know.

I don't care.

The only thing I'm sure about right now is the glaring fact that I'm hellbent on keeping Junie as happy as she looks right now.

If anything ever wipes that smile off her face and I know it's my fault, I'll fucking die.



## SWEET ANGST (JUNIPER)



**H**oly crap, my head is *spinning*.

And I'm starting to think it's about to pop right off.

Disasters are supposed to come in threes. Not good things. Not things that keep delivering a life where I'm not panicked about money or whether Catness has a nice new bed to curl up in.

But here I am.

Alive and thriving with a surging business, fresh opportunities, and an incredible man.

Dexter Rory.

I don't like to think about him too much in case I jinx it, but he creeps inside my head anyway.

When I'm at the store baking, when I'm serving customers, even when I'm hunched over my laptop crunching numbers that are healthier than they've ever been.

Again, all thanks to him.

It's hard to imagine why I hated him at first. Or why I was so scared of this fakery when it turned out to be the best decision of my life.

I expected to get paid handsomely.

I didn't expect him to thief away another small piece of my heart with every searing kiss.

Most of all, I never expected to be *happy*.

The kind of happy where I can come up for air and breathe most days without choking on another mishap.

So happy that I sit on the new leather chair in my little office and spin because I can't stop smiling.

So flipping happy I've gotten into the habit of imagining what meals I can make Dex when we get home like we're so much more than awkward roommates hooking up.

Even if I know I'm heading for a wreck, he's becoming my entire world.

And I think happiness might be pretty infectious, too.

"Junie?" Emmy offers me a grin I'm certain she wouldn't have worn a month ago. Did I really smile so rarely? "Are you ready?"

"I'm always ready. What have you got?"

She rolls her eyes, though the smile melts away. "I mean the orders for your fancy golf course? It's D-day."

"Oh, right." I pull the last tray of orange scones from the oven and flap a tea towel over the just-baked apple turnovers to cool them. "Any second now. Just need to box these beauties up."

"Need some help?"

I glance at the register, where Jake and Sarah are holding down the fort. Sarah's making coffee while Jake greets the next person with a goofy smile.

"If they don't need a hand, that would be great."

"They don't need me," Emmy says with a slight huff, tucking a curl of hair behind her ear. Her smile fades, and she leans against the side. "This might sound weird, but do you ever have days where you feel invisible?"

I stare at her.

"All the time."

*Just not so much lately,* I don't say. But I'm not ready to make myself an even bigger gossip feast for the staff.

“You?” Emmy snorts before she can help herself.

“You’d be surprised,” I say dryly, opening the crisp pink boxes with our newly printed logo on the front for the turnovers. “I’ve spent most of my life being invisible.”

“But you got Big Fi—I mean, *Mr. Rory*.” She flushes as she joins me in opening the boxes. “Sorry, I know you’re—”

“It’s fine, Em.”

“And he’s hot and rich.”

I laugh because there’s no argument.

He’s *definitely* hot and dripping gold, but I never expected her to come out and say it.

“You’re right about that,” I agree. “I’m a lucky girl.” A *very* lucky girl who wonders when the gods will come to collect to balance out the good in my life. “But that doesn’t mean it was easy. It didn’t happen overnight. He didn’t even notice me at first. I was kind of just a giant pest.”

“He noticed you pretty fast,” she purrs, popping the turnovers into the boxes. “*And* he’s not out there flirting with someone else.”

Aha, I knew this wasn’t about me or Dex.

“You know,” I say, choosing my words carefully, “you’d be surprised what might happen if you just let a boy know how you feel.”

Emmy gives me a brief, scornful look like I’m asking her to scale the pyramids. “What, like when he’s out there hamming it up with Sarah?”

I smile sympathetically.

“One of the best things about being the boss is that you see the things other people miss,” I say. “And you know what I see?”

“...I get the feeling you’ll tell me anyway.”

I nudge her and she laughs. “I see the way Jake looks at you when he thinks no one’s paying attention. If he’s flirting

with Sarah, it's not because he doesn't like you. Maybe he's trying to make you jealous."

Her wide-eyed expression nearly makes me laugh, and I bite my lip. "He looks at me? Are you sure?"

"Poor boy has been thirsty as hell for months."

Right on cue, Jake pokes his head into the kitchen.

"Nana's here, Junie," he says, but his eyes flick straight to Emmy.

I love playing matchmaker and I'm annoyed that I have to miss my latest chance.

"Perfect timing," I mutter, putting down the last of the turnovers. "Is the van ready, Em?"

"Yep! Oliver's already waiting out back."

There's my chance.

"Okay, Jake, will you come and help Emmy carry this?"

I think his head grows another size. The kid doesn't need another word of encouragement to get beside Emmy. How she didn't notice this poor boy falling down around her, who knows.

They're sweet and innocent, even though I've got a distinct lack of faith in relationships that start when you're still figuring yourself out.

At least Jake won't treat Emmy like Liam treated me, though. He's not capable of being a royal prick.

But I also doubt he'll treat her the way Dexter treats me.

I have to hold back my smile as I walk to the register, where Sarah's busy mopping up a spill on the counter. She gives me a quick smile and points to the corner where Nana sits, perched like a morning bird with a tall coffee and gooey salted caramel brownie before her.

"Hey, Nana." I kiss her cheek and take the seat across from her. "I wasn't expecting to see you so soon!"

"Sit down, honey." She's frowning.

“Um, is something wrong?”

“Yes. You expected to text me about the big news and leave an old woman mired in suspense?” She empties a sachet of sugar into her coffee. The Winkley sweet tooth is alive and well. “It’s looking busy today.”

“The bakery, you mean? Actually... that’s kinda connected to the big news.” I lace my fingers together, knowing what’s coming.

Look, I never intended on telling her about Dexter’s arrangement with the store, but Haute isn’t Dexter, and I want to make her proud. Handing the store off to me was a gamble on her end, and I want her to know it’s paying off.

I need her to know I’ll keep her legacy alive long after she’s gone.

“Nana, I’ve landed us a great opportunity. You wouldn’t believe the orders coming from the golf course, and they’re not even having any special events yet. This year could be awesome, but come next summer—”

She cuts me off with a bleating sound.

My breath catches.

I’ve never heard Nana make a noise like a startled goat in my life, halfway between a yelp and a gasp. She presses her hands to her cheeks, her mouth trembling. Hot tears grow slowly along the line of her lashes.

I’m so confused. I don’t understand what has her so crazy until I follow her eyes.

*Oh no.*

*Oh, crap on a cracker.*

She’s staring at my ring.

About the same way a little girl looks when she sees a giraffe for the very first time in her life.

Oops.

At first, I told myself I would only wear it for deception, but it's becoming a habit.

Now, it practically lives on my finger, feeling so natural I honestly forget it's there. But I should have thought harder about the repercussions.

"Um." I feel my face blazing and I look down at the table to avoid her gaze. She saw what it was like when Liam left.

The way I cried and yelled and swore to everyone that I'd never let a man use me as a Junie punching bag again.

"You're engaged," Gran hisses breathlessly. "You're... you're engaged to Dexter, aren't you?"

I can't argue with the truth, can I?

Especially when it's really a spectacular lie.

I'm sitting right in front of her, wearing his freaking ring.

"I'm sorry, Nana. Honestly," I say helplessly. "We were going to make a formal announcement soon but I just..."

But nothing.

I stop, deflated and out of excuses.

I should have thought this through before.

The moment Dexter fake proposed and gave me a ring, the moment his mom knew about us, I should have just fessed up and told her.

"How long, girl?" she asks firmly.

"A couple weeks," I hedge. "Not long at all. Again, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, I just..."

She reaches over the table and takes my hand—the one with the ring—holding on like she's drowning.

It's like she wants me to look at her, to really see her in a way you don't when you're living ordinary days with your family.

But I do.



I see her wrinkled skin, the way she wears tiny scars like medals and her fingerprints are almost worn away by a lifetime of work.

I see the fierceness in her eyes, the hope and excitement she's barely holding back, the promises of a future she desperately wants for me.

And I see a prayer on her lips when they tremble. The woman who had to stand in for both of my parents, who raised me and adored me like no one else ever will, pouring her life into wishing me the absolute best.

"I understand," she says quietly. "Telling the world you're engaged—starting a new chapter—it's wonderful, but it's so scary, June bug."

"Y-yeah. Everyone knew about Liam," I whisper. Not a lie, but it's not admitting the truth, either, because right now I *am* scared out of my wits.

I'm freaking out about what comes next.

About what these crazy colliding feelings *mean*.

But she looks at me with eyes that are both too old and too wise to belong to a humble baker. She looks at me like she knows something she shouldn't—like maybe she knows it's not what it seems.

"That doesn't mean things will end the same way they did with Liam," she says firmly.

"I hope not." My shrug isn't nearly as relaxed as it should be.

The truth is, the emotions sweeping through her are a fraction of what I feel when I confront the hard reality.

It's going to hurt like hell when this strange, beautiful thing with Dexter ends.

Even though I don't want it to.

The realization that we'll be over before we've really begun makes my chest hurt, even though I've known it for a long time.

And if it's meant to end, shouldn't we talk about that too?  
Shouldn't we plan our exit sooner?

So I can figure out how I plan on hitting the cold, cold ground without my heart exploding into so many fragments I'll never put it back together again.



I GET BACK to Dexter's house late and find him already there, which is unusual.

After seeing his vehicle in the garage, I wander through the house until I find him in the enormous library, my traitor cat curled up on his desk like he owns it.

He looks up when I enter.

"Welcome back, Sweet Stuff. Good day?"

There's something tired about his smile.

"If by *good*, you mean Nana finding out about the engagement, then yeah, it was dandy." I gnaw at my bottom lip. "She saw the ring, Dex. I think her eyes left her head for a few seconds."

He sits up straighter and closes a notebook, dislodging Catness, who glares at both of us for having the nerve to knock him off his pedestal.

"How'd she take it, after the initial shock?" he asks.

"Oh, you know." I shrug, sorting my feelings and trying to figure out which ones I should let show on my face. "She took it pretty well, actually. I'd say she's pleased."

A total understatement, but at the same time, I don't know how to be more enthusiastic given the circumstances.

"She likes you, you know."

"Convenient," he throws back smoothly.

But why doesn't his smile reach his eyes?

I reach across the desk and give him a kiss. Although his fingers trail across the shell of my ear, there's something oddly absent about him today.

Like not all of him is fully here at the moment. *With me.*

So, maybe this isn't the best time for the conversation I've been wrangling in the back of my mind.

When I pull away, he's looking at the photos on the wall. The ones of his parents, of Harry Truman, of Dex with his brothers. His family. His legacy.

"How was work?" I ask. "You're home early."

A tiny frown pulls at his eyebrows and the corner of his mouth. He toys with a sleek pen in front of him before pushing it aside.

"Did you know President Truman was almost destitute when he retired?" he asks, standing and following the line of photos. His shoulders are squared, hands behind his back. Army discipline through and through.

"I didn't," I say.

"He's the reason the presidential pension was passed. The Rory family paid for a significant chunk of his legacy, plus seed money for his library later on."

"Okay. That's cool." I don't know where this is going, but I don't dare interrupt his train of thought. "That's a great thing for your family legacy, right?"

"We've done a lot of great things." He pauses, looking over the photos with a strange heaviness.

I'm not used to seeing him like this. Usually, he's big and bold, strikingly confident in his world and his unshakeable place in it.

But his life is a big pond. He was born on the shoulders of people who palled around with presidents.

Maybe even bigger than he can fill.

"It's not an easy thing, building a business from the ground up," he says, the change of subject so abrupt I blink. "There's

a fuckton of work, brutal expectations, plus everything hanging on whether or not we succeed.”

“Like Colton?” I venture.

“Colt’s the reason Archer is so desperate to make this work, but it’s more than that, honestly. This is our chance to put the family name back on the map for a success in this century. For reasons that have nothing to do with how big our checks are to charities and museums.”

I still don’t get why he’s so hung up on this tonight.

I frown, walking up to him until I’m close enough to slide my arms around his waist. At first, he’s stiff, every muscle tensed before he relaxes into my touch, leaning into me.

His decisions are meticulous.

Everything he does is deliberate and expertly thought out.

Well, everything except for me. I’m only here because he made a huge mistake. I still don’t know what that means.

In the photo, his grandfather stands next to Harry Truman and his entourage, tall men in suits wearing proud smiles.

Such a long time ago. Such a long shadow. Such big boots to fill.

“It would have been easy as hell to just live off the family fortune,” Dexter says. “There’s more than enough to go around. We could all live in Mother’s house easily without having to see each other.” He gives a bitter laugh. “But if we did that, what do we leave behind?”

“I mean, you blew that out of the water. You’re an overachiever, Dex, and so are your brothers.” I tighten my arms around him, stepping into his embrace.

“We try.”

“I’ve seen how hard you work.” I turn him around so he’s facing me.

He brushes a stray curl back from my face.

Strange how he seemed so cold once, so unapproachable. Now, there's so much softness in his face, even if it's only there for me.

“But this history lecture... that isn't all that's wrong, is it?”

He half smiles, though his eyebrows pinch in a tiny frown again. God, I want to smooth it away.

“How do you do it, woman? Always seeing right through me.”

“Oh, please. Like you're hard to read.”

My hand sweeps across his thigh, so close to where I know I'll find him hard.

He chuckles, but it fades quickly as he looks down at me.

“It's Haute. It's always that fuck,” he growls. “Something about his offer still rubs me the wrong way. I'm sure it's nothing, but due diligence is in order. Including what he wants with your bakery, sweetheart.”

I swallow, taking a moment to soothe my emotions.

It's perfectly natural that he's having second thoughts, especially when all this is bringing me deeper into his life.

That's not what we agreed, after all.

And it's cool that he doesn't want to be involved any longer than we planned.

I can't be mad at him for that, even if my heart hates being broken.

I step back to preserve the sorely needed space between us.

Space is good when we're going to talk about heavy stuff, despite the absence of his heat feeling like a lost layer of my own skin.

“Dex, if mixing up the Sugar Bowl with your business makes things too complicated for you, I get it,” I say. My voice is too distant, too cold, and I clear my throat. “I mean, I know this agreement was only meant to last six months and —”

“Goddamn, woman.” His voice is rough as he takes my arm and pulls me back into him. Back into his warmth, his scent, his safety. “This isn’t about you.”

“But—”

He kisses me over my protests.

He pins me against him so firmly I shake.

With Dexter, it’s always easier to obey, and normally I don’t mind.

But tonight, there’s something different in the air.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” he mutters against my lips. “I’m not trying to get rid of you, I swear.”

My heart buoys with relief.

*Not yet, I want to tell him. But what about when this doesn’t make sense anymore?*

What about when we’re supposed to check out and move on, when the unofficial contract expires?

His mouth feels so hot on mine, so eager he’s almost desperate.

He moves with the same focused intensity as his hands, showering me with attention.

I want to believe him.

And although I have questions, I don’t dare voice them as he guides me back to the desk and sweeps the paperwork aside. Catness is curled up on a green ottoman in the corner now, watching us lazily.

And I watch as the paper flutters to the floor and wonder if that’s what will happen to me when we’re done.

If I’ll control where I land, or if the fall will just dictate my landing.

His tongue traces a neat path down my body, and soon I forget to worry, to question our future or his affection.

There’s no room for doubt in this frantic pleasure and the panting heat of our joined bodies.

There's no room after, when my face is buried in his shoulder and his embrace keeps the doubts at bay.

Maybe we don't have to figure everything out now.

Maybe we can live in the moment and that'll be enough.

The future can stay in the distance and if we don't think about it, it doesn't have to hurt us.

Dexter kisses me again, more gently than ever.

His thumb strokes my jaw. Our clothes are strewn around everywhere like a tornado came through and it makes me grin.

I'll never have this passion with another man.

"I'm no psychic, but I see a bath in your future," he whispers, grazing the skin below my ear with his teeth. "And then a glass of wine with dinner. Maybe two."

"Only if you're with me." I wind my arms around his neck.

"Deal. You're one hardass negotiator, Sweet Stuff."

For the first time this evening, his smile reaches his eyes, and my worries melt into the promises of good Bordeaux and another night in his arms.





## SWEET MEMORIES (DEXTER)



**I**t's so late I can't tell what time it is.  
Maybe early morning.

Outside, the navy sky brightens into the familiar pale dawn glow that heralds the sunrise. Soon, the horizon will be brimming with the new morning, the birds will be chirping, and Kansas City will become the familiar loud, bellowing beast I know how to tame.

For now, though, everything is quiet except my thoughts.

Junie lays curled against my side, sleeping like a kitten, her cheek pressed into my chest.

Her slow breath skitters across my skin, reminding me how damn sensitive everything is when it comes to her.

Last night was good.

Really fucking good.

Hell, this girl could put me in chains and I wouldn't consider it a bad night. All she has to do is smile at me, and I want her more than I can speak.

Yet somehow, she still doesn't think she's important.

Somehow, she thinks I can magically switch off when this arrangement expires and cast her to the wind.

Goddamn.

I look down at her, holding a breath.

Her eyes weave dreams under her eyelids and her face is slack. I can see the morning light dancing on her eyelashes.

Those freckles she tries to hide whenever we go out.

The little imperfections that are slowly driving me insane.

A tiny line scar just above her eyebrow. The smattering of acne scars across her chin, invisible unless I really look for them in this kind of light.

The way her belly moves when she's bent at this angle, soft and authentic, signs of a real working woman who doesn't have the time to log her macros or sweat off calories at the gym every day.

I love it a thousand times more than any plastic model because it's *honest*.

She doesn't hide who she is, and that makes her easy to trust and easier to respect.

It's the most precious thing to look at her like this, to see all the autumn fire of her hair, to drink in what she looks like when she doesn't have a hostile world pressing down on her.

Right now, she looks young. Vulnerable. Open in a way I don't often see.

Anytime something reminds her to hide behind her walls—like the fact that we're pretending, or there's a deal at stake—she shuts down.

I shouldn't care whether she's vulnerable with me when the acting and sanity-shredding sex should be enough.

The fact that she's here, matching my every move in this sham, should be plenty.

The fact that I get to share a bed with her should be everything.

Fuck, I'm getting too greedy for my own good.

"It's not you. It's never you, sweetheart," I whisper, knowing she can't hear me. I'm not even sure if I wish she could.

She doesn't stir. I look back up at the ceiling.

It's textured cream, though the far wall has three shades of subtle red accent, just like my office. Three brothers and a cardinal.

Forrest Haute is up to something.

The more time I spend with him—the closer *Junie* gets to him—the more certain I am. I shouldn't have ignored my gut the first time.

I was so fucking desperate to get this deal, I'd have signed my soul over, but that means I had my eyes pinned shut to everything that could go wrong.

We still don't have a final contract and he's already getting Junie involved.

There's something odd there, and I wish like hell I could figure it out.

Haute barely seems to give a damn about the property and what we do with it beyond making his residual cut. That's increasingly obvious.

Every time I open a dialogue about our plans, he finds a way to steer the conversation back to baked goods. Or he sends me the world's briefest email and defers to his team.

I resist the urge to bury my face in my hands and groan.

What the hell is he playing at?

Sunrise stains the sky blood orange as I swing out of bed, careful not to wake her. For Junie, sleep is a treasured scarcity.

Catness looks up from his bed in the corner and yawns.

“Good morning, furball. Hang tight until breakfast,” I whisper.

She deserves a few more hours of shut-eye, and even if she wakes up before I'm back, she won't be surprised I've slipped out early for work.

Not that this is *work*, necessarily.

Archer couldn't find a single damning flaw in Haute's business model or any skeletons in his finances, but my older brother works like a forensics geek, pouring over reports and financials.

He believes in the proper way of doing things, all aboveboard and by the rules. He wouldn't know what to look for if the person he's looking at is sneaky enough.

And if there's any truth to Haute's dark side, that goes double.

Fortunately for Higher Ends, I have better ways to get answers when the stakes are this high.

The city's groaning to life with snorting traffic and lumbering trucks making deliveries as I drive through my neighborhood.

The summer air is so thick it's already unpleasant to breathe, promising another scorcher today.

The local police station is barely up and running with its normal crew by the time I arrive. When you live in an affluent sector of the city, the cops move slower.

The flustered officer behind the desk looks at me like I should be arrested for strolling in before he's settled in with his morning coffee.

"I'm here to speak with Detective Batista," I say. "Is she in yet?"

The young man looks at me with new respect, and is that a flicker of fear?

Fair enough. It's nice to see some things never change, and Gillian still provokes that sort of response.

"Sure, I can see if she's in. What do you want to speak with her about?"

"That's private, I'm afraid," I tell him.

"O-kay. Who should I tell her is asking?"

"Dexter Rory. Trust me, she'll know the name." I rest my elbows on the table and wait.

He mumbles an excuse and leaves me to wait alone, but it doesn't take long.

Detective Inspector Gillian Batista strides in with a uniform cinched tight at the waist and looking almost starched, her black hair tied back and brown skin glowing in the light. This is a woman who knows that half the battle is looking the part and letting the world know you're not interested in taking any shit.

The other half is being as tough as an old boot.

"Captain Rory," she says, hands on her hips. Nothing in her expression gives away our history. "You're the last person I was expecting to see this early on a Friday morning."

"It's been too long to pull rank, Batista. But you can already guess why I'm here."

"Follow me." Her dark eyes narrow at me and she nods again, more curtly this time, before leading me through the station to an interview room.

I take a seat in one of those hard police chairs that seem designed to dislocate a man's spine, looking up at her. I smile because it tells me she's still as hard as nails.

The hellish months we shared in Syria almost a decade ago will always be there in our memories. So will the night an ambush by an Islamic State group and bad intel had me struggling to keep Batista's guts from hanging out of her body until medevac showed up.

She won a hard-earned Purple Heart and a hero's welcome home for that.

When I found out she was coming back to Kansas City and enrolling in the police program, I sent my personal endorsement to the police chief and the mayor.

One of the few times I didn't mind the weight the Rory name still carries in this town. The meeting where I handed it off was the last contact we had.

She's too much like me—stubborn as hell and merit-driven. If my letter helped put her over the top, I never wanted

any big thanks or special favors.

I just wanted to send her on to a second chance, living her best life.

*Until now.*

I can already tell she's curious, glancing at me with eyes like drawn blades.

"So," she says, perching on the edge of the table and facing me. "What's got your panties in a twist so bad you come to see me this early?"

"I need a favor," I say bluntly. "I'm guessing you know the name Forrest Haute?"

"Owner of Liberty Trails? The golf course?" She wrinkles her nose. "Oh, yeah. We always have a few incidents out there every year when rich kids get drunk and punchy."

"That's the place, yeah. I'm looking for any old records or incident reports related to Liberty Trails and any other Haute properties in the area."

She raises her eyebrows. "As a civilian, you're aware you have no right to that information, Captain. Nothing beyond the usual business filings with the state or matters of public record —"

"C'mon, Batista, I know you outrank me here. Just like you know I wouldn't come sniffing around for favors if I thought I had no chance."

"What makes you think I'm about to risk my job for this?" She folds her arms tightly.

"Because," I say, "you won't be risking shit. No one will ever know. Also, if I'm right, there's a chance you could wind up with a very high-profile bust on your hands."

"Forrest Haute is a powerful man." She doesn't budge an inch. "What is it you think he's done?"

Shit.

The way I pause, clearing my throat, says it all.

“I don’t know. Not yet,” I admit.

She laughs bitterly.

“So, hold up. You want me to bring you privileged reports on a *hunch* over a wealthy businessman?”

“Unless you want to look through them yourself first. You know I trust your judgment.” I flash her a grin, knowing there’s a fair chance she’ll tell me to pound sand, and I’ll be forced to grind out what I can from old newspaper articles. “There’s a very large business contract on the line for my brothers and me with Haute. I’m simply trying to nail down his intentions and make sure there’s nothing nefarious that could hurt us.”

Her eyes drop and she looks me up and down, considering it.

“Well, I guess it’s fair you’re more cautious now. I hear you’re a taken man,” she says.

My brows dart up.

“What the hell? How?”

“The kids at the Sugar Bowl talk an awful lot. I make weekly muffin runs for my team.” She grins affectionately.

I groan inwardly, slumping in my chair. No point in denying it, though, especially if it helps sway her.

“What can I say? She’s the one.” I turn my hands out. “That’s what has me nervous, too. The fact that Haute’s working with the Sugar Bowl now, piloting their products in his properties. Please, Gill. This is important.”

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she says, standing. “I’ve got a phone and I’m pretty sure you still have the number.”

I lean forward. “I didn’t want you blowing me off. I knew you wouldn’t want to do it, but I *need* this information.”

Her mouth presses tightly as she looks at me. “Because I owe you my life, I’ll look into it. If I find anything damning—and that’s a big *if*—you’ll be the first to know. Even Steven?”

I nod. “Perfectly fair.”

“Oh, and when you leave, if you ever want to speak again, pick up the damn phone first. I still consider you a friend, Captain. I’m glad you manned up and got engaged. It should do you some good.”

“Time wears everybody down, I guess,” I say with a snort. “You’d better not quit kicking ass on me. I read about your part in the human trafficking bust with the attorney general’s office last year. Awesome work.”

“Yeah, yeah, stop flattering me so I can get out of your hair and grab those files. You wait here.”

As soon as she leaves the room, I lean back in the chair and let myself relax for the first time today.

There’s no guarantee she’ll find anything—if Haute is dirty, he’s a beast at covering his tracks—but if the cops have been involved at any stage, I’ll know. There’s a reason they keep records.

And if he *has* been involved in any shit, any whiff of the underhand and suppressed, we can figure out how to move on from there.

Gillian returns several minutes later with a chunky brown file.

“Here you are. Every incident ever at Haute properties. I skimmed through them, but there’s a lot of petty crap. I decided to be generous and let you knock yourself out with the boring stuff.” She tosses it on the table with a *thump*. “You’ve got one hour, Dexter. Anything you don’t find in that time goes unfound.”

“I appreciate you, Batista.”

“Yeah...” She pauses on her way to the door. “I wish her luck, you know. Any girl who decides to deal with your grumpy ass forever must be part saint.”

“Thanks again.”

She smiles at that—a tight, hard smile that slides from her face as she leaves.



Finally, I'm alone with the cases that could make or break everything.

I can feel the clock ticking as I page through them.

Most of the incident reports are petty crimes, one-off fistfights and boozing like I expected—nothing ever involving Forrest Haute himself, of course.

A few freak medical incidents. Fire calls requiring police presence. More drunken brawls over football and hockey.

Even in Haute's high-end properties, people are the same at heart.

They love getting drunk, getting into fights, getting high, and falling off balconies. There are a couple auto accidents over the years as well. A memorable one features a man who stole his girlfriend's convertible and crashed it into the golf course's lake.

Something about insurance fraud which turned out to be an admin filling out some forms wrong.

But nothing showing any hint of big, organized crime.

Nothing truly *shady*.

Fuck.

When I glance at the clock, I've already burned forty minutes.

Time is running out, and I brush the reports aside, barely skimming them. As soon as I see the word *intoxicated* or *medical*, I move on to the next.

Until finally, I stop on a report with a few more pages.

Something about police recovering roughly two million dollars in counterfeit bills on the golf course. The file says a manager found it stuffed into bags and abandoned by an unknown guest before it was reported to the police. The trail went cold.

My brows go up.

It could be nothing. Only, the clincher is the date—five years ago, a time I remember from when we started looking into him—about the time Haute’s casino started going bust.

I make a note on my phone, marking the case number for any public record documents I can pull, plus relevant points and dates. When we’ve got more time, we can cross-check everything.

This isn’t a smoking gun, no, but it could be a clue.

I have to bring this shit back to my brothers now.



JUNIE’S GONE when I finally get home, but that suits me just fine.

I need to think through what I’ve read and sit down with my brothers. They’re already on their way while I’m pacing the office.

Surprisingly, Patton shows up first, swaggering in like he’s going to get paid just for walking through the door.

“Shit, Brother. It’s cold as hell in here when it’s just you without your better half.”

“Don’t be a dick,” I snap, nodding at the chair in front of my desk. “This is serious.”

“I’ll say. You don’t usually summon us to meetings. That’s Archer’s job.”

“What job?” Archer asks, coming through the door. Instead of his suit, he’s wearing jeans today, though he’s still wearing a shirt and a jacket. Old habits die hard.

“Being the assertive asshole,” Patton says, sending me the ghost of a wink. “Dex beat you to it today. Better quit slacking.”

Archer brushes his dark hair back from his face and glares at us. “What’s so goddamn urgent? I had to cancel Colt’s swimming lesson to make it here on time.”

“We’ll make it up to the kiddo later. It’s too important.” I push carefully written notes across the desk so they can see them. “I found more material on Haute we need to look into.”

“Didn’t I do that already?” Archer growls. “You’re the one who wanted the deal to go forward, full steam ahead.”

“I still do,” I say as Patton picks up the paper. “But I can’t hide this. I’m getting a bad feeling, and now he’s got his hands in the bakery, too.”

“Fucking hell, Dex.” Archer rubs his eyebrows. “If this is about you getting cold feet—”

“You think I’d raise a bullshit concern for no reason?” I spit.

“Have you heard of *coincidence*?” Patton grinds out, shoving the notes away. “So what? With a business his size, dealing with the public, you probably have all sorts of weird people blowing through. Imagine who stays in our properties—you can’t vet everything, Bro.”

Yeah. I knew Patton would want to plow through with the plan anyway. “The dates are important. Remember all that bad press about money trouble and the casino going down? Haute Ozark or whatever it was called?”

Archer chews his lip as he picks up the paper and reads.

I summarize the police report, highlighting the lack of contract and his clear disinterest in the future of the Mill.

“Guys, I want this deal as much as you. Nothing else will land us this kind of money,” I say, my eyes on Archer, “but something about this waves every red flag in the book. I don’t trust him. I don’t trust that his dirty dealings are purely history. My gut says there’s something else rotten going on.”

Patton rolls his eyes.

“Seriously, Dex? That’s what you’ve got? A gut feeling?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Archer says. “How’d you get a hold of this, anyway? Looks like an internal police file.”

“Ask no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.” I fold my arms.

“When we started this company, we agreed that everything would be aboveboard,” Archer says with a heavy sigh.

I spread my hands. “Sometimes, you’ve gotta fight fire with fire. Especially when doing everything the right way didn’t yield results.” I nod at the report. “I still want the Mill, but I *don’t* want to risk the company getting trapped in legal quicksand.”

He nods slowly.

Patton groans. “You guys will stop at nothing to get out of making a buck.”

“He’s not saying quit, and neither am I. We need to look, Pat,” Archer says. “Someone at the golf course might remember something.”

I don’t bother telling him to be careful since he’s extra cautious in everything he does. As for Patton, I want to yell at him to *grow the fuck up*, but I also don’t want to start a bloody fistfight in our conference room.

“I should go follow up,” Archer says, standing abruptly. He rolls the paper up and tucks it into his jacket pocket as he stands.

Patton waits for him to leave before turning back to me with a fuming look.

“I didn’t know you were still pals with that Army chick you kept alive,” he says. “What does Miss Winkley think about that?”

“It was years ago, Pat. We were never *together*.”

“No, you just slept together once.”

I glare at him coldly because it’s all I can do not to wince.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you’ve never had a one-night stand.” When Pat doesn’t meet my gaze, I smirk. “Exactly. So stop being a smart-ass prick and leave my relationship alone.”

“Relationship?” Patton’s eyes pop. *Fuck*. “You mean your *fake* relationship, right? Or do you mean—”

“Shut it. You’re not welcome to stick your face into shit you don’t understand,” I warn.

“You’re right, I don’t understand. What *is* going on with you two? She’s changed you, Bro. You’ve grown a personality.” He shrugs and leans back.

“Are you done giving me shit yet?”

“I mean it. You’re different now. More mature, more alive. Arch would say that’s a good thing. Me? I kind of miss the boring old Dex.” He throws me a smile he knows will stick as I’m heading out the door. “I should probably go raise some fresh hell. Gives him a sense of purpose.”

“You’re an idiot,” I snarl, but there’s no fire in my voice.

He fucking knows. He revels in it.

But when we need him to join us with something important—like investigating Haute for real—he’ll get over himself and do it, even if he complains the whole damned way.

And if I know my little brother, he absolutely *will*.



WHEN I’M DONE with work, Junie texts to say she’s finishing up at the bakery, so I head over.

Part of me doesn’t know why.

This is her domain.

The less I’m there, the less entangled our lives will be when we inevitably have to untangle them.

It’s hard to help myself. Especially when there’s something so unapologetically Junie about this place, complete with Colt’s cookie hanging up and the tall, leafy plants in the corner.

“Hey,” she calls as I push the door open. “I’m in the kitchen!”

The staff has already gone home and it’s just her here.

“You need to try harder with that work-life balance thing,” I tell her, leaning against the doorframe. The kitchen looks as meticulously clean as I’ve come to expect, except for the corner Junie occupies.

Wearing an apron, with her red hair piled up in a knot and her hands covered in flour, she looks like a domestic goddess.

I’m awestruck that I’m the lucky jackoff who gets to worship her.

“Work-life balance? What’s that?” she snorts as she looks up, revealing a smear of flour across her face. “What would you know about that anyway, mister?”

“It’s almost eight o’clock, sweetheart. When did you get here?”

“Not like you’d have any idea, seeing as you were gone before I got up this morning.” She shrugs and turns back to the chocolate torte in her hands, giving it a thin layer of icing. “Besides, this isn’t really *work*.”

“You’re baking. I beg to differ.”

She looks up again, a wave of laughter in those glassy green eyes. “I can bake for *fun* some days, you know. And I had an idea.”

I join her, looking down at the torte. It’s not just the dark chocolate being smoothed over the top, there’s a splash of color.

A cardinal, I realize too late.

A bright-red cardinal with black eyes and an expression of pure mischief.

“For my mother?” I ask.

“Nope.” She looks up at me with the sweetest smile. “For you.”

I glare at the black cake. “Sweetheart, you know I don’t do \_\_\_”

“I know. You want to shoot anything sweet into the sun, but hear me out.” She taps the dark base of the torte. “Dark chocolate and espresso. Just a pinch of sugar. I used the darkest cocoa we have. This baby isn’t my usual. So you’re going to shut your mouth and love it.”

“It looks... edible,” I growl, ignoring how the fact that she made me a damn cake makes my heart twist.

“Well, duh. I made it, didn’t I?” She throws me a look that cuts me in two. “So, why did you have to rush off so early? Work?”

“Yeah, always.” I drop a kiss on her temple and the tip of her nose. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“No, you didn’t wake me. I slept in with Sarah opening and it was heaven.” She turns back to the torte and finishes the cardinal. “I was actually planning on getting this done as a surprise, but then you turned up.”

“Sorry. Do you want me to leave?”

“I never want you to leave,” she whispers, before stilling for a second. I freeze too, and we stay like that until she unwinds and lays her instruments of sugary torture down. “I’m calling it done. Just gotta box this pretty up and head home.”

*Home.*

My home, she means.

Fuck, *our* home.

It sounds so natural on her lips now I barely stop to question it.

There’s a new normal in my big, empty house.

A normal involving this sunny woman and a self-propelled furball on a mission to plaster his hair to everything. I’ll have to start giving my cleaners Catness hazard pay.

A normal where she’s there, considering my house home.

A normal that has me smiling every time I walk through the door, expecting to see her.

“Sure,” I say, leaning back and dragging my eyes away from that bastard cardinal that looks like it knows all my past sins—and the sins yet to come.

“And after dinner,” she continues, “we can share some of this. It should go well with coffee.”

“Okay, I’m sold.” I tense and step away.

“Also, we need to talk,” she whispers, glancing up at me and away. Hesitant. Unsure. Afraid. “I mean really talk, Dex, and not about the company.”

“Okay,” I say again, and she smiles, looking down at the torte with its cardinal, an icing symbol of the unholy hold she has on my heart.

Frustration rumbles in my chest.

I think I know what’s coming.

She’ll ask questions about *us*, and I won’t have answers she’ll like. Hell, answers that make sense.

This day has been complicated enough.

Now, it looks like it’s ending with a choice between destroying my business or Junie’s heart.





## SWEET HEARTACHE (JUNIPER)



I don't know when I first started thinking of Dexter's house as 'home.'

It might have been the very first day of the flood, when he hauled me into his bed and I woke in his arms and felt more at peace than I had in forever.

Or maybe it was after, when I explored every inch of the house and made mad love to him on the kitchen island.

Or maybe it was when I caught myself singing in the shower like no one could hear—or at least, like no one would complain to the landlord.

When I felt like maybe this could be my life in a parallel universe—and then in *this one*.

Dexter and his life and his house.

It certainly feels like home now, curled up on the sofa after dinner with Catness perched at the end, snoring away.

Dex sits beside me with my legs thrown over his lap and one large hand resting on my calf. His thumb strokes absently with the same affection that never fails to send warmth through me.

"If I don't survive this, I expect a hero's funeral." He holds up his coffee mug and reaches across me to cut a slice of the cake.

It's hard not to laugh as he takes the smallest piece possible with none of the cardinal icing. I accept my plate with

a normal-sized piece, too, but I don't take one bite until he goes first.

After hesitating, he stuffs a forkful in his mouth and chews slowly, fixing his gaze on me the entire time. His sharp blue eyes give away nothing.

“Well?” I urge, leaning forward.

Finally, he swallows.

“Disgusting.”

My heart plummets.

“Disgustingly delicious,” he tells me, giving my calf a rough squeeze. “Don't know how the hell you did it, but you've made me eat chocolate that isn't a mole sauce slathered on enchiladas.”

Relieved, I take a bite.

It's definitely not my favorite.

The intense, bitter chocolate and strong espresso feels like an assault on my tongue. But I didn't make this beauty for me—I made it for sugar hating supergrumps like the maniac holding me.

It won't be a bestseller if I even bother to make it available by special order, but I'm not out to make a new hit.

I made it so one man could finally enjoy my life's work.

And maybe—just maybe—I was hoping the hypothetical delight would sweeten him up for what's next. Because even in the silence, filled with nothing but the crackling fireplace, tension creeps in.

I've felt this charged silence before.

I've felt it on long nights after he falls asleep, wondering how something that lives in my heart so easily can be so very distant.

I've finally decided I don't ever want to feel empty again.

Dexter watches Catness as he stretches awake and slinks to the floor and sprawls out by the fire.

His thumb stills on my leg as he retreats into his head—the one place I can't reach him.

“What's wrong?” I ask, linking my fingers with his. “I know you don't like to have heavy conversations, but—”

“Just work, sweetheart.” His thumb resumes its calm stroking and he glances across at me with a smile. “Don't mind my shit. I'm not great at switching off.”

I frown.

Liam said something similar once, though never with a smile. In fact, he told me I was paranoid for thinking there was anything wrong.

He wasn't honest and open like Dex.

“Hey,” he whispers, taking my plate from me and placing it on the table. “You okay? Anything happen at work you want to talk about?”

“Oh, just the usual.” This isn't the conversation I wanted, but maybe I can find an opening. “I was looking over the accounts again this morning and I think we should be able to afford the new kitchen overhaul without even dipping into the ‘fake fiancée fund.’ That's all from money in the bank and a few conservative guesses for the rest of summer.”

“Great news. I'm damn proud of you.” His broad smile feels so genuine as he tilts me back in his arms, delivering a warming kiss.

“Yeah. It's something I've dreamed of forever, but actually doing it... insane.” I smile at him, searching his eyes. “Oh, and Jake finally asked Emmy out.”

“The one with the curls?”

I nod. “They've been working together for over a year and they've been flirting nonstop.”

“I got that impression. When I first came into the store, he got defensive the second I spoke to her.” Dexter chuckles at the memory, and some small part of me wonders if he's just as jealous when it comes to me. “Glad they've finally come

around. It'd be a shame to waste a summer when you're that young."

"The store is in a better place for it, for sure."

He shifts so his arm is over my shoulders and I'm curled up against his chest. "Anything else?"

"Well, your friend stopped by this morning. Forrest Haute," I say, remembering how he bought several cakes and tipped generously while he was there.

It was nice of him, even if his compliments made me feel uncomfortable, having to play up the whole fiancée act again.

Dexter instantly stiffens, every muscle tensing.

I twist to look up at him, but his eyes are dark and unreadable.

"Forrest Haute?" he repeats. "He came in and you didn't tell me?"

"...yeah. He didn't say a word about you; he was just there for the cakes." Smiling uncertainly, I settle back against Dexter's chest, willing his hand to rub my skin. "He said he was in town this weekend and he had to share his new favorites with a few guys he was meeting for business."

"That's it? Did he say anything else?"

I frown, thinking. "Well, he also offered to do pickups for his places using his own drivers."

"I see." Why does Dexter's voice seem too flat?

"I wasn't expecting the personal touch. I didn't think he'd be so considerate for a guy who runs so many businesses. I thought it was a good idea. This way, I don't have to send the van out and it's all free of charge."

Dexter folds his arms as he looks at me.

"Yeah, sure. Real fucking nice of him." His tone grates.

I narrow my eyes.

"Why are you being like this? It *was* pretty generous and it shows real commitment to my stuff. Considering we're

working together now, we need that.”

“Goddammit, Sweet Stuff. Guys like Haute aren’t *nice*. They fuck over people like you and you need to be aware of it. I can’t stand to see him take advantage of you.”

“Take advantage of me? How?” I’m so lost. This isn’t how I wanted this conversation to go, but it’s spinning out of control and I don’t know how to get it back on track. “Are you saying I’m the problem now?”

He groans, running his hands over his face. I watch him the way I used to watch Liam, feeling the same desperate dread of something precious slipping through my fingers.

So close, yet so far.

It’s like there’s a thickening sheet of ice between us I can’t thaw.

“You’re not the problem, Junie,” he whispers. “You never are. But I’m not sure Forrest Haute is the friendly, harmless man you think.”

“Then *tell me*,” I plead, hating that high note in my voice. “What’s going on with you and Haute? One minute you want this deal with him so bad we’re fake engaged, the next, you’re telling me to watch my back after he went out of his way to boost my sales.”

His nostrils flare.

I clench my fists, waiting for an explanation. Waiting for him to lower his shields and throw me a bone.

But he just drops his hands.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Maybe for you it doesn’t.”

“I’ll handle it, Junie. I don’t want to spoil the evening.”

I glance at the torte I made, the cardinal now a smeared red mockery of my feelings plastered on a cake I don’t even truly know if he wants.

“Too late,” I say, uncurling and brushing past him to the stairs. “I’m going to get some sleep.”

“Junie, wait.”

A hard lump rises up my throat.

When it sticks, I know I’m going to cry like the shameless wreck I am. So I choke it back down and glare at him.

“What the hell do you want from me, Dex? I’m not cut out for all this guessing.”

“When did I say it was you?” He stops in front of me. He’s so tall, so broad, so much of everything I want and yet now it hurts to even look at him. “I never said that.”

“No, but look at this.” The painful lump is breaking through like poison, burning my whole face. “Look at *us*. You’ve got your secrets, and you won’t tell me, will you? You don’t *trust* me.”

His eyes darken like a restless ocean, danger flaring in their depths.

“Is this because of that asshole who broke your heart? Listen, if it’s that, I—”

“This is because of you,” I interrupt. “Maybe Liam hinted I wasn’t fit for big money and lofty reputations, and I should’ve listened. But don’t you see? It’s playing out the same way. I’m still just Juniper Winkley, a shadow to people smarter and better than me, and you’re—”

“Shit, Juniper. *Stop*.”

The roughness in his voice makes me freeze, breathless and broken.

Dex rakes a hand through his hair and reaches out to me. This time, I’m locked in place by that stupid desire for reassurance. To hold on to whatever we have left.

His hands are so warm against my skin when he takes my arms.

“Listen to me. You’ll never be *just* Juniper Winkley.”

“I want to believe you,” I force out.

He pulls me closer so I’m looking up into his face, his hands tracing the line of my jaw. A crease deepens between his eyebrows and he wipes away a tear that slips out from my eye.

“Don’t you get it?” he says, his voice pure smolder. “You’re too fucking good for this.”

Before I have time to think about what he means by *this*, he’s kissing me.

His lips are hard, claiming and desperate, but his hands are soft.

The tightness in my chest unravels a little.

We haven’t resolved anything, no, but I can still breathe when I’m with him. And I’m too afraid of what might happen if I walk away now.

So I obey, listening to his warmth and the pressure of his grip and let myself forget in the hopes he’ll never just be another sad memory.



THE REST of the week passes with the same heavy angst that runs under everything like a quiet pulse.

We finish the rest of the chocolate torte between our jobs, passing the evenings together again.

On the surface, it’s normal.

I don’t press him for hard answers he isn’t willing to give.

Still, it feels like time is running away with us, and there’s a new uncertainty opening up that feels like an ever-expanding pit.

If we’re not doing this to fool Haute anymore, then why?

I tell myself it’s okay.



It takes time for two lives to mesh, especially when we're both so busy. He's in meetings with his brothers and managing a real estate empire and I'm tied down at the bakery, working the longest hours ever.

Even if that means we're talking less, what does it matter?

He still kisses me the same as before. More passionately, even.

Like he's trying to convey whole emotions with his body that aren't fit for words.

Then the weekend arrives.

I wake up alone, just like I have almost every morning this week. I wander downstairs to feed Catness and find him coming up from the basement gym.

"Morning, sweetheart," he says, distracted as he glances at his phone. "You probably don't want to kiss me right now. Morning breath."

"You're heading into the office again?" I fold my arms.

"I've got a lot of work to do."

"...but it's Saturday."

He looks up at me with a frown. He's been doing that more and it's slowly killing me, wishing I knew why.

Maybe I'm not so interesting anymore.

I'm certainly not his equal in business, in life, in anything.

*I'm not what he wants and he's figured it out.*

Only, he doesn't say that.

He just raises an eyebrow and says, "If I'm not mistaken, you work a lot of Saturdays yourself."

"That's not the point."

"I don't need this right now."

"Dex, stay." It's more of a whisper, a plea, and he freezes on his way back up. "Don't go to work. Just for today."

“I wish I had the option. This can’t wait and it’s just my reality, Junie,” he says slowly, turning and heading upstairs.

He doesn’t quite say ‘take it or leave it,’ but it’s what he means.

I don’t understand how we’ve been torn apart.

I don’t have a clue how to sew up the damage either as I drag myself after him.

He sighs and runs a hand through his damp hair.

“I’m sorry.” He sounds like he means it. “I don’t mean to take this shit out on you. I’ll be back for dinner, I promise.”

I could fight him, but what’s the point?

“Let me make you a coffee,” I tell him as he runs to the bathroom. He flashes me a quick smile and he’s gone.

The worst part is he’s *right*.

I do work unholy hours that usually include weekends. The only reason I’m not at the Sugar Bowl today is because I wanted to spend that time with Dexter, because I thought we could finally talk about the future.

Because right now we’re trapped in a very confusing present.

And I shouldn’t care so much.

This was never meant to last and being with a businessman born into generational wealth means putting up with his insane hours.

*So, yes, it’s fine*, I tell myself as I flick the fancy coffee machine in the wall on and lean against the side. It’s fine that I’m spending Saturday alone.

It’s just another day of putting off the conversation—or the apocalypse that ends us.

There’s a loud knock on the front door.

I start. I’m pretty sure the gates are supposed to *stop* people from just barging in, but when I open the door, it’s Delly Rory standing outside.

“I’m so sorry for dropping in on you unannounced.” She walks in with a burst of floral perfume and perfectly styled hair. “I didn’t realize how early it was.”

I glance at the clock out of habit.

Eight a.m. on a Saturday morning and his mom’s dropping around as a fun little surprise.

Also, she’s flipping gorgeous.

She looks like American royalty in her burgundy designer dress and gold earrings so bright they leave stars in my eyes. There are highlights in her hair that lighten her complexion, and her makeup is exquisitely done, her nails long and painted peach.

My self-esteem isn’t stellar at the best of times, but Dexter’s mom looks way more put together in her fifties than me. Bye-bye, confidence.

I’m standing here like a dope, still wearing my pajamas—an old Easterly Ribbon t-shirt with her silhouette and moody lyrics and gym shorts—and my hair is one big rat’s nest at the back of my head.

“You’re so effortlessly pretty,” Delly says, giving me a perfumed kiss on the cheek. I can feel the slick press of her lipstick and I resist the urge to wipe it away. “Do you know how long it takes me to get ready in the morning?” She laughs, throwing up a hand. “No, don’t answer that.”

“Would you like some coffee?” I open the cupboard with the mugs. “I’m making Dexter some right now before he’s off to work.”

“Work on a Saturday? Where are his manners?” she huffs loudly. “But yes, I’ll have a coffee please, darlin’. Decaf, if you’ve got it. Can’t stand more than a milligram or two of caffeine these days or I get the shakes all day.”

I finish their drinks and fix myself a fully caffeinated coffee with an extra shot of espresso while I’m at it. Something tells me I’ll need it today.

“Speaking of my son, where is he?” She glances around the kitchen like she’s half expecting him to pop out of the massive cabinets. Absurd or not, they’re actually big enough.

“He’s upstairs getting ready after his workout,” I say, wishing I’d gotten dressed before I came downstairs. “He’ll be down any second, I’m sure.”

*Because he’s so desperate to get to work and avoid me.*

“That’s just like him. The boy never learned how to relax.” Delly sends me a sympathetic look.

Like he knows we’re talking about him, Dex enters the kitchen with perfectly combed hair, wearing a full suit that looks almost painted on.

“Mother? What are you doing here?” He stops short at the sight of her.

“Oh, I thought I’d drop in and spend some time with my new favorite couple.” Delly gives him a kiss on the cheek he doesn’t return. He frowns at her, not missing the glance she sends at my bare hand. “But it looks like you’re all ready to go.”

“I am,” he says. “And for the record, Mother, normal people don’t just ‘drop in’ this early.”

“You know me. I’ve been up since five.” She waves a dismissive hand.

“Junie needs to sleep in when she’s off.” He glances at me apologetically, but our little argument still sours the air between us. I shrug. “Bye, sweetheart,” he says, accepting the coffee and kissing me on the cheek. Although he does that a lot of mornings, there’s a different vibe today, like we’re really pretending now and it feels forced.

I hate it.

“Bye,” I say as he leaves. The door slams behind him. I wrap my hands around my mug and lean against the counter. “Sorry. That was rude of him.”

“No need to apologize, dearie. I’ve only been dealing with his bluster for half my life.” Delly sinks into the sofa and pats

the space beside her. “A mother knows her son. He’s always been like this. Work is his escape when he’s climbing the walls.”

*So he’s escaping me then?*

I tap my nails idly on the ceramic mug as I sit beside her, wishing she would leave, knowing that every moment we spend together just makes the happy fiancée illusion flimsier.

“I guess that’s just the draw of the cards, huh?”

“Only when he’s stressed.” Delly pats my leg, apparently under the impression she’s reassuring me. “The rest of the time, he’s more reasonable.”

I already know he’s stressed, but hearing her say it like that hits me in the stomach. I take another gulp of coffee so hot it sears my mouth.

“Maybe I’m stressing him out,” I say. “With the Sugar Bowl’s latest business deal, I mean.”

“The one with Mr. Haute? Patton did say something about that the other day.”

“That’s the one. It’s great for the bakery, but I know Dex has a few misgivings about it, and—”

“Oh, my dear.” Completely disregarding the fact that I’m holding a mug, Delly takes my hands. “You’re not the problem, Juniper. Please don’t think that for one second.”

How many times has he said that?

I wish I’d never said yes to this.

I should have just turned it down and figured everything out on my own. Sure, I’d still be struggling to drum up a few extra dollars and coming home to canned soup in a different crappy apartment.

But I knew how to manage without money or special connections.

I knew how to survive.

I didn't *need* it, and if we're being honest, it hasn't been about the money for a while. I just got greedy for something else.

I let myself fall for *him*.

Delly looks at my face and purses her lips like she can see my brain scattering in a dozen directions. There are wrinkles around the corners, but they've been artificially smoothed to delay the inevitable march of age. I guess money can stall time itself if you've got enough.

"Did Dexter ever tell you how his father died?" she asks, leaning back.

I frown. "We haven't talked much about our parents, no. But it was a plane crash, right?"

"Yes. When Dexter was barely grown." She smiles, but remnants of tragedy linger in her eyes. A sadness that all the money in the world can't eradicate. Nothing heals a broken heart. "The last time I ever saw him shed a tear was at the funeral."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"He doesn't like to talk about it, especially considering the aftermath." She glances down. "I was... I wasn't myself for a few years after it happened. The grief took me to such a dark place, dear, and I didn't want to burden my boys."

I wait, wondering what she's holding back.

Her elegant frame rattles as she sighs. "Frankly, I was a mess. First the drinking, then the prescription pills, then more drinking and pills together."

My eyebrows go up.

I definitely wasn't expecting such a human confession.

"Delly, it's okay. If it's too personal, you don't need to—"

"No. No, dear. It's such a long time ago now, and I suppose Dexter doesn't want to tell anyone else about it. But with everything he did for me—the days the poor dear spent at

my bedside so I didn't drink myself to death, or worse—he saved my life. And I think it left him so scared he iced over.”

My heart aches now.

I feel like the queen of all bitches for judging him so hard, for not trying to understand.

“That’s rough. I’m really sorry.” I set my mug down on the end table and pat her hand. “I’m not sure I understand, though. What has him so scared?”

Delly smiles sadly.

“Why, seeing what lost love can do,” she whispers. “I was never the same. I’m still not, no, but thanks to my son, I’ve learned to live and laugh again. It tore him up, watching me trying to throw myself into my husband’s grave. Honestly, I *hurt* him. I shouldn’t have let it take months for him to talk me into checking into a real place where I could get help. For years, I worried he’d think it wasn’t worth it after seeing my addiction, my grief. That he’d never be brave enough to love, to take a chance on anyone...”

Her slim fingers bend gently around mine.

I swallow thickly.

God, I know how it feels, even if it’s just a shadow of what she’s been through. All these years after my mom died, and I still don’t talk about it with anyone but Nana.

There are some things better kept inside.

“I get that,” I whisper.

“Of course you do, dear. I watched from a distance as he went into the Army and worried myself sick. Then he came home and my boys dealt with their grief their own way, working like mad for that business. I watched them pour their hearts into building something grand—then Dexter met you. You opened his heart, and I’ve never been happier to be proven wrong.”

I’m dumbstruck.

I don’t know what to say.

I've never been a mom who lost the love of her life.

I don't know what it's like, watching from a distance as your children make their choices, good and bad, and try to deal with their own damage.

"They all work very hard," I hedge.

"The company is everything," she says, her voice too brittle. "That became their life while I wished they'd share it with more than just work. With Dexter now, and you two getting married, there's hope."

Talk about heavy.

"I'm sorry," I offer again, unsure how to process the fact that her hopes for a happy family are riding on me.

I tighten my hold on the mug, trying not to spill coffee.

"Another thing. Dexter didn't smile so much before," she says suddenly. "He worked and he felt proud of his achievements, yes. Heaven knows he made a lot of himself, but he never *smiled* after the accident."

I swallow. The stupid lump in my throat comes back with a vengeance.

"And then you came along like a whirlwind," she says. "I knew he was in love with you before I even met you. You make him smile again."

I don't know what to say.

The thought rips at my heartstrings until I forget how to breathe, and I tighten my hold on the mug, needing to feel some warmth.

To know I'm still here, still grounded, still Junie.

Even though I make Dexter smile.

"Well, I shouldn't keep rambling. You've heard enough." Delly's eyes gleam as she looks at me. "But you brought back something he lost that day," she tells me, and I listen to the way her words ring in my head, saying everything I've ever wanted to hear. "Something I thought he'd never find. You make him *happy*."



Happy.

I don't know if I can describe the Dexter I've seen last week as *happy*, but then I remember the way he made love to me on the balcony, the smile he gives me when I wake up in his arms.

The way he always kisses me like I'm his first and last kiss.

If that isn't joy, I don't know what is.

But if it's all true, why is he so moody over Haute? What isn't he telling me?

Is it really Haute at all or is he afraid to admit he's feeling the same things I am—everything we're both too scared to say?



## SWEET SURPRISES (DEXTER)



I don't see Junie much over the next few days.

The possibility that I'm subconsciously avoiding her is fucking with my head.

Work always brings an easy distraction, though there's nothing easy about it lately. Not when we don't have any clue what we're up against with Haute yet.

Every passing second is just another second where both Junie and Higher Ends could be in danger.

Hell, my entire damn world might be in danger, and I don't know how to fix it.

"Dexter?" Archer's voice cuts through the grim thoughts.

I blink at him over the long wooden conference room table.

"I'm listening," I lie, slowly maneuvering a pen in my fingers as I glance at the clock.

The delivery people picking up Junie's latest order for Haute are due in about an hour. I need to wrap up here and get the hell over there.

"What was I saying? Enlighten me, numbnuts." Archer raises a brow.

"That Haute's clean as a whistle and I'm wasting your precious time." It's a guess but given how the circular conversation went during the first half hour, it's not a bad one.

“I’ve got your report written up here, Arch. I can see everything just as well as you.”

“Yeah, I still vote we go ahead.” Patton leans back in his chair, testing the balance.

“And get mired in something illegal?” Archer turns his glare on Patton. “You might think tangling with the law is a joke, Pat, but we need to make damn sure everything we do is entirely aboveboard. There’s no coming back from fuck ups like that.” He looks at me again. “We also can’t have any mistakes with cops.”

Shit.

Looks like he isn’t going to let calling in my favor with Batista go.

“I told you, no one’s going to find out. Plus, that file gave us clues.”

“Fucking prick,” Patton mutters, nodding at his iPad. “Haute, I mean. Though you’re both welcome to wear the hat if it fits.”

“This isn’t the time, Pat,” I snarl.

“I mean it. He’s a certified prick. What sort of dude runs this many charity fronts when he’s strapped for cash? There must be tax fraud.”

“That’s between Haute and the IRS. His loopholes can’t blowback on us as long as we don’t get mixed up in his charities.” Archer links his fingers together with practiced patience. “For the record, *we* donate plenty ourselves.”

“Seriously?” Pat smirks at us both. “You make it sound like we’re just as shady as him, trying to cover our tracks.”

“Giving to charity isn’t what makes him shady,” I bite off. Usually, Patton’s bullshit makes me laugh, but today I’m wound too tight to find him funny. “It’s the fact that he could be hiding all the shady shit underneath his good deeds.”

“On paper, it’s unlikely. He’s clean, Dex,” Archer says. “No connection to anyone implicated in the bust at the golf course. Hell, the report from your PI says he’s not even

cheating on his wife. Though I guess that's up for debate if he's as obscene as you make him sound with his sweets."

Knowing Haute, he probably *is* cheating.

He just hasn't left any sort of trail.

"There's something we're missing," I growl. "Fuck, I know it."

Archer sighs and rubs his temples.

"Look, part of me wants to believe you. But I don't know what more I can do. Either we pull the plug on this project based on a *gut feeling* or we listen to the evidence."

"Pull the plug?" Patton rocks his chair forward with a *thump*. "Not a fucking chance, Bro. Do you know how hard we've worked on this? And now you want to go and butcher the golden goose?"

I glance at the clock again.

With the traffic downtown, I'll need to haul ass to get to the Sugar Bowl before the pickup.

"We don't have to make any final decisions today," I venture. "He still hasn't sent us the final contract."

"Yeah, about that—his assistant says it should be coming today. A few people were out sick on his legal team," Archer says.

Fuck.

I stare at the table. It's all glossy wood, gleaming and heavy as a tombstone. Just the sort of impressive and expensive Archer likes.

Patton's right, though, even if he's as insufferable as ever about it.

This is the deal of a lifetime.

We should be over the moon, kissing Haute's pastry-inflated ass so he goes ahead with it.

If I'm honest with myself—and this is the sort of honesty I hate—it's because of Junie.

If Haute hadn't roped her into his supply chain—if *I* hadn't gotten involved with her and the risk was just ours—I might have shrugged off my doubts.

Archer's reports might make more sense.

I might not feel like I'm crawling out of my skin.

Business is all about risk, that's nothing new.

But not Junie. I won't risk her family legacy and everything she's toiled over on a hunch.

"This meeting's gone on long enough. I need to go," I say, pushing up from the table.

Archer stares at me, but I don't offer an explanation. He doesn't know how far the thing with Junie has gone, and I don't need him to.

"If you guys find anything new, let me know ASAP."

"Someone's in a hurry. Wonder why?" Patton gives me a wide shit-eating smile as I pass him, but I don't take the bait. There's no time today.

Outside, the sky opens up and dumps a steady summer rain on my head.

I walk past my Tesla and choose a nondescript company car. Just in case I do find anything, I don't want anyone to notice me.

Before I set off, I check my phone, but Junie hasn't texted.

Looks like she got the memo about keeping our distance.

There's an empty itch under my skin, hating that she's given up on me even though that's what I demanded.

Fucking hell, I'm going to be sick.

As I pull out, I try to forget all about Junie on my way to the Sugar Bowl. I arrive just in time for the delivery boys.

They show up in a white van that isn't sporting a logo from the golf course or anything else. Odd, but certainly not damning.

Two guys climb out, laughing and joking like any working class stiff on a long shift.

They're more boys than men—I'd peg them as being in their early twenties. Broad-shouldered, but normal enough.

They look like they work out, though they're not the hulking human Dobermans I was subconsciously expecting in my mafia nightmares.

Still, I make a mental note of their faces.

One guy has cropped brown hair. Army-style, the kind I recognize right away. Average face, no distinctive features, around my height, minus a few inches.

The other is blond. Tattoos crawl down his right arm. He's built like a runner, long and lanky.

I check the time on the dash. Midmorning.

Junie comes out the back and helps the guys load her stuff into the van. She looks totally at home with them, her hair long and loosely tied back, her sleeves rolled up in the heat.

From the way they look at her, they've noticed she's a sweeter treat than anything in those pink boxes.

*Focus, asshole. You didn't come here to let your jealousy blow it.*

It takes them a few trips to get everything inside, hauling the boxes in stacks. It's a mix of pastries and cookies, plus a couple cakes, if I recall right from our conversations. Junie hands them to the tattooed guy and gives him a diplomatic smile.

This caveman urge to make everyone know she's taken storms my blood, throwing jagged thoughts around my head.

*Mine, mine.*

Primal and ridiculous.

I shake my head, forcing myself to look away from her as she waves them off, one hand on her hip, and then get ready to follow the van.

The kids driving it are cautious, maybe due to their cargo. They take it slow and hit damn near every single red light in the district.

No chance of losing them—the hard part is keeping far enough behind and out of sight.

Eventually, we reach the edge of town and Haute's golf course. They take the service road toward the clubhouse, heading for the loading docks in the back.

Then my watch buzzes with a call from Archer.

Perfect timing.

I'm sure he wants to know where the hell I am after I stormed out.

Whatever.

“Hey, Arch,” I answer, swinging the car around. “I'm coming back right now.”

“Where were you? When you ran out, I thought you had a meeting with marketing, but you're not in the building.” He sighs impatiently. “I need you to keep your shit together, Dex.”

“I am.”

“Was it important?”

I glance in my rearview mirror at the golf course as I speed along the highway back into town.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “It was personal.”



I SPEND the next week checking up on Junie and her deliveries, with Archer hot on my case about wasting company time and Patton throwing looks like he knows I'm up to no good.

I probably am.

The delivery boys are efficient, arriving by noon to collect the day's goods. Some cakes, cupcakes, turnovers and cookies and muffins.



Never quite the same order, according to Junie, but it's everything the golf course needs for its expanded menu.

There's still nothing *wrong* with this, either, so why does it feel too clean?

It's probably me, stubborn jackass that I am, looking for snakes in every pie.

My darkest imagination keeps me watching them like a hawk.

They follow the same routine every time, careful to a fault. Get the boxes, drop them off, and unload everything by one o'clock sharp.

Usually, that's when I leave.

Today, though, the tingle at the back of my neck doesn't let up.

I park in the golf club's lot and text Archer, letting him know I'm stopping for lunch.

The clubhouse looms above me as I get out of the car, the stars and stripes and a Missouri flag fluttering from the very top. Three large steps lead to the front door.

It's almost offensive in its old-world grandeur, the Tuscan style that was so popular twenty years ago. An ode to the rich and famous, the people who come here to lose themselves in overpriced entertainment and manicured green turf.

It's the kind of place I visited growing up, back when my father was alive. The kind of place where I should feel at home.

The kind of place I hate.

Course access is limited to having a very expensive membership, according to their website. The restaurant and bar, however, are luckily more open to the public.

That's all I need.

Inside, it's just as old-fashioned. The restaurant offers expansive views across the whole golf course, including the

lake sparkling in the light. The scenery can make even the least golf-friendly person relax.

I have to admit, it's effective.

But that's not why I'm here, so I switch my focus from the surroundings and ambience—*good ambience, damn him*—to the menu. I want to see exactly what they're doing with Junie's pastries and if they're luring more guests in like Haute promised.

I peruse today's menu several times and stop.

What the fuck?

The pastries aren't there. None of her desserts are, save for the muffins on the breakfast menu.

I know half her offerings by heart. They're all missing.

The deliveries have been going for a solid week. More than enough time to change the menu over. I can't believe they're piling everything up in kitchen storage, especially when the place advertises a commitment to freshness.

Changing over the menu should've been the kitchen's first order of business.

Haute knows what he's doing when he's been so personally invested in this, and what he's doing now is *not* showcasing the pastries and confections he never shuts up about.

Which means he's doing something else with them.

A cold sweat pricks my neck.

I beckon over the waitress, a pretty girl with a high ponytail and flawless skin. Something else I'm certain Haute insists on with his hiring managers—everything he owns must be visually appealing. His properties, his businesses, his waitstaff, even his fucking wife, who's so pumped full of Botox she can hardly smile.

I smile up at the girl. "I'm curious, do you have another dessert menu? I'm looking for a smaller bite today."

Confusion crosses her face. *Weird.*

“Oh, you mean different from the back page?”

“That’s right.”

She twists her lips. “I think there’s some summer gelato and sorbets we haven’t put on there yet. They’re normally weekend specials, but I can ask if you’d like...”

I wait for more. Anything.

But she just looks at me like she’s mentally counting down the seconds until I throw my hands up in surrender or just ask for a drink.

Shit, do the staff know about the deliveries? They happen midday, so someone must.

Or what if they’ve been told to keep their mouths shut? And if so, *why*?

The van only stopped unloading twenty minutes ago.

If I’m quick, I might be able to sneak through the back and see what’s going on for myself.

“No problem,” I say, handing her the menu. “On second thought, I’ll just have a coffee, then. Cold brew, black.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s it. Thanks.”

“Coming right up.”

I drum my fingers on the table while she trots off.

My watch buzzes with another call, this time from Patton, but I ignore his annoying ass.

My worst suspicions were just validated.

The question now is *what* and how the hell do I prove it without getting caught?

My coffee arrives a minute later, iced and blissfully unsweetened.

I get a touch of brain freeze as I gulp it down quickly and leave a tip on the table, walking outside just as the afternoon traffic picks up in the restaurant.

It's been half an hour since the delivery, and I half expect to find it gone, vanished into the ether.

But no, it's still parked next to the loading dock when I round the back. The two boys are nowhere to be seen. Maybe the golf club is the dessert's final destination after all, but that doesn't explain anything.

I've only stopped for a minute when a truck pulls up with big red coolers inside. The two kids who picked up the desserts reappear from the back, helping the new crew carry them inside through an open door into a storeroom. That's probably my way in, but it's way too crowded.

I find a side door.

Locked.

Fuck, everything here is. I also can't just sneak in through the restaurant with how busy it's gotten.

The longer I hang around, the more suspicious I look.

A cook wearing white stands by another door, propped open by his foot. A cigarette dangles from his fingers and he turns his face up, exhaling a long plume of smoke.

From the way his shoulders slump, this looks like a well-needed break.

It also looks like my way inside.

Once he's done smoking, he throws the heavy door open and heads through. I catch it just before it clicks shut.

There's no window, so I can't see what's going on, but distant shouting and the scent of sizzling food wafts through the air.

I slip through, heading inside the kitchen, careful to stay out of view.

The noise instantly threatens to overwhelm me, but I plow through the narrow corridors, eyeing a storeroom.

To my left is the restaurant, judging by the staff that come and go.

Luckily for me, the cooks are too busy to worry about a stranger in a suit heading through.

Then I'm through the last door to the storeroom.

The delivery guys are shutting the large outside doors. I pat the wall until I feel a light switch. A dull buzz hums through the air as the lights flick on.

This place is enormous.

And there, on a table, stacked like an afterthought, are Junie's pink boxes. A few are bent and crumpled like no one cares about the food inside.

There's cream smeared against the outside on the front of one. Junie wouldn't leave it like that.

She might be chaotic and overworked, but she's not careless.

These guys are fucking animals.

More importantly, half of this stuff isn't fit to serve anymore unless they want to risk a write-up from the health inspector.

As I approach, I see the branded stickers holding the boxes shut look torn, the frayed edges smoothed back down with a dirty thumb. Unhygienic as hell.

There's a noise behind me.

I barely have time to duck into a corner when someone enters the room.

A dishwasher or kitchen boy, judging by the pimples on his chin. He grabs a box of sauces—ketchup and mayonnaise—and runs back to the kitchen.

I shouldn't be here.

I'm risking the fucking farm.

If anyone catches me, the best-case scenario is Haute knows I'm up his ass snooping around. Either he pulls the plug on whatever he's doing with Junie, or I get her into trouble. No matter what, the contract with Higher Ends will be toast.

Worst-case scenario, I wind up with trespassing charges on top of it.

*This better pay off.* I grit my teeth.

With one more glance at the door leading into the kitchen, I swipe the top box from the pile and run. It feels like cupcakes or muffins bouncing around inside.

I fly through the kitchen and stagger back outside, bolting to my car.

The weather's turned windy and fresh rain blows in my face.

I tuck the box awkwardly under my jacket, trying to look normal in case there are cameras.

I keep my head down, facing the ground as I walk to my car.

Walk, not run.

Confidence.

That's one of the first lessons my dad taught me. Look like you know what you're doing, and people will believe it.

As soon as I'm in the car, I open the box.

Sure enough, a few disorderly cupcakes stare up at me, perfectly normal aside from some damaged frosting. There's a fingerprint gouging the icing, but otherwise, there's nothing to suggest they've been seriously tampered with.

*What else? What am I missing?*

I feel ridiculous as I grab the cupcake and squeeze it in my fingers. The moist cake crumbles in my palm, raining crumbs all over my suit.

Goddammit.

I'm chasing my own tail and nothing makes sense anymore.

Then something sharp stabs my palm.

I stop and look at what I'm doing.

There's some kind of small metallic disk at the base of the cupcake. A metal plate stamped with a number.

*Bingo.*

I rip open the rest of the cupcakes and find more, all stuffed into the bases. Sweat beads on my brow.

I don't know what I'm looking at, not yet.

I just know these cupcakes were never meant to be eaten.

The small discs sit in my palm, sticky and menacing as tiny knives.

My hand shakes as I grab my phone, snapping a few photos for evidence.

I need to bring this back to Archer and Patton, but if Haute is using Junie's goods to do something this shady, she needs to know ASAP.

Wiping my hands, I start the car and take off like mad.

This won't be an easy conversation.

Too bad, Junie deserves honesty.

She also needs to end her business with Forrest Haute right the fuck now.





## SWEET BETRAYAL (JUNIPER)



**A**fter the week we've had, the last thing I expect to see is Dexter turning up at the store in the middle of the day.

He's not been seeking me out. In fact, it's been the opposite.

Even when we're in the same house together, he spends more time staring at a screen than at me, shuttering himself in his office to work.

I try not to be upset.

I knew what I was getting into—a crazy businessman with a beastly schedule. I've always just been a prop to help him land the deal of a lifetime.

That's what I signed up for. There's literally a contract with those terms, written by his lawyer in black ink and signed by yours truly.

Logically, he's well within his rights to prioritize business over me.

The problem with logic is I don't have to like it.

And I don't.

I flipping hate the way my nerves still spark at the sight of him, suit ruffled and dark hair mussed.

I hate the way watching him perched in front of a computer through the glass door sends a rush of jealousy bolting through me.

I hate the fact that I'm folding my arms as he approaches, instantly defensive, even though it doesn't make sense.

But isn't that how it goes with instinct? You watch something precious as it falls apart and you try to protect your heart from the incoming blow.

You prepare for the worst, even if you know you don't have a prayer of stopping it.

*Okay, maybe that's a little strong. Or maybe it's just the cold truth.*

He's not about to tell me it's over in front of everyone, of course, so I know it's not that. He wouldn't make this the time or place.

Sarah eyes us like a hawk. Oliver seems so distracted by the sight of Big Fish he's dribbling coffee down his apron.

"Dexter," I say, also hating the way his eyebrow rises at the sound of his full name. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk."

"Oh. Okay." I smooth my finger over the bare spot where the ring is conspicuously absent. It's in my pocket, weighing me down. "There's a table in the corner—"

"No. Somewhere more private."

*Oh, crap-zilla.*

Maybe he really *is* dumping me right here, right now. Just like Liam did all those years ago, because what the hell do my pesky little feelings matter when a big important man has an agenda?

But Dexter isn't like that.

...is he?

Sarah's still staring, and so are a couple patrons between slow sips of coffee. I summon a flimsy smile and pull my apron off.

"I'll be right back," I tell Oliver, who nods with wide eyes.

At least Emmy's in the kitchen so they won't all see—whatever shit show's about to go down.

It's weird not feeling invisible. Today, I'm as conspicuous as a big ugly zit, and the attention is just as welcome.

“You don't have to be so abrupt, you know,” I tell him as he leads me outside with one hand pressed impatiently to the small of my back.

I sink into the weight of his hand helplessly. He wouldn't touch me like that if he was about to dump me. *I hope.*

“People will talk,” I say.

“Let them,” he clips.

I pull away from him and stare into his eyes, dusky blue mirrors revealing nothing.

“Dex, what the hell? Why are you here?”

“I wouldn't drop in like this if I had a choice. Sorry.” He sighs and urges me forward. “Will you just get in my car?”

I fold my arms again, squeezing harder like I can lock up my heart and all its inconvenient feelings with just enough pressure.

“What's going on?”

“I'll tell you as soon as you get in.” The car automatically unlocks and he ushers me into the passenger seat.

Something pink catches my eye.

There's a Sugar Bowl box sitting there, a little crumpled with cream smeared across the edge and what looks like a mess of cake inside.

I grab it for a closer look as I slide inside the vehicle.

“Um, what did you do? What's this about?”

“That's what I want to talk about, Junie.” He shuts the door as the rain picks up, spitting against the windshield, hissing in the silence between us. “I was here when the men from the golf course came for their order. I followed them to Haute's

clubhouse. I went looking for your goods, but it turns out the food isn't there to be eaten."

I look at him like he's started spewing Coptic Greek because it makes just as much sense to me.

"Huh? I don't understand."

"I snuck inside. I stole one of the boxes and found these inside your cupcakes." He opens a napkin and shows me a bunch of numbered plates, barely bigger than coins. "Someone shoved these inside."

"...they what? They messed with my cupcakes? Why? What about the rest?"

I'm reeling.

"I'd guess they've fucked with everything else, too, or else they're planning to. Now, I don't know what they are. Don't know what they're for, but it's clearly nothing good. And almost certainly illegal." He rakes a hand through his hair and rests the napkin on his thigh.

I cast a longer look at the metal plates, trying to convince myself this isn't a bad dream.

They're thin, maybe nickel or hammered steel, the small mystery numbers engraved on top.

They were in my desserts.

The desserts I thought Haute was serving to happy customers.

The desserts he *swore up and down he was going to sell*.

Ugh.

Where do I even start?

"I don't... I don't get it," I stammer out. My thoughts are a tangled mess and words come broken. "He... he told me they were going on the menu, didn't he? I thought he was selling them. He's done like *three* pickups this week."

"I checked, sweetheart," he says grimly. "They're not on the menu. Nothing besides the muffins at breakfast time."

My head throbs.

“Holy. Shit.”

“Yeah. That’s the long and short of it.”

My heart beats like a racing hummingbird.

I’ve never been so dumbstruck in my life, aside from the day Dex came barreling in and demanded an engagement.

But he kept telling me without really telling me that there was something suspicious about Forrest Haute, didn’t he?

I never believed it.

I never *wanted* to believe him.

The deal he offered was too good, and it felt like something I earned because he loves our product that much. Not just an easy handout because he knows Dexter.

In my wildest dreams, I thought it could even put the Sugar Bowl back on the map.

*Stupid dreamy-eyed schmuck.*

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

“Junie!” Dex growls my name. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, but I’m going to get to the bottom of this if it’s the last thing I do.”

I know he means to be reassuring. And yeah, part of me feels glad he’s being his overprotective beastly self because it means he still cares.

But the Sugar Bowl is *my* responsibility. And now I’m letting it down, along with everyone who works here and Nana’s legacy on top of it.

She trusted me, and here I am walking straight into the weirdest trap I never could’ve imagined.

Holy hell, I’m being used.

I’m being *played* like a fiddle.

Like a total freaking tool.

I don’t usually get angry, but now I can’t stop it.

It's a hot, heavy, swollen feeling, like sitting on pine needles. It makes me throb toward the sky and pulls me into the ground.

"Junie?" Dex whispers, eyeing me hard.

My hands ball into fists.

"He's playing us," I whisper. "That lying *fucker*."

"I know."

"And I fell for it."

"I'm going to find out what this means," Dexter promises. "That's the part we're still missing. It's fishy as hell, but I need to know exactly what he's doing with these plates."

"Count me in," I hiss.

For a second, he stares at me, head cocked and eyes glowing. Then he tosses the metal discs on the dashboard and looks at me.

"Not a chance, Sweet Stuff."

I blink at him. "Don't say that like you don't want to know what he's doing with them, where they're going."

"Of course I want to know. I told you, that's the next step," he snaps. "But you need to let me handle this."

"But it's *my* bakery, Dex."

"Exactly my point. Fuck, Junie, I don't even know if the Sugar Bowl is safe if Haute's hiding something illegal in your desserts. Bare minimum, you'll face some probing investigation if this goes all the way to the authorities. And that's just if the police get involved. If Haute knows you're onto him before we get that far..."

He doesn't need to finish.

Every Scorsese mafia movie whips through my brain. It's too easy imagining guys with semi-autos showing up and turning me into Swiss cheese, or Dexter blowing up in his car the minute the engine starts.

How is this happening? In all her years running things, Nana never had a brush with the mob.

“Dexter, don’t do this. Please.”

“I need to know you’re safe.” The corner of his mouth pulls down. I look at it, because looking into his eyes—and the tortured expression there—hurts too much. I can’t afford to have that change my mind. “I can’t have you getting mixed up in some shit like this. The second I have a better idea what we’re dealing with, I’ll go to the police. There’s a cop I know, a damned good one who served with me once.”

“Okay. I just... I thought we were in this together.”

“We are,” he says gruffly, taking my hand.

“Apart from when you make decisions and expect me to follow along, right?” I don’t mean to sound like a bitch when he’s just trying to keep me safe.

I really don’t.

I just need to know he isn’t leaping into danger alone.

He takes my hand in his and holds me tight. “Promise you’ll let me take care of this. Tell me you trust me, Sweet Stuff.”

This argument is different.

He just doesn’t get it.

It doesn’t sting so much as it aches. A bone-deep ache that has a direct line to my tear ducts.

“This isn’t about me. This is the Sugar Bowl,” I tell him, my voice choking despite my best efforts.

God, would it be so difficult for me to *not* cry just once when I’m confronting someone?

“Junie—”

“It’s my business, Dexter. If anyone’s going to take care of this, it should be me.” I yank my hand from his and grab my poor crumpled cupcake box.

Dexter doesn’t say another word.

He just throws me another brooding look as I storm out of the car and back into the store.



THE PARK LOOKS busy for this time of day.

I watch through the windshield, idly sifting through the pile of crumbs for another plate as old men walk their dogs, mothers push their strollers, and young couples glide along the paths hand in hand. In the distance, the pond glints in the sunlight.

The ache in my chest doesn't ease up one bit.

That argument hurt like hell, almost as much as the big reveal.

It's not that I'm not used to arguing. I used to bicker with Nana all the time when we lived together. Near the end, Liam and I would have blowout fights over the smallest things. There'd be radio silence until I came back with an apology.

Not this time.

Dexter's heart might be in the right place, but this is my business and I'm not letting him go it alone.

This is my life being messed with.

And if Haute's threatening me, I need to know what's going on so I can take it straight to the police. I have a right to the truth and an obligation to protect my people as their boss.

My phone buzzes with another text from Dexter, who's probably figured out I'm not at the Sugar Bowl anymore. ***We'll talk again tonight. When will you be home?***

Maybe he went in and asked for me.

Another reason for the staff to gossip. It was bad enough that Sarah asked if I was okay before I went running out.

I push it out of my mind, though. That's not the issue here.



Right now, the issue is what Forrest Haute is doing with my desserts.

With my mind made up, I head over to the clubhouse. It's an obnoxiously large building, even more so now that I'm not here with Dexter, but I avoid the gilded front and head around to the back.

I'm more comfortable here.

The back of buildings like this has their beating heart, and it's usually made up of normal people.

Custodians, cooks, delivery boys. It's a hive of activity I recognize.

I park the van slightly back from the road and sit back, watching the loading doors. It's a long shot, but the boxes were abandoned when Dexter was here, and I might get lucky.

If not, better luck next time.

No way am I letting Haute get away with using my goods to do—God only knows.

My phone lights up with another call.

Dexter must be more worked up than ever. Probably pissed off.

The last thing I need is a snarling grizzly bear at home, but he shouldn't have told me to back off.

Not when it's my business. My baby. My everything.

He should know me better by now.

I take a moment imagining the fun scenarios where Dex apologizes, where we kiss and make up, where he tells me he wants to be with me.

I imagine reverting to the bliss we had before this drama.

I imagine a fake marriage that will never happen, and the bittersweetness of it coats my tongue in sour hope.

Eventually, a few delivery boys emerge from the loading doors carrying two bright pink Sugar Bowl boxes. But instead

of a van, they load them into a sleek black SUV. It idles in the corner, so subtle that I almost miss it.

Where are they going? I have to know.

My heart leaps up my throat as I start the van.

My vehicle grumbles like a loud dragon, but no one turns to look as I follow the SUV out of the clubhouse and back toward the city.

Shit, shit, shit.

So maybe I'm not cut out for this spy chick stuff after all...

My heart pounds a headache into my skull.

My hands go slick against the steering wheel.

I open the window, just so I can feel the wind on my face, never mind the fact that the humidity after the rain makes the air feel like pea soup again today.

I can't believe this is real life.

These guys are probably criminals.

Actually, screw probably.

If Forrest Haute was doing anything legit, he wouldn't need my desserts to play hide and seek with mystery numbers.

Dexter's right.

*This is dangerous.*

The realization skitters down my spine like marching spiders. I tighten my fingers on the steering wheel. If I get caught, there'll be more than a potential lawsuit to deal with.

Like actual hell to pay.

My fingers cramp, wanting to lock up.

We head through downtown and wind toward a rougher area with worn abandoned buildings and barely functioning warehouses.

This place makes my old neighborhood look like paradise.

The shadows are alive at night here. Sirens are a lullaby.

My skin pricks with sweat.

At least no one gives me a second glance, though. I'm hanging a few cars back and the van blends in with the rest of this place in the winding traffic.

I blend in—*for now*—and there's nothing sleek about me. Nothing expensive except the ring that's no longer on my finger and stuffed away like a dirty secret.

The SUV pulls up on the side of the road next to a battered laundromat. It looks normal enough, with its sign lit and customers washing clothes inside. The industrial-sized washing machines and tumble dryers are visible through the window, going through their spin cycles.

There's nothing suspicious about this place.

Still, Haute's friends must be here for a reason.

I park a little ways down the road and check my map before firing off a text to Emmy, telling her I'm making a snap delivery to this address.

At least if I go missing, she'll have my last known location.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself, glancing in the rearview mirror. "You're being ridiculous."

Maybe so, but that doesn't explain why my throat is so tight or why my chest feels like it's about to explode. This is shady business and I'm right smack dab in the middle of it.

The men move slowly, gathering up a couple boxes and carrying them into the laundromat. When they reappear a few minutes later with their hands free, they climb back in the SUV and drive away without lingering.

I pretend I'm getting something off the passenger seat as they pass by, just in case they look through the window and see my face. It's a struggle not to duck down in the seat.

I've never wanted to hide more in my life.

Dexter can think what he likes, but I'm not stupid. The van looks old and boring, and with my hair tied up and shades on, so am I.

Once the SUV disappears and my heart sinks back in my chest, I climb out and head for the laundromat door.

My skin tingles like I'm being watched. It's like I've forgotten how normal people move.

I'm all jerky and wide-eyed, looking around too much.

*Keep it together, Junie.*

I cram my hands in my pockets and hunch my shoulders, taking up as little space as possible. Whenever anyone meets my gaze, I look down at the ground.

*Don't make eye contact.*

*Don't attract attention.*

Then I'm inside.

It's about what you'd expect. A few of the machines whirr noisily, their big drums spinning and vibrating. An old lady waits by the window with a pile of reusable bags beside her. She doesn't even notice me.

Right.

To them, I'm just another random face, coming in to collect my nonexistent laundry.

I angle my body so no one can see what I'm doing and pull out a disc from my pocket. The only one Dexter missed.

I wipe off a few crumbs and look at the number. 45826.

Lovely. That's not much to go on.

I don't start panicking until I look up and see the big tags with numbers on the machines. Five digits, just like what's on the metal plate.

And there, in the corner, with an OUT OF ORDER sign taped to it, is the washer that matches the number in my hand.

No coincidence.

It's clever, really. No one here cares enough to look too closely at a busted machine.

The old lady's laundry finishes and she starts hauling her clothes out of the washer into her bag. Her back is turned and I see my moment.

I'm not built for this.

The movies always portray this sort of thing as fun and adventurous. Scary, sure, but in an adrenaline-coursing heroic way.

They don't show how your entire body turns to stone with real fear.

I need to pee.

I need to lie down.

Jeez, I need a whole new life because I did *not* sign up for this, stalking around and sleuthing after creeps and crooks.

The washer that's out of commission opens too easily. I stare at it, surprised it wasn't locked or something.

The drum looks oddly hollowed out, the innards more like a thin cover. And inside—a black bag.

I don't think, I just reach in and tug the zipper down, revealing a flash of green cash. Lots and lots of bills.

I'm finally about to breathe when a thick hand lands on my shoulder.

I'm screaming before I even whip around.



## SWEET REGRETS (DEXTER)



**J**unie's eyes roll like marbles as I swing her around, and I curse myself for scaring her.

Goddammit, though, she *should* be afraid for doing this alone.

Past her, in the hollow drum of the washing machine, I catch a glimpse of cash sticking out like waving leaves.

Fucking hell, this is bad.

The kind of bad you only hear about on a crime podcast or Sunday evening TV specials.

I'd bet my life this place is rigged with cameras, too.

Which means the owners of this money will have a crystal-clear shot of my face, and more importantly, they'll have hers.

If they haven't already figured out their cover's been blown by nosy interlopers, they will pretty damn soon, and they'll know who's responsible.

What will they do to keep their secret safe?

There could be men with dead eyes and sidearms barreling toward us in black SUVs right now.

I need to get her the fuck out of here.

"Dex," she whispers, staggering back like she's been hit.

I stare her down, hating that I hope it's finally dawning on her just how serious this is. Shit, if I hadn't found her here first

---

*No.*

I bury the thought before it sees the light of day. I'm not going to lose my shit just because her curiosity trumps her sense of self-preservation.

"Outside. Right fucking now," I bite off, slamming the washer shut so hard it echoes through the room.

The old lady by the front doesn't even look at us as we head through the door.

To think I was angry at the way I handled warning her. At the way she's involved in this fuckery thanks to me.

The way I yelled at her.

I thought she was angry because of the situation, the fact that Haute was playing us for fools.

Never did I think she'd be bold enough to go searching for answers on his turf.

Weak sunlight struggles through the evening clouds, glinting off Junie's hair as she yanks her arm from my hand.

"I can walk, you know. Jesus."

"Keep moving," I grind out.

A couple people turn to stare at us, frowning. Who the hell can blame them?

I hustle along, faster to lessen the chances of anyone remembering our faces.

"We can't talk here," I whisper, stepping closer to her so she has to look up at me. "Get in my car, Junie."

"What about my van?"

"I'll send someone to pick it up later." My temper hangs by the frailest thread. I massage my temples, trying to keep my worries in check. "For fuck's sake, Junie, *get in.*"

She holds her ground, stopping and frowning at me. "And if I'm not leaving the van?"

"This isn't the time for an ego battle, sweetheart," I say desperately. "Come on. We need to go."



She shrugs.

“I drove here and I can drive myself back.”

Insufferable.

The longer we stay, the more attention we could draw, and the more likely it is someone’s going to swoop in on that cash drop and realize it’s been compromised.

“If you get moving now, fine,” I growl, pinching my nose. “Back to my place. I’m not arguing that.”

She glances at her van like she’s considering making a run for it, but then she nods. Maybe it’s finally sinking in, the gravity of the situation. Or maybe it’s just because she knows we can talk freely there without any risk of men with guns barging in.

I don’t even know what I’m going to tell her.

Part of me feels relieved as hell she’s still in one piece, this primal part that wants to pull her close, to apologize and tell her I’m glad she’s safe and nothing else matters.

The rest of me wants to tear her a new one for walking into a potential slaughter.

She glances back at the laundromat. “But what about the money—”

“Leave it,” I snap, grabbing her shoulder and spinning her around so she’s facing away from it. “The less you have to do with it, the better.”

“Yeah, but—”

“*Later.* You’ve got ten seconds to start the van or you’re coming with me. Move your ass.”

Her lips thin and she narrows her eyes as she glances across at the vehicle and starts moving. My eyes are glued to her surroundings the whole time, looking for any sign of unexpected cars swerving toward us.

Every nerve in my body bristles, wishing I had my gun, a token nine millimeter I keep locked up at home for personal protection.

Shit, the bystanders alone are threatening enough in this paranoid haze.

Every mom and dad hauling bulging bags of laundry, every dog walker, every teenage punk glancing our way. A kid on a skateboard sails past, probably wondering why there's a vehicle like mine parked here.

*Go, go, for fuck's sake, woman.*

I wait until Junie's in the driver's seat before I jump in my ride. I've taken one of the company cars again, and although it's sleek, black, and not outrageously expensive, it still stands out.

God fucking damn it.

*She's safe*, I remind myself as I pull out behind her and follow the van closely on the road.

She's safe, and now that we're escaping, we can keep it that way.

My gut knots, knowing how close we might've come to never escaping at all.

Junie might think she knows what she's doing, but when it comes to the underworld, she's horribly naïve. Hell, even I'm lacking. It's been about a solid decade since I last saw combat.

Once she was inside the laundromat, she forgot to keep an eye on what was happening outside. She didn't notice the way I was watching her through the window. Didn't notice when I came in, when I walked through the doors, when I grabbed her.

She wouldn't have noticed a gun in my hand or the chloroform-soaked rag destined to make her another missing person before it even went over her mouth.

There's no honor in death or abductions.

Every damn time I close my eyes, I can *see* it playing out in my head.

They would've stuck a gun in her back and forced her to get in their car, maybe. They would take her to a secure

location and extract every bit of information they could.

Then they'd kill her or worse—how many women in the wrong place at the wrong time wind up being trafficked?

*Too many.*

And fuck me, it would be my fault.

I introduced her to Forrest Haute. I dragged her into a fake engagement. I made her lie like the king of all assholes I am.

Junie could have *died* and I'd have no one to blame but myself.

I've never been shaken like this before, viscerally afraid for her.

It's like falling off a cliff, only you can't see the ground.

I'm just spinning, going down, waiting for the impact, and it's that waiting, that hellish uncertainty, that *unknown* that's driving me insane.

Also, she's driving too slow in this traffic.

I squeeze the steering wheel, reminding myself that nothing says guilt like speeding, like running, like relying on gut instinct.

But I imagine her in the car alone.

Is she crying now?

Is she in shock?

Is she driving at a crawl because she's still trying to process everything that's happened thanks to me?

My knuckles are about to pop out of my skin.

Snarling, I relax my hands, taking a deep breath. I've been checking the rearview mirror every three seconds.

We're still safe.

*For now.*

I punch the button on my app as we approach my house and the gates swing open. I close them behind us immediately.

Overdramatic, maybe, but I'm not risking anyone else coming in.

The van opens and Junie slides out the second we're in my driveway. She looks up at the house with the strangest expression, almost like she doesn't recognize it.

Then I get out and she looks at me.

I know her well enough to read her perfectly.

The way her eyes widen, her lips press together, the tendons in her neck standing in sharp relief.

*Fear.*

That's what grips her now, and if I had less self-control, it would be mirrored on my face too.

Fear for her.

For everything this nasty discovery means.

I don't want to be angry, but that's how my own fear erupts.

Anger slashing through my veins like swords, so potent it scorches.

"How did you find me?" she asks.

"You mean when you didn't answer my calls? Don't say that like I wasn't driving around looking for you." I'm too close to her now. Close enough to see her freckles, the sharp green of her eyes, the dampness on her eyelashes.

She *was* crying, by the looks of it.

"Only Emmy knew where I was..." She sniffs roughly.

At least she had the good sense to tell someone else, even if that person wasn't me. That stings more than it should.

"You disobeyed me," I spit. "I told you not to do anything alone. I *told* you not to get involved and leave it to me."

For the first time, she glances away like she can't stand to look at me.

The hazy light through the trees crisscrosses her cheekbones. All it does is remind me I might not have found her alive. She might never have looked at me again with anger or disgust or anything else.

That's going to haunt me forever, the nightmare *what-ifs*.

The thought of finding Junie cold and lifeless.

"You barely told me anything," she says numbly, folding her arms like she's trying to push her emotions back in behind them. "All this was going on and you didn't tell me *shit*, Dexter."

"I told you about the plates. I showed you proof Haute's shady as hell."

"You gave me the bare minimum to make sure I wouldn't get involved." When she's mad, there's this rasping heartache in her voice. She looks at me, her eyes too bright and glassy. "But whatever he's up to, this was worth it. Now we know where he keeps his cash and—"

"Cash that's under surveillance." I step toward her, my shoes scuffing the asphalt. "You think Haute would use that place as a drop site where any random dumbass can waltz in and grab unguarded money?"

Her nostrils flare and she looks down, tightening her arms around herself. "I understand the dangers—"

"Go inside, Junie," I clip before she even finishes.

The way she looks at me tells me I definitely look like the asshole here, and I sound like one too.

It's not like I suspect anyone of being able to overhear us, but there's something safer about indoors. Less open.

Call me paranoid, but I need to know she's absolutely safe. I also can't let things get so heated that she runs, throwing herself at every lurking wolf imaginable.

"Fine," she snaps, marching through the front door. I follow to see her whirl around in front of the fireplace, the late afternoon sun spinning ruby threads in her hair.

For a second, I stop and stare.

With her hands clenched by her sides and flashing eyes, she's magnificent. A living, breathing treasure I'm fighting like hell to protect.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not doing this to piss you off," I say, folding my arms.

Now it's my turn to force everything inside, to keep myself from flying off the handle and screaming how close she came to disaster.

"What? Like how you're being a giant douche?" She raises an eyebrow. "Because you're acting like one, Dex."

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I resist the urge to check it.

"Don't push me, Sweet Stuff."

"Don't lecture me then. Okay, so yeah, I went there alone. I made a mistake. You *might* have a point through all your snarling. But still, this gave us something we didn't have before..."

"At what cost?" I throw back. She freezes and I hate myself for it, but I can't hold back my temper. She's still acting like it's a game. "We found ourselves a drop site and we probably wound up on camera or worse, seen by fuck only knows. Where do you think that goes, Junie?"

She flinches, swallowing thickly. "Look, I *know* it was dangerous, Dexter."

"Do you? Because you marched in there like you'd get a pat on the head for digging at a crime syndicate. You had no fucking clue what you were risking."

"Don't talk to me like I'm a child," she flares.

"Don't behave like one. What do you think would've happened if I hadn't found you when I did?" I'm bristling now, stepping closer. "This isn't a game, Junie. Even if you report it to the police, it's not quick and clean like it is in the movies. By the time they make a move, it'll be like the hidden money never existed."

“You think I don’t know that?” She’s shouting now. Her voice rises to match mine. “You think I wasn’t scared out of my wits the whole time? When you grabbed me, my fucking life flashed in front of me. But this is my business. My life. My fight. I deserve to know what’s going on without having to stand around, waiting for you to play superhero.”

Goddamn.

So I really did scare her shitless when I surprised her at the laundromat. I may be right about everything, but it brings me no pleasure.

It feels wrong.

Like I’ve gone and broken something precious and scattered the pieces in front of us like careless, cutting shards. One little misstep and someone will wind up bleeding on the floor.

I hate it.

I hate how my blundering ass can’t figure out how to tell her *I care, I fucking love you* without being dragged through a pit of sharp words and acrid glances.

“So what do we do now?” she asks in a small voice.

“*We* let me deal with it. Like I said before, I’ll take it to the cops. I have a contact.”

“The cops. Right.” She laughs brokenly, shaking her head. “And what can they do without proof? You basically said it’ll be cleaned up there before we can blink.”

“There’s more to find, sweetheart. Like I said, leave it to me.”

“Lovely.” Sighing, she flashes a thumbs-up like the wounded little smart-ass she is. Only, there’s something brittle in her voice as she says, “I won’t bother you anymore. You’ve made your point. I’ve got a store and a life to get back to.”

Oh no.

Oh, fuck.

I sidestep and stop in front of the door.

“Not a chance, lady. You’re staying *put* until we’ve figured this out. You’re safer here in a gated house with a state-of-the-art Home Shepherd security system than anywhere else. I have friends I can call on the Kansas City PD to patrol this place, too. I’ll let you know the second the coast is clear.”

She stares at me like I’m speaking ancient Phoenician.

“I wasn’t done at the bakery, dude. I’m not your prisoner,” she whispers. “They’re expecting me back and I’ve got to drop off the van. I’ve got orders to bake and—”

“Fuck the bakery!”

It comes out in a brutal, throat-scorching rush that leaves me stunned.

I’ve never truly roared at her before.

I’ve never used my voice as a weapon.

I’ve never imagined hurting her while I’m trying like hell to keep her alive.

“Don’t you understand? This is life or *death*, Junie,” I whisper raggedly. “You might think you can just waltz in there and come away unscathed but the real world doesn’t *work* that way. You don’t just wind up on organized crime’s radar one minute and skate back into a normal life the next.”

She blinks at me.

Once, twice, like she’s collecting her thoughts, or maybe she’s just trying to breathe.

“Junie,” I manage. “Say *something*.”

“Don’t. Don’t fucking shout at me.”

I hang my head. I don’t know how not to shout at her.

I’m so shit-scared and furious and disgusted with myself.

So *angry* that I’m the cause of this misery that I want to throw something, to show her the sharp edges and remind her we’re balanced on a knife’s edge and the second she puts herself in danger, the balance breaks.

I can’t lose her. Not like this.



“I told you before, you can’t order me around,” she says, still too quiet and unsure.

“And I told you, you can’t call the shots when you don’t know what you’re dealing with. Don’t brush this off like it’s not important. You could have died there, woman. *Died*. They could have found you and it would’ve been so quick you wouldn’t have even known it was happening.”

Her face pales, but I’m too far gone to stop now.

Then my fucking phone vibrates again.

A call this time. Wretched timing.

Ignoring it, I shake my head fiercely. “You may hate the fact that I’m telling you to stay put, but I need you to understand it’s for your own good.”

“Is the deal toast?” she asks absently. “Is that why you’re blowing up like this?”

I laugh harshly, finally glancing at my phone.

Fuck the deal. I’ve seen enough to know Haute isn’t anyone we want as a partner.

I need to get to the police station, to see Batista immediately, to get a warrant for Forrest Haute and his friends.

Every second spent here is a second wasted by keeping this going.

“Never mind the deal,” I tell her, breathing too fast. I tuck my phone back in my pocket.

She looks at me with the same stiffness in her expression.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice distant, like she’s speaking to me through a pane of glass. I can’t reach her. “I guess I just did more damage trying to do the right thing.”

“It’s not about that.”

“Yes, it is.” She swallows and meets my gaze. There are tears gathering there. I’ve only seen her cry once before, and never like this. Our arguments never felt this frigid, this final. “I get it. I’m not cut out for this. You know it, and so do I.”

“Don’t do this to me now.” I glance at my phone again.

Shit, shit.

Archer’s going to die of a stroke if I don’t report back.

“We’ll finish this later. I have to go,” I say, turning on legs of pure cement.

“You don’t have to do anything, so don’t worry about it,” she whispers. “With Haute going down and the business with him toast, there’s no reason to continue with this, is there? This fake fiancée crap...”

God. Fucking. Damn.

I don’t have time for this.

It’s killing me that I don’t, driving a slow dagger through my heart.

And what would I say if I did?

Now isn’t the time for a heart-to-heart, even if it’s long overdue.

If I don’t leave now, I could blow my best chance at nailing Haute’s dick to the wall.

Fuck.

“This isn’t my priority,” I tell her, shoving my phone back in my pocket. When I meet her eyes, just for a second, the hurt there threatens to undo my conviction, and I look away again. “Just stay here, Junie. We’ll talk when I get back, I promise.”

“No need,” she says coldly.

Fuck.

I wish like hell I could stick around and find out what that means, but there’s truly no time. Another text comes through, probably telling me to meet Archer at the office ASAP. But with a lot more expletives. He’s not fucking around.

Neither am I.

“Stay,” I growl back over my shoulder, one hollow, desperate word before I’m running to my car.



## SWEET GOODBYES (JUNIPER)



I still don't know what hit me.

How did it all come crashing down so fast?

Dexter's living room feels like an empty cave without him in it. My chest, emptier still. The kind of lonely I've felt before and hoped—I dreamed—I might never have to feel again.

Not with Dexter.

But this is what happens when a girl ignores her basic instincts.

I swore I'd never get involved with another man after Liam, and now look at me.

Look at us.

Look at what we've destroyed.

I don't know how it died so swiftly.

The worst part is, this house is still familiar, glowing with the dead warmth of a love that's faded out. Until Dex became the world's biggest jerk, I thought maybe this place could be home.

Now it's too big and I'm way too small.

But I've always been too small.

I don't cry.

For a second, I don't think I get a choice. Merciless tears sting my eyes, lodging a lump in my throat and the awful feeling of falling. That freefall lurch your stomach does.

His words lash me in the face.

*We'll talk when I get back.*

Anger burns away the urge to ugly cry.

If Dexter thinks he can treat me like that and find me waiting dutifully, he's so flipping wrong it hurts.

Upstairs, in the spare bedroom where I've been keeping my clothes in some pretense that we're not really living together, I start gathering up my stuff and throw everything into a bag.

Well, not everything. The bigger plants can stay.

I can't haul everything now.

The smaller succulents come with me, though. Plus, all my clothes, my jewelry, my toothbrush from his bathroom. The folded blue pajamas on my pillow in his bedroom.

Every part of me that fits in a bag.

I imagine his reaction as I work.

Will he wander through the empty house calling my name? Or will the deafening silence be enough to tell him I'm gone forever. And good riddance.

Or when he figures it out, will he walk into the bedroom and sit on the bed with the same deadweight like I'm sitting here now?

Will we be the same person, separated only by hours?

The light will be different then. The room will look greyer and the house will feel colder.

And I'll be long gone.

The thought chokes me until I lean over, holding my stomach like I can keep myself together. Like my organs aren't spilling out of my body at the thought of leaving and never, ever coming back here again.

Even Catness yowling loudly and headbutting my ankles doesn't take the edge off.

Oh God, I'm going to cry after all like this is a real breakup and not just a strange illusion falling through.

Like I've got something to mourn besides having a huge, stressful fake fiancé obligation off my shoulders.

*It wasn't real, you idiot, I remind myself, standing and refusing to let the tears gathering in my throat have a say. It never existed. It was a fairy tale for show. You just bought into too much make-believe.*

I take my clothes downstairs and pile everything in the hallway. Catness skulks around my legs, staring up with wide, worried eyes until I pick him up.

“Sorry you can't get too comfortable, boy. But we'll be settled again soon, I promise.” I give him a furious peck on his furry head and set him down.

I'm packed and ready to go and just luring Catness into his carrier when I realize there's nowhere *to* go.

Crap.

I don't have a functioning apartment anymore. I wouldn't want to go back there even if my bridges with the landlord weren't a smoldering ruin.

I need to figure it out fast.

I just need a temporary place, somewhere big enough for my meager belongings, Catness, and a sad collection of succulents.

That thought alone almost makes me crumple. I have a few friends, sure, but I've been so busy we haven't caught up in months. I definitely never told them about this dumb arrangement.

And what would they say if they knew?

My friend, Adrianna, has her shit together in ways I never will. She's been in a house for two years, happily married, and I'm sure she thought her advice really hit home when I came crying on her shoulder over Liam.

If she only knew I went and rented myself out to the first rich man who came calling—

God. I'll never live it down.

Yeah, no, I can't go there.

There's only one place left I *can* go, I think, and my stomach clenches at the thought.

Nana was right there for the last breakup. She saw the tears, the heartbreak, the way I came undone, and I vowed she'd never see me like that again.

It was never supposed to happen again, dammit.

Yet here I am.

My throat pinches shut as I stuff everything into the van and drive it back to the store. I can't have my staff asking uncomfortable questions, so I'm careful to drop it off and keep out of sight, settling under a tree by the curb.

I close my eyes, breathing raggedly through my nose, looking at my options on Uber for a pet-friendly driver with an SUV.

At least at Nana's, I won't have to pretend.

I'll tell her the truth, and because she's Nana—because she's a guardian angel sent down to save me from my own insanely bad decisions—she'll listen with the same tenderness that's always held me up.

No judgments, no—though she'll have plenty in her own head—and she'll be there for me like always.

While I wait for my ride, I go from stoically controlled to barely holding it together.

I think the driver takes pity and spares me any small talk as he helps me load my stuff into the trunk and drives me across town. I spend the journey staring out of the window as Catness yowls next to me whenever we roll over a pothole.

When the car pulls up and the kind driver gently unloads my stuff on the curb, I see the front door open.

It takes Nana eleven seconds to make her way to me. Eleven seconds of Catness screeching by my feet in his carrier and me panicking, struggling to come up with some nice, emotionless way to tell her how I've ruined my life.

Eleven seconds of this pressure in my chest that makes me feel like I'll never make it through this.

Eleven seconds of that great, yawning emptiness threatening to swallow me completely.

All it takes is for me to look up and really look at her.

Then I burst into tears.

“Oh, Junie! Oh, honey, what's wrong?” She pulls me into a hug as Catness continues making his displeasure known. It starts to rain, but I barely notice and I don't care. Every breath feels like it's coming from my stomach.

Dexter's gone.

We're over and done.

And it wasn't real—*it wasn't real*—but it felt like the truest love I've ever experienced.

And I just walked away from that and there's no going back.

It *hurts*.

I didn't walk into this thinking it could bust my heart like a brittle ornament, but now as I sob on Nana's shoulder and she holds me so tight I don't need to worry about breathing, I appreciate how deep it hurts.

“I know, I know,” Nana whispers, and I believe her. “Oh, my darling, I know.”

I close my eyes and let her hold me together as I bawl my little eyes out.





I STAY cloistered in my room for an entire day, alone with the past.

Nana refitted it into a guest bedroom, but it still has my old blue wall and the same wardrobe, the same familiar bookcase, just full of books she thinks guests will want. None of my old fantasy books or old romances, the worn paperbacks from secondhand stores she insisted I bring with me to the new apartment.

Dexter doesn't call once.

Honestly, I mostly never expected him to—not after the fight we had or the way I left while he was gone without even a note—but part of me subconsciously expected to wake up to a text or call anyway.

It's the same dumb part of me that wants to hold on to what we had a little longer, I guess.

But if I've learned anything from this train wreck, it's that I can't let that part of me win.

After calling in sick to work—something easily believable by the thickness of my voice—I sit in my room with my new laptop, looking at numbers, toying with ideas for improving the Sugar Bowl and wondering if we can get by without the other half of Dexter's payout.

I don't think he'll be that heartless, though. I'll probably get the money as a parting dropkick to the heart.

That's actually more depressing than losing the money, so I turn my attention to trashy midday TV for a distraction.

Before I know it, another day is shot.

"Junie?" Nana knocks gently on the door. "Time for dinner."

"Go ahead and eat without me, Nana. I'm not hungry." I wipe my nose on the back of my hand.

"You might not be hungry, June bug, but you *will* eat when you're in this house. Downstairs in five."

Groaning, I fall back against the bed and stare at the ceiling, marveling at how easily she makes me feel like an unruly teenager again.

A couple months ago, I lay on this same bed and called Dexter for the first time because I couldn't survive Nana's pecking questions.

Now, the thought makes me sick. So I roll out of bed and tread over to the bags I packed.

I don't want to unpack too much and commit to staying even though I've got nowhere else to go. It's also too tiring to think about forging on to better places, even if I finally have the money to land a decent place in a nice neighborhood that won't spontaneously flood itself.

Nana expects a certain level of decency, though, so I angry-brush my hair and shimmy into a skirt and blouse. Maybe that's enough to detract from the bags under my eyes and my lips, chapped and stinging.

Wishful thinking, but here we go.

My five minutes are up, and I descend the stairs to the kitchen.

Nana stands by the stove like always, a wooden spoon in her hand and an apron that says *My Kitchen, My Rules* around her waist.

I'm transported back to another time when she was a little less grey and I was a lot more hopeful.

"You're just in time. We're starting cozy season early. I thought you might enjoy a nice warming stew," she says, exchanging the spoon for a ladle which she uses to portion the stew into her little bowls with hummingbirds on them.

The sight of it makes my throat tighten.

"Anything I can do to help?" The words trip off my tongue. I'm so used to saying them it's almost habit.

"Just sit down, honey. Pour yourself some wine."

Wine.

Probably the worst kind of self-care I need right now, but I pour a tall glass anyway. When I set the bottle down, I see the white band on my finger tan where the engagement ring used to be.

I look away before I start hating the bareness, the absence, the *failure*.

“Now,” Nana says, putting the bowl in front of me and laying down a homemade baguette basted with garlic butter, “do you think you’re up to telling me what happened?”

It’s more of a statement than a question—a demand for the truth, really—but I don’t want to answer her yet. I use my spoon to push the chunks of meat around.

“I owe you that much, don’t I? And I’m sorry for barging in on you like this.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. You know you can stay as long as you’d like, as long as you need to,” she says brightly.

“I know, but...” I don’t want to *need* to. “I know it was pretty sudden.”

“Yes, these things always are.” She smiles with so much understanding it breaks my heart again.

“Not always.” The wine tastes light and fruity as I take a sip. “You saw it coming with Liam a long time before it happened, Nana.”

“Sure, and it should have happened long before it did,” she says darkly. “But this isn’t Liam.”

“No,” I say. “It’s not.”

And I’m glad about that.

Even though losing Dexter feels like losing a future I barely knew I wanted. A future I could have had if things were just different.

“This is good.” I gesture to the stew with my spoon. “Barbacoa and chickpea?”

“And lobster.” Nana never does anything by the rules—especially when it comes to food. “I know how much you like

seafood.”

My heart sinks.

“Not so much lately,” I mutter, thinking about that night I miraculously pulled off a lobster dinner in Dex’s kitchen.

Gran looks at me thoughtfully, her mouth twisted to one side. Back when she was younger, she used to smoke. You can still see whispers of that habit around her lips, the skin lined and shrinking whenever her mouth moves.

“Junie, I know he wasn’t the perfect soulmate,” she says after a moment. Her fingers toy restlessly with the stem of her wineglass, though she doesn’t take a drink. “I know things weren’t as simple as they seemed.”

“Wait, what?” I look up so fast my neck cricks.

“You weren’t seeing a man secretly for half a year, Junie. I would’ve known. You worked and you slept and you didn’t do much else. Poor thing, you didn’t have the energy.”

“Okay, Nana...”

Her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “All I’m saying is, I knew something else was up between you two besides a museum meet-cute and a snap engagement. It’s never that easy, even in romance novels.”

“It was a farce,” I admit. “It wasn’t real, Nana. It was all fake.”

“Fake? But that’s where you’re wrong.” She leans across the table and takes my hand. Her knuckles are knobby from a lifetime of cooking, the veins too large and her skin too loose.

It’s a testament to what time and hard work can do, how it can shape a person. Having her hand in mine reminds me of the gap between generations.

A gap I think Dex also shares and understands.

We never spoke about it properly.

I never mentioned the void in my life my mom left behind or the way Nana always tried but could never make up for losing both of my parents.

There were so many things I never told him that I wanted to, that I wanted *him* to tell *me*. But there was never enough time, enough opportunity, enough of the right moment.

We were too busy playing at being in love.

It was never real.

“No,” Nana says, squeezing my fingers until I look at her. “It might not have been precisely what you claimed, but I have eyes in my head, girl. I know when something’s real.”

“The ring was a farce. Amazing, but fake.” I blink back tears. “The dating, the dinner with you—it was all a big lie. I’m so sorry.”

“So maybe you weren’t really engaged. Does that mean your feelings were a lie?” She holds my gaze, and for the faintest second, I see myself like she sees me. Tired. Quiet. Lost, with that hollow sadness in my eyes no amount of wine can drown. “I saw the way you looked at him, Junie.”

“But he doesn’t love me,” I whisper.

I mean it to come out strong. Just another truth. But my voice cracks and the sound slices through my heart.

That’s the worst part I can’t escape. I can’t get past the fact that he doesn’t feel anything.

But Gran just snorts. “And you know that how? If you tell me it’s because he didn’t tell you, I might just leave the table.”

“It was pretend.” My voice is too loud, cutting through the silence. “A business thing, Nana. I pretended to be his fiancée so he could convince this guy to do business and he gave me money and advice for the Sugar Bowl. We had a contract, signed and all.”

“So what?” She tuts and shakes her head. “Marriage itself is a contract and a promise. I don’t care about your past, Junie. I care about right now—and I remember the way you two looked at each other. There was no faking that.”

“Nana—”

“I remember the way you kissed,” she says firmly, laying down the gauntlet. She’s totally determined to finish now. “I remember being kissed like that a long time ago. I couldn’t fake that passion to save my life.”

Ugh.

I’m so screwed.

I also think of all the times we’ve kissed since, all the things we’ve shared, the way he took me to his balcony so he could show the world how much I meant to him.

The way he saw my scars and poverty and addiction to work, the things that haunt me even now.

The way he didn’t back away.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt safe. Protected.

“There’s a reason your little sham was so successful, you know,” Nana continues, and I look at her through wet, burning eyes. “Whatever you two told yourselves, your feelings were more honest. Your lips didn’t lie. That man is right for you, Junie, no doubt about it.”

*Right for you.*

It feels like a dream.

An absurd thought I can’t quite reconcile with my situation because he *was* right for me.

Except he wasn’t.

I wouldn’t be here crying into my stew if we had a happily ever after in the cards.

If he was right for me, why didn’t he ever flipping tell me?

And why didn’t I ever tell him?

“Look at you,” Nana says softly. “You’re not mourning a business relationship. This isn’t a simple contract gone wrong, it’s so much more.”

“No, no. But if I admit it—” I whisper brokenly, “—that makes it real. I can’t do that.”

“It’s always *been* real, love. You’ve just never wanted to stare it in the face before.”

I press my fingers against my eyes until fireworks bloom, red and angry ribbons.

Dexter was mad at me because he was scared.

He shouted at me to stay because he was so torn up about losing me.

He’d stormed in barking crap and protecting me from myself because he was afraid for my life.

...he wasn’t angry because Haute’s business with me ruined his big payday or because I didn’t listen.

His aggression came from a place of fear, the way a cornered dog lashes out.

Oh, God.

So maybe the way he treated me wasn’t okay.

But neither was the way I shot down his concerns. We both made mistakes, and now I’m here, sitting at Nana’s table and staring into my wine like it holds all the answers to life rather than more questions I hate I have to ask.

My heart doesn’t give me a choice.

*Why did we have to yell and freak out and blow everything to smithereens?*

*Why couldn’t I just tell Dexter Rory I was falling in love?*





## SWEET REVENGE (DEXTER)



**A**rcher's about three seconds from becoming a human hand grenade.

He paces around the office, yanking his tie down his neck. Sweat blooms under his arms.

I'm sure I look just as disheveled. Hell, maybe worse.

Even Patton isn't looking like his usual lazy and collected self. His face is flushed under his scruff as he watches Arch pace around, the same way a curious bird might observe a caged tiger.

"This is bad," Archer says for the fifth time. "Fuck."

"Yeah, we've established that," I say. "Now we need a solution."

"Easy for you to say."

"Not so easy." The pen I'm holding snaps, spilling black ink across the table. "Shit, what next?"

"What about the cameras? Is there any way we can get the surveillance footage from the laundromat?" Patton asks.

"Not a chance," Archer answers before I can. "Not without a warrant, and we won't get it before Haute's pals descend on Dex and Juniper for messing with their stash."

"My friend on the Kansas City PD said as much. But she's stepping up patrols for my house and the Sugar Bowl. If they want to give us a real mafia send-off, they'll have their work cut out for them. More likely they lay low and delete the

footage as soon as they see it,” I say. “Haute’s like that, too. His first thought is covering his tracks.”

“The money will be gone, too, so there’s no real proof. If we’re not careful, he’ll slip through our fingers and your dumb ass will wind up hiding out in Casper, Wyoming, shoveling a hundred tons of horse shit to pass the time.”

I wince, hating that he’s too right.

I can’t stay in Kansas City if we don’t get this un-fucked promptly. I’ll be lucky to grow my beard out and find enough firewood to split in my hermit crab cabin, trying to stave off insanity.

And that isn’t even considering Junie’s fate.

She can’t stay in this city if strange men can come after her any time—meaning no Sugar Bowl, no money, and no life.

And won’t we make the sweetest misery-loves-company couple ever if I drag her along to a dusty little town with more bison than people?

Sonofafuck.

How did this become my life?

“Cannot believe this shit.” Archer spits the curse like it could scorch the air. “We’re boxed in. The deal’s off, obviously. He can take his sweet time clearing up anything relating to his operation. He’s got the staff to sweep that golf course squeaky clean in a few hours. For all I know, we’ll *all* have to watch our fucking backs.”

My brother gives me a grizzled look that cuts deep.

I’d rather have him tear my head off than what I’m feeling right now, knowing he’s sweating for us, for the company, for *Colt*.

Even the slight possibility that this shit could wreck my nephew’s life boils my blood. I rake a furious hand through my hair, dead silent because this whole situation is beyond words.

Patton looks at me with sympathy I don’t deserve.

Yeah. You know it's bad when the family fuck-up can't enjoy the fact that he isn't derailing everything for once.

My entire body buzzes like a live wire.

Junie's in danger and she's pissed as hell. She's also completely done with me.

I can't begin to process the agony, wishing it never stopped being pretend. When did it go and turn so real it's leaving me dizzy, crawling under my skin and clawing out my heart like she matters, dammit, like she was actually someone I—

“Dex!” Archer snaps. “I need you with us.”

“I was thinking,” I lie. “Okay, hear me out. We can't do anything about the footage or the money without the police.”

“And?” Archer raises an eyebrow.

“So what if I go to Haute myself? There's nothing stopping that. We're just two people doing business. Nothing more.”

“Go and—what? Confront him?” Patton shakes his head. “Bro, I actually thought you were going to have a good idea.”

“You'll like this one, then.” I fold my arms, waiting for their attention. “We need proof. Haute isn't about to let us get any. The money's gone. The laundromat, who knows. There's nothing we can do. So, I go to Haute and I tell him I found out his dirty little secret. I tell him we *want in*.”

For a second, nobody breathes.

Archer's eyes widen, staring at me like I've lost my mind.

I wonder if I have, if the stress was finally too much.

Then Patton whoops and slaps me on the back. “Balls to the fucking wall! I like it.”

Too easy.

I look at Archer, knowing my buttoned-down big brother will be the one who'll fight this tooth and nail.

“It's simple. He confesses and incriminates himself. I get the proof we need, and we go to the cops. Missouri's a one-party consent state for recording, meaning he doesn't have to

know. Hell, maybe he'll slip enough about who he's really working for, what group. I take my recording to the police, they get their warrant, his businesses get turned inside out, and we get plenty of protection to fend off any reprisals. Maybe we can even buy the Mill anyway when it's confiscated and put up for auction."

*More importantly, Junie's safe.*

*Maybe she'll even forgive my stupid ass someday.*

I keep that last part to myself.

My brothers won't understand if that's my top priority, but hell, I'm the idiot who got her into this mess. I need to be the one to get her out.

"And what happens if he slams the door in your face? Hell, what if he decides to shut you up?" Archer asks. Always the sensible one, searching for the weaknesses in every plan, every contract. "What will you do if somebody pulls a gun on you?"

"Who brings a gun to a business meeting?" I spread my hands, knowing how weak that sounds. "Let's assume Haute doesn't know everything. He knows we stumbled on his cash, yeah. He knows we're onto him using the Sugar Bowl for mule stuff, but that's it. He's still in town. No abrupt exits for him, knowing how suspicious that would look. He won't be armed, especially if we meet at one of his properties."

"We'll be close by," Patton says. "*And* armed."

I nod, surprised at how fast it's coming together from a harebrained scheme.

If this goes right, everybody wins.

One good recording gives Gillian Batista a nice big arrest. Junie might never speak to me again, but at least she won't be in danger, and this whole thing will be ancient history.

"Are you with us, Arch?"

"This is a stupid damn idea, but it's all we've got," he rumbles, sticking out his hand to shake mine. "We'll be close by the second you need help. Try to come back alive."



IF I LEARNED anything in Syria, it's that you don't let fear stop you cold.

You just keep moving, even if it's all inertia.

After I call Haute's assistant, asking to book a meeting ASAP at the Mill, the only thing left is to get ready.

I show up early, muddled with doubt. I feel like fucking Archer as I pace around the floor.

Junie flashes in my brain in punishing flickers.

Her sunshine smile.

Her searing kiss.

Her overfed furball and her stupid-ass jungle of plants.

I know I should've handled it differently.

If I'd told her my concerns from the start, if I'd let her in as a partner instead of trying to protect her with ignorance, maybe this shit never would have happened like it did.

I don't even want to know if she'll be home when I return—fuck, *if* I return.

Still, no matter how much I've hurt her, at least she'll be safe after this. If I couldn't keep her heart, I'm not losing the chance to set her free.

The Sugar Bowl will keep going without any hitmen chasing off its owner. She'll get the rest of the money I owe. Maybe a few anonymous donations, too.

If she doesn't know it's the asshole who smashed her heart, she can't refuse them.

And it'll be worth it, knowing she'll succeed.

I just have to get through the next few hours.

I just have to feed Forrest goddamned Haute a big lie one more time.

Archer and Patton are at a café up the street. After twenty minutes, if they don't hear anything, they'll come to check things out.

Until then, I'm on my own, making the most important sale of my life.

I pat my pocket, making sure the old-school digital voice recorder is still there. There's too much risk with a phone, and this little device is small and unobtrusive enough. It doesn't even leave a bulge in my pants.

Hopefully, it should pick up everything we need to land a warrant and end this fuckery.

Haute shows up late with his usual swagger, hiding his power in wide shoulders and slicked-back hair. His bearish brown eyes are as unreadable as ever.

Everything about him screams 'rich,' from the showy gold watch on his wrist to the expensive suit and designer cologne wafting off him like a sea breeze.

He's a man who prides himself on being the most expensive if he can't be the best.

In his mind, they're the same thing.

I wonder how much blood is on his hands. How many atrocities did he have a hand in to maintain these lavish appearances?

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he says without a hint of real apology. I'm not stupid, keeping me waiting is a pure power move.

I nod slowly, following him to the elevator.

"Frankly, I was a bit surprised when I received the meeting request. All things considered, I didn't think I'd hear from you again."

"Then you have the wrong impression, Mr. Haute," I say smoothly. "I don't turn my back on friends, let alone the ones who impress me."

He stares at me, cold and assessing before his eyes light. I'm not prepared for the thick hand that slaps my shoulder, rocking me back.

“Let's step out on the balcony, Dex—the views are positively deadly here. We'll have a drink and you can tell me what this is really all about.”

So far, so good.

The pig loves flattery like a bee covets honey.

The balcony is farther from the main road in this unit. Farther from my brothers, but he's not likely to try anything weird. I can't believe this man was ever any kind of brawler.

I just have to hope he's come alone, and there's no one else waiting with our wine.

The balcony is just as beautiful as he promises with a sheer glass wall revealing the cityscape below. The afternoon sunset glints across the high-rises in the distance, painting the sky with its cotton candy glow of blues and pinks.

“Champagne?” Haute asks, pulling a bottle from the fridge.

I steel my face, trying not to frown.

Obviously, he had someone come here ahead of us to prep everything. But at least there's no sign of a third wheel. No sign that this is anything except a business meeting with us or perhaps a meeting between friends.

“Sure,” I say and he hands me a glass, then fills it. “Thanks.”

“Now, I assume this is about the Mill and your plans? You're still committed to moving forward?” He takes a sip and I follow suit.

It's good stuff—expensive, like everything Haute owns.

“Actually, it's a little more than that.” I take another drink. My throat is too damn dry. “But first, let me say again how pleased I am to be in business together.”

He waves a hand. “It's a mutually beneficial deal.”

*Just how beneficial is it for you?*

I don't even know whether he's going to involve the Mill in whatever shady shit he's started with the Sugar Bowl, but it's a decent bet.

"I'm especially glad I introduced you to my fiancée's bakery," I continue, hating how much the F-word stabs me in the guts. That grabs his attention—he glances at me sharply. "The pastries clearly mean a lot to you and your partners. They're the perfect cover."

"They are delicious," he drawls, his eyes assessing now.

"And I know how *important* they are. For your more serious ventures, I mean, beyond real estate."

"My more... serious ventures?" He raises his eyebrows, moving his mouth slowly.

*Shit, why is he playing dumb?*

For this to work, I need him to implicate himself.

He has to admit he's involved in illegal activities. Ideally, I need details so any warrant issued doesn't turn up empty-handed.

But the way he's looking at me tells me he won't make this easy.

He's a fucking snake, but he's too good at hiding under a rock.

"Mr. Haute, I understand why you decided to use your own delivery guys for free pickups," I say carefully. "I mean, it's very generous and I'm sure you understand how important the Sugar Bowl is to Junie, but I thought it was a little... odd. I decided to do some looking. I hope you don't blame me."

"I'm still not sure I follow, Rory." His face is almost slack with false calm, but his fingers are a little too tight on his glass, pale at the knuckles.

Do I really have to say it point-blank?

"The cupcakes were a little faulty that day. Junie, she's a stickler for quality, and she asked me to grab them because she



didn't want to disappoint your people." The lies drop off my tongue easily. "I took them. I found the plates inside. Don't worry, I told my lady I threw them away. Nothing else."

Haute taps a meaty finger against his glass.

If the tension gets any tighter, it'll break.

"What I'm trying to say is, I want in," I say with a chuckle, throwing caution to the wind. "That's why I'm here. I could help you out. I suspect you could use a few more under-the-radar drop sites. I have a lot of properties you have no stake in."

Haute purses his thick lips. "Drop sites? You're proposing I use *your* properties?"

"Drops, meeting points, whatever you need." A drop of sweat streams down my back as he considers it in silence.

His usual smugness is gone. His face reveals nothing.

Fuck, maybe this was a bad idea after all.

This guy has done everything he possibly can to keep this crap buried and I've just dragged it out in the open and confronted him.

What if I've overplayed my hand?

If he's seen the footage from the laundromat, I definitely have. He'll know I went there with Junie. He'll also know I know more than I'm letting on.

"So, you want in." He levels a measured glance.

"Yeah." I nod slowly.

"And just what exactly do you think you're getting involved with, Rory?"

Fucker just won't do it.

He won't confess.

I don't know what combination of words will make him spit it out. He hasn't denied it, sure, but this conversation won't stand up for any judge, and he'll have the best lawyers waiting in the wings.

“The operation you’re running,” I say carefully. “I don’t know the details, obviously, but I’m sure it’s profitable. You’re a cautious man. Not someone who marches into anything like this without considering every angle or a profit-risk analysis—you’re a businessman, like me.”

He takes another drink, sipping slowly like he’s sucking every last drop of flavor from the liquid before finally swallowing. Nothing about this man’s eating habits will ever be palatable.

“I am a businessman first,” he says, his voice oddly flat.

“Exactly. So am I. You must agree, or you wouldn’t have ever done business with Higher Ends.” Even though it’s Junie’s desserts that sealed the deal. They’re the treasure he wants, and now I know it’s not just to satisfy a ravenous sweet tooth.

It’s not about the Mill. Not any potential financial returns from the property that could be years off.

*This.*

Because whatever returns organized crime offers are vastly better than any conventional business deal he could make.

“I could bring a lot to the table,” I say. “Right now, your friends are relying on shady, insecure places as drop sites. That’s going to bite you in the long term. If we can stumble on it by accident, guess who else can? I’m offering you safe, discreet locations, full security, and real investment in return for a small bite of the profits.”

Haute purses his lips, making a little sucking sound as he thinks.

At last, he’s interested.

There’s this quiet, dark amusement in his eyes. For a second, I think he’s considering it and maybe he’ll confess and let me in on the deal.

Then he moves—too fucking fast for a man his size.

The champagne bottle smashes against the railing before I can blink and he shoves me against the wall, holding jagged

glass against my neck.

Champagne floods the floor, spraying my shoes, stinking like death arriving with expensive tastes.

He doesn't seem to even notice how stunned I am.

His eyes are too wide, his nostrils too flared. His pupils are like staring into inkwells.

The noise of the shattering bottle was like a gunshot, but now there's just his breath and mine and a deathly silence.

Holy shit, I never thought this asshole would get violent without someone else doing the dirty work for him.

*Think, think—*

“Shady places as drop sites?” he hisses, pressing the edge of the bottle against my throat. My jugular throbs, desperate to avoid being sliced open. “Places like the laundromat? Why the fuck did you go snooping, Rory? *Why?*”

His beastly arms rattle me again.

I'm not afraid.

Now I'm getting *pissed*.

The speed he moves says he's stronger than he looks. The way he's holding the bottle against my neck tells me this isn't his first murderous shakedown. He doesn't leave the gruesome shit to minions.

He won't hesitate.

This man has drawn blood and broken bones before.

One wrong move and I'm dead.

I've seen enough people bleed out to know how violent it'll be. My flesh torn open, my life spilling out of me in seconds. There'll be a lot of cleanup, sure, but Haute's people can manage. My brothers will be lucky to ever find my body.

Plus, I'm away from the balcony edge, farther from potential witnesses.

Fuck.

Archer and Patton might check-in after roughly fifteen minutes.

Not soon enough.

I need to find a way to occupy this maniac now.

Step one—get the fucking bottle out of my face. I'm sure I can take him if he's not holding a weapon to my neck, but it's sharp and close, pressing hard enough to feel glass biting my skin.

“For Junie. Just like I said,” I tell him. His crazy eyes stay fixed, slowly narrowing. “Juniper. You remember my fiancée, right? I never meant any disrespect.”

The edge of the broken bottle scrapes against my Adam's apple as I swallow, but he eases back ever so slightly. “What does she have to do with this?”

Everything and nothing.

I take a deep, rattling breath.

“It's her dream to take the Sugar Bowl national. Make it a big, respected brand.” So far, so good—and I don't have to lie about this. Haute must hear the sincerity in every word. “I want to help her, but there's only so much I can do.”

Haute doesn't back away. “You've got your own business. You must make a hundred times more than her.”

“Yeah. But you know those desserts. You love them, and not just because they're perfect cover. Think about what that means in five years, maybe sooner, if she gets her way. More bakeries, more cities, more places to expand...”

This is my big gamble, hoping he's truly as much of a sugar fiend as he claimed early on.

There's a calculating gleam in his eyes now, the murderous gleam going dull.

He knows what it's like to be so fiercely in love you'd shatter your entire moral compass.

Not that Forrest Haute ever had one.

“I just want her to be happy, man,” I strangle out, and although this is veering back toward make-believe, it doesn’t feel like a lie. “Never mind the business, the money. It’s Junie. Her dreams are mine. And if I’m involved with this, with you—that’s capital I can put back into her dream. We can work together to make a national name for her. Everybody wins.”

“You want to work with me? Even after this?” He snorts loudly, the champagne thick on his breath.

“Help me make her pastries famous,” I growl. “I’ll do anything to make it happen—and I do mean anything—I just need answers. Help me help you. And if you could take the damn bottle off my neck, that’d be nice.”

His hand shakes as it hovers over my neck.

With a discontent groan, he sweeps back, like he’s disappointing some bloodthirsty monster inside him.

“Big words, Rory. You’re asking for a lot of trust.”

“Trust? I could’ve gone to the cops over this, Haute.” I don’t let an ounce of fear into my voice. “I could’ve stood in your way, but I’m here, aren’t I? Asking for an in. I want to help the Sugar Bowl and my family. Just like I want to help you.”

Haute takes another step back and lowers the bottle.

It’s like watching his shield go down, appealing to that strange part of his flawed soul that understands an obsessed, death-defying love.

If only I had time to process what talking about Junie like this really means when it doesn’t feel a damned bit like lying.

“I love her,” I say. “Being with Junie—it’s not like anything I’ve ever experienced. Before her, I never dreamed I’d be willing to do the unthinkable. I never thought I’d be glad to risk everything.” I let my shoulders sag, hoping he’ll see me as a desperate lovestruck sicko. Someone he can use. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make her happy. Anything. You just tell me what you need.”

“I’ve seen you together. I know how you feel, I suppose,” he says slowly. The broken bottle hangs in his hand now.

“She deserves better than me.” I laugh, hating the way it sounds. “But if I can make her dreams come true, it’ll all be worth it.”

Haute finally steps away, looking over the darkening city as he says, “She’s something special, yes. The Sugar Bowl could easily become a national brand—and a conduit for so much more.”

Goddamn, he’s close to slipping.

*Just keep him talking.*

“If we’re involving her business without her knowing, we need to talk this out,” I venture. “Just tell me how this works. Whatever you can.”

He spares me the briefest glance and another layer of his armor comes off.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He sighs like an exhausted teacher explaining an algebra problem for the fifth time.

Good. Let him think I’m dense and harmless.

I stare at him intently, waiting for more.

“I piloted the goods for the drop sites first. The men I deal with, the bosses, they keep their soldiers on a need-to-know basis. The less said and the more discreetly they say it, the better. The lower the risk if anyone ever decides to flip for the authorities or a rival group. It’s a pretty decentralized operation at the lower levels, and it works for us.” He turns to look at the city again. “If this works, your fiancée’s lovely pastries could become more than a logistical tool. Long term, they’re perfect for transporting more important cargo.”

My face burns, hating the way he talks about this disgusting shit like it’s just another real estate transaction. The thought of his friends bastardizing Junie’s creations, stuffing them with drugs or coordinates or who the fuck knows, makes my blood molten.

“Impressive,” I bite off, trying like hell to keep my voice neutral. “I’m sure she can step up the orders, no problem. We could even set up a Sugar Bowl bakery case at the golf course to explain the new business boom. It’ll be easy.”

“That would be a first in this line of work.” He inhales sharply. “Easy or not, we need to talk numbers first.”

I walk toward him again, knowing it’s a risk as long as he’s clutching that bottle.

I do it anyway for the sake of the recorder in my pants.

For Junie.

I’ve got under ten minutes to kill before my brothers check in. I glance at my watch, but Haute tracks every movement. I don’t dare reach for my phone.

“Okay. Numbers,” I say, spreading my hands.

Then Haute’s phone rings.

A sharp, blaring sound set to the factory default that, from the look of it, he isn’t used to hearing unexpectedly. His head snaps up and his eyes slit as he pulls out his phone and squints at the screen.

The big hand holding the broken bottle twitches.

Shit, this isn’t good.

Even the way he’s looking at the screen tells me it’s a call he doesn’t want to take, almost certainly related to his *primary business*.

“What is it?” he snaps, holding it to his ear. “I told you not to call unless it’s an emergency—”

As the voice on the other end of the phone talks quickly, Haute’s eyes heat. It’s a different sort of expression from before—not the lazy, controlled anger—but a white-hot, knowing rage as he looks straight at me.

“I’ll deal with it,” he snaps, ending the call.

“If that was—”

The bottle comes back up like a club.

There's barely time to swing to one side as he charges, backing me against the wall. "You miserable ingrate! Thought you'd play me like a fucking fool, did you?" he snarls, every breath full of murder.

I shove his thick arm away as he swings the bottle alarmingly close to my face.

*Game over.*

"Got pretty close, didn't I?" I laugh at him.

"You don't get to lie to my fucking face, Rory. I'm not the stupid shit you think I am, but you—you have no clue what my business is and how dangerous it can be."

"Keep talking," I grind out.

He shifts half an inch to the right.

I take advantage of his undefended left, plowing an elbow into his side—all muscle, not much fat—before ducking out from under him.

He swings that bottle again and catches me, slicing down my arm.

Fuck!

Blood soaks my shirt with streaking pain.

So it's a proper death match now.

I barrel into him, forcing him back, straight through the glass doors and into the condo. Glass shatters around us with a deafening explosion, cutting through the soles of my shoes.

We crash into a table, rolling across the floor in vicious confusion.

Haute swings, but he's lost his bottle in the fray.

All he has now are his fists.

They're enough.

He punches me back before scrambling to his feet. I match him and we face each other, chests heaving.

Damn.



If I give him any time to recover, there's a chance he'll beat me in a fight. He's got the weight and size advantage and I'm hurt, bleeding like hell.

*Keep moving.*

It's my only chance.

I swing left, around the back of the sofa, bolting into the kitchen. A huge wooden table dominates the center of the room with an ugly-ass pig jar. Whoever decorated this place must've been high or catering totally to eccentric artists, but I don't have time to think about that.

I also don't have time to search through the drawers for a knife.

Haute pounds after me.

I swipe the pig jar off the table just as I swing around and run into the wide-open studio space with more room to maneuver.

The ceramic pig feels like a lead weight in my arms as I turn. Adrenaline foams in my mouth as Haute barrels into me and—

We crash down on the floor again.

Just two big, overgrown men brawling like warring gorillas, blood smearing stark and ugly against the off-white subway tile.

Only this time, I've got the jar.

I have a weapon.

And I still have my grip and just enough of my reflexes left.

With all my might, I swing my arms like a human tornado.

There's a loud crack from Forrest Haute's head.

Then he isn't wrestling me anymore.

He's slumping to the ground like a deflated punching bag.

I shove him off unsteadily, staggering to my feet in this mess of a studio.

The table's shattered, wood and splinters everywhere. Dust is still settling in the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the balcony door.

Oddly, the pig jar split apart neatly, lying in two pieces on the ground next to Haute's prone body.

*Shit, did I kill him?*

I grab a meaty arm, feeling for his pulse.

It hammers against my fingers, almost as fast as mine. He's alive, even if he'll walk away with one hell of a splitting headache.

Fine.

I don't care, just as long as he never sees the outside of a cell again.

I drag myself over to the sofa, fishing for my phone.

"Archer," I say roughly as soon as he picks up. "I'm alive, don't worry."

"Thanks," he says dryly. "How'd it go?"

"Haute's down. Call the cops—and an ambulance."

"Ambulance? What happened?"

"You heard me. Ask for Detective Batista and tell her it's about Haute, then get your asses over here."

Archer relays the message to Patton, who's presumably calling 9-1-1, before he comes back on the line.

"How bad, Dex?" he asks.

"Made a real mess of the place. He cut me. Missed killing me, but I guess I'll need some stitches." Not my first time, but fucking inconvenient just the same. "Otherwise, I'm fine. He sang like a bird. Just get over here, Arch, before anyone else does."

"On our way. Don't die on us now."

I hang up and make my way awkwardly to the intercom, one hand pressed against the gash on my arm. The receptionist doesn't seem to recognize the difference between my voice

and Haute's lazy drawl, making me wonder how often he visits his own properties.

Not that it matters now.

As I head back to the sofa, I glance at the broken pig jar. It's cracked, but the words I didn't notice before are still readable on one side.

*Life is short. Love sugar.*

For fuck's sake.

It's ironic, I suppose, that I knocked Haute out with a fancy sugar bowl.

*A fucking sugar bowl* after everything that's happened.

Another reminder of what's at stake and what I'm afraid I've already lost, even if Haute and his friends are neutralized.

*Junie.*

I'm almost certain she's gone now.

After I'm patched up and done wasting a few hours in the ER, I'll go home to an empty house.

It'll be just like before I met her—only then I didn't mind the hollowness at home.

I thought it was normal.

Bleeding a few pints out sure puts things in perspective.

I don't want her to leave.

I don't want this stupid pretense to be over even though it's null and void. I don't want to face a life without her.

Because I love her.

And she doesn't have a clue, not after I barked shit in her face and ripped her apart.

Maybe that's why this doesn't feel like a win, but more like a chore that's finally done.

I slump against the wall and close my eyes, my thoughts fading.

As soon as I'm done bleeding, I need to talk to her.  
I need to tell Junie everything before it's too late.



# BITTERSWEET TEARS (JUNIPER)



The first hint I have that there's something terribly wrong is when two police officers show up at Nana's door.

Two of them in matching uniforms, both wearing identical expressions of polite concern. Nana invites them in and plies them with cake as they explain they need to ask me some very important questions about my involvement with Forrest Haute.

It's been two days since I came back here crying like a stray cat.

To say I'm over it is pure exaggeration, but at least I'm not bawling my eyes out uncontrollably anymore.

"Sure," I tell them, wondering if I'm a suspect myself. After all, I was there in the laundromat, clearly sleuthing and potentially incriminating myself. Haute's dirty number notes were stuffed in *my* cupcakes.

Dexter made the risks clear, even if he never said anything about winding up on the police's radar.

But thinking about him makes my heart squeeze, so I focus on my expression.

That's something I've been practicing. The dead smile where I crinkle the corners of my eyes to make it look real.

"Do you need me to come down to the station?" I ask.

The older officer, a lady with dark hair who introduced herself as Detective Gillian Batista, gives me a brief smile.

She's all hard edges and scares me a little, but I decide I like her.

"We can talk to you here," she says. "You're not under arrest or anything."

"Oh. Oh, thank God." The relief is palpable. I link my fingers together as Nana drops off more coffee.

"We've already spoken to Dexter Rory about the case and your involvement," Detective Batista continues, "so this is more of a formality. We need as much information as possible to build a case."

They've already talked to Dex.

Of course they have.

I tighten my fingers so they don't shake. I saw the headline last night when it popped up in my local news feed.

Big headlines about a major real estate mogul and developer getting busted. All thanks to Dexter Rory.

No mention of the Sugar Bowl.

No mention of me.

"You've spoken to him," I repeat. "And how is he?"

The article said he was hurt in a confrontation with Haute, but I called the hospital only to find out he was discharged. I don't know anything else and it's driving me insane.

"He's absolutely fine." The younger cop leans forward. He looks about my age, maybe slightly older, with mousy hair and toned muscles. His eyes are kind, though. "I believe he needed stitches in his arm, but he's all good now."

"Stitches?" There's no hiding my horrified gasp.

Detective Batista sends her colleague an annoyed glance. "I know it sounds bad, Miss Winkley, but you have my word he's in good shape."

Right.

And that's all I'm going to get because I don't have a right to his life anymore.

I left the ring back at his house. For all I know, it's in the trash by now.

He said I could keep it, but I couldn't bear to.

Not after—well, everything.

“Is it all right if we ask a few follow-up questions?” Batista asks.

“Of course.”

“How did you know Forrest Haute?”

I walk them through my interactions, focusing on the meeting at the clubhouse and the deal he brokered there. I hardly mention Dex, even though he's probably given them every detail.

I don't know what to say about the whole fake engagement thing.

Our contract. Our illusion. Our marvelously stupid mistake.

The detective's gaze is sympathetic as it lingers on my face for a second too long.

Oof.

I probably should have cleaned up better this morning. At least splashed cold water on my face and put makeup over the dark circles around my eyes.

I look about as good as I feel, too.

Godawful.

“And what were the terms of the contract you arranged with Mr. Haute?” she asks.

“I have a copy of it on my laptop, I think. Hang on.” Desperate to get out of the room with the cops and her all-knowing eyes, I leap up and run upstairs.

As soon as I'm in my room, I stop, standing in the middle of the floor.

*I'm fine.*



If I keep telling myself that, then maybe I'll eventually believe it.

No, I didn't think he'd reach out to me again just like that.

After all, I'm the one who walked out of his life and left the ring behind as a parting f-you.

It makes *sense* that Dexter wouldn't want to lay eyes on me again.

I'm a little mistake wrapped in a bigger one with catastrophic consequences. One line in a chapter I'm sure he'd love to delete from his life like a shameful memory.

And I'm fine, I'm fine, but oh God, it *hurts*.

Pressing a hand against my stomach, I close my eyes and count to ten before I grab the laptop off my bed.

"Here we go," I say a few minutes later as I bring up the document for the police. "I can email it if that helps."

"That would be wonderful, thank you." Batista glances at her partner and then focuses on me again. "A written statement from you would also be enormously helpful, Miss Winkley. Can you do that?"

"Oh, yeah. Whatever you need."

"Excellent." She jots something down on a piece of paper and slides it across to me. "If you could send the contract to this email address shortly, we'd really appreciate it. Take whatever time you need with the statement."

Her handwriting is just like her—tall, upright, precise. She's dug the pen in hard enough to leave grooves in the paper and I sweep my fingers across them absently.

"Absolutely."

"Thank you again for talking with us, Miss Winkley."

"Will you be wanting me to come to the station for the statement?" I ask. "I mean, seeing as I was technically involved with everything without really knowing..."

Her smile is kind enough.

“We’ll give you a case number and anything else you might need. Written should suffice, along with the contract. There’s no evidence linking you to any crime. I’ve asked my department to add patrols around your grandmother’s property, too, though I don’t think you’re in danger.”

I stare at her, my heart thudding.

“We expect the Kansas City outfit out of Chicago Mr. Haute worked with to lay low for a while. It’s not in their nature to target witnesses when they know there’s an open case. These organizations are like weeds, but we’ll be pursuing everyone directly responsible in this scheme.”

Although I believe her, relief still presses me into my chair and makes my legs liquid. I’m not sure I can stand if I want to.

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say after a moment.

“Colin, will you head to the car? I just want one more word with Miss Winkley here privately.”

Colin gives her a long glance, like she’s breaking an unwritten rule, but after a moment he leaves the room. Nana’s in the kitchen banging away as she cleans up pans, and now it’s just Detective Batista and me.

“I know Dexter Rory,” she says. “We served together overseas. He helped me come home alive once.”

I blink at her, wondering if she means she *knows* Dexter. She’s so different from me, it’s hard to imagine them together.

“Um, right. If you’re here to break the news gently, I don’t need you to be his messenger. I know it’s over...”

“Did I say that?” She stares at me, her dark eyes focused. She’s younger than I thought—maybe thirties, around his age. Lines are starting to flare near the corners of her eyes but there’s a vibrancy to her face I missed before. “Your relationship isn’t my business. But I saw him when you were still together. He asked about Haute and mentioned you.” She shrugs. “All I’m saying is, I’ve never seen him like that. You clearly mean a lot to him.”

Wow.

Isn't that basically what Nana said, too?

"Thanks." I force a smile. "But, um, I think whatever we had can't be mended."

She looks at me for a second before setting her cup down. "The coffee and cake were delicious. Thank your grandmother for me, will you?"

"Sure thing."

"Good luck, Miss Winkley. With everything."

"Let me know if anything comes up," I say before I can help myself. "About the case, I mean."

She nods as she leaves the room. "Try not to worry about it. It's looking like a textbook takedown of organized crime."

That's good news, but for some reason it makes my throat tight.

I might have to testify in court later. I always knew that was a possibility, but what if months pass and I have to relive my sham engagement?

Will I be over him by then?

My stomach flips over. An unwanted answer.

Gran pokes her head through the doorway as I'm stewing with my thoughts, wearing her usual knowing smirk. "More cake? We're celebrating, aren't we?"

"If you want to call it that, I guess. It's a pretty big bad guy going down."

"Oh, heavens, no. I'm talking about you coming to your senses, June bug," she says cheerfully, carrying over two heaping pieces of strawberry shortcake. "We're going to sit and figure out how you'll kiss and make up with that fine young man."



THE POLICE DON'T GET in touch over the next few days.

It's back to business as usual.

The papers online aren't revealing much either, but it's making me antsy. How weird is it that I'm more bothered by the radio silence than the fact that I could've been openly targeted by hitmen?

Of course, everyone's talking about it at the shop—and talking about me.

I don't catch much besides muffled words that always stop as soon as I step into the room.

But that's how you know—it's the hissing whispers and wide-eyed looks whenever I turn my back or when they don't think I'm looking. The sidelong glances, the obsessive interest, the oozing *sympathy*.

I definitely don't need more sympathy.

Dexter and I are done.

Even our involvement in the same harrowing crime case feels like an echo from the past.

“Well, *I* heard Haute hired a big-time lawyer for over a million dollars,” Sarah whispers to Emmy. Now that Emmy and Jake are officially dating, the two girls have made up remarkably fast.

“Just one mil? I reckon it was more like two.”

“He'll do anything to stay out of prison. It's almost like saving face when Big Fish kicked his butt.”

“Well, yeah,” Emmy says, rolling her eyes. “He's the one who got Haute arrested, right?”

I keep rolling pastry in the kitchen, fighting to tune them out.

*Roll twist. Roll flip. Flour.*

They don't notice the door's open and I can hear every word. Maybe they don't care.

But I just don't have the energy to face them, to see the questions dancing on their faces, let alone the pity.

“I can’t believe he was so brave. He always seemed like the type who wouldn’t get his hands dirty,” Sarah says.

“Yeah, I’m surprised, too. The man’s filthy rich and way too polished,” Emmy huffs out. “But for Junie, I guess he reverts back to caveman.”

“But she wasn’t there...”

“Does it matter?” Emmy sighs wistfully. “You just know he was thinking of her. I bet she’s all he thinks about. I knew it when I saw his eyes.”

“Seriously?” Jake pipes up from the back. “You guys have been talking about this case all week.”

“Because you’re jealous, boy,” Sarah teases. “Better step it up and save Emmy from zombie muggers or something if you ever want to be top dog around here.”

Emmy laughs.

Despite how ridiculous it is, there’s something warm and lumpy in my chest. Like love, jealousy, and the heated wave of tears.

But I won’t cry again at work. That would be triple ridiculous.

I start cutting little pastry cases out once the dough gets thin. We’re doing little lemon posset tarts—something tangy and sharp to balance all the obscene sweetness we sell.

I promise you it’s not inspired by a heartbreaking man who was born without a sweet tooth.

“...do you think she’s okay, though? I haven’t seen him around here for a while, not since they were fighting,” Emmy whispers.

Oh, so they *do* know I might hear them then.

“Junie?” There’s a loud ceramic clunk as Sarah pulls out some mugs. I can imagine her fumbling. She always was the clumsy one. “I dunno, she hasn’t said much. But it’s a lot to process.”

“Yeah. I wondered if maybe we should, like, give her something... Like moral support, y’know.”

“What, a sympathy card? Flowers?” Sarah snorts sarcastically. “She doesn’t need flowers for not getting kidnapped, Em. She just needs her man.”

Sarah’s not wrong and it punts my heart right through the roof.

Thankfully, they drift back to talking about school and celebrity scandals.

Then there’s a crashing sound.

“Oh, shit!” Sarah swears loudly. Another crash. “Whoops!”

Rest In Peace, mugs.

I roll my eyes as I wash my hands, wondering how many dishes I’ll have to replace this time. Good help is so hard to find.

“Get Junie. Grab her right now!” Sarah hisses.

Emmy bursts into the kitchen a second later.

“The door wasn’t shut,” she says blankly.

“No,” I say. “What did you guys break today?”

“Oh, um, just a mug or two but it’s not about that.” Emmy’s slightly wild eyes meet mine and my stomach drops.

“Big Fish,” I say, keeping the hope out of my voice.

“He just came in! You need to come right now.”

Lord, the man has the worst timing in human history.

My hair’s frizzing in this heat, I’m covered in flour, and I’m wearing an old blouse with a couple small holes in it under my apron, courtesy of Catness.

Shit.

I speed wash my hands until the hot water scalds me and I jerk my hands back. Soap, lather, fingernails, rinse. Pastry flour likes to get everywhere.

“Are you okay?” Emmy whispers with a concerned look.  
“Here, take off the net.”

I rip the net off my hair and hand it to her.

“How do I look?” There’s no point in pretending I’m not absolutely shitting myself. They already must suspect it was a breakup even if they don’t know the what or why.

They also don’t know it wasn’t a real relationship to begin with.

“You look great.” Emmy brushes a stray flake of pastry from my cheek. “Go!”

Dexter stands by the register, wearing the same grumpectacular expression he had the very first day I met him.

Back then, I was a little awestruck by his godlike good looks. The hair, the shoulders, the ocean *eyes*.

Oh God, the eyes.

Then he had to open his mouth.

Now I know there’s so much more to this man than a precision sculpted body and a personality like roadkill.

I know how those soulful eyes glow in the shadows on long nights and what the brush of his stubble feels like against my stomach as he trails hot kisses down my body.

I know there’s a scar on the back of his knuckle and a tattoo of war and that his smile could rival the most colorful sunrise.

I know how amazing he feels when he sheds that stylish grey suit that clings to him like a knight’s armor.

Sarah practically grabs me and marches me to the front of the store. “We’ll be—uh—somewhere else.”

My fingers are numb.

My tongue, stone.

I think I’m having another out-of-body experience.

Because even though he’s standing right in front of me with his arm wrapped in something like a cast, I don’t have a

single thing to say.

Not one word.

“Junie.” He says my name with the same dark smile I’ve only ever seen him give me.

Not the practiced smile reserved for clients and staff and occasionally his brothers—but a warm, sweet smile that touches his eyes.

I’m so dead.

If I ever thought I wasn’t deliriously in love with this man, I was dead wrong. He still has my heart captive, bruises and all.

And I still don’t know what the heck to say to him.

There are no words for this sort of reunion.

What I want to say isn’t appropriate for a bakery bustling with staff and afternoon guests idling over their coffee.

“Give me a Catness cake pop,” he announces.

I stop and stare.

Then pure shock gives me my voice. “You want a—a Catness pop?”

Without thinking, I look at the display cabinet. It’s a fun new item we added just recently, forever immortalizing my furbaby in cake form.

The cake pops are especially popular with the summer crowd of kids and flirty young couples capping off their dates. Somehow, I think its popularity has less to do with the cute smiling tabby face and more with the unholy sugar load.

They’re a little rich, even for me. I’m surprised I don’t have another hit on my head to worry about, courtesy of every dentist and diabetes doctor in Kansas City.

“You heard me,” he says.

“...but they’re pretty intense. Maybe the sweetest thing we have. I could get you something more to your taste? Maybe a \_\_\_”



“I know what I asked for, Sweet Stuff.” He meets my gaze. There’s so much warmth there, just for me, that my chest squeezes. “One cake pop. Please.”

For a stunned second, I just stare.

“I don’t understand,” I mutter as I pull it out of the case. “What have you done with Dexter? You look just like him.”

It’s jarring, the first time I’ve said his name out loud since the police visit, and it makes my heart squeeze again.

“Do you want it to go?” I ask.

“I’ll eat it here.”

I pop the cat-faced cake pop on a plate and ring it up. He swipes his credit card like a sword through the reader.

Then he shoves the entire cathead in his mouth.

Whole.

Oh, boy.

I think he’d have a better time with a piece of solid uranium.

He winces as he chews, the sugar overload no doubt scraping his tongue, scorching his throat on the way down.

But somehow, he forces a smile as he chews.

It’s the most absurd, stupefying thing I’ve ever seen, and I can’t help it—I laugh like crazy.

“What... what the hell are you *doing*?”

“Fair question.” He swallows and grabs the napkin, using it to wipe his mouth. “Shit, that was awful.”

“You were warned. You were never going to enjoy it.”

“Thanks for proving my point. There’s a lot a man can enjoy that isn’t always good for him. And a little sweetness never hurt anybody.” He glances at the staff crowding the door to the kitchen, sneaking looks at us while pretending they aren’t. “Step outside with me, Junie.”

I motion to Sarah to take the register and follow him.

Outside, the sun is shining, the traffic is light, and Dex leads me off the main street to the back alley, where the bins and the back door to the bakery are.

An empty wrapper blows past us, crinkling loudly in the wind.

“Wow,” I say, looking around. “This is so romantic. If you’re about to give me some spiel about the way we ended, can we not do it next to a dumpster?”

“I didn’t think you’d want this to be public.” He folds his arm defensively.

“Fine.” It’s a decent point, and even if we have garbage for a view, at least no one’s staring out the window at us. “Okay, talk,” I say, turning and looking up at him. “I’m here. You’ve got me. What do you want to say?”

“I’ve been a complete fucking wreck ever since I left the hospital, for one.” He laughs bitterly, looking like he’s winging it, though knowing Dexter, I’m sure he’s had this whole conversation planned out. “My mom practically made me stay home under armed guard. Doctor’s orders, laid up with this oversized papercut, and it’s given me a lot of downtime to think.”

“Dangerous,” I say before I can help myself.

“Right. Idle hands and all. However, in this case, it’s been useful. I’ve never had this much time off just to *think*.”

Part of me wants to be furious he had all that time in the world to think and never once reached out to me, but that’s not fair.

He needed this time and space.

Frankly, I did, too, even if I didn’t want to accept it until now.

“All that thinking helped, but it didn’t change my mind,” he says. “I knew everything I needed to when Forrest Haute stabbed me with a broken bottle.”

“That’s how it happened?” I gasp. “They never said it was a broken bottle...”

“Champagne bottle. He had a mole inside the police department. They tipped him off that he was under investigation at the worst time.” He waves it off like it’s *no big deal* he was attacked by a stabby lunatic who tore his arm open.

I hate it.

But I love this insanely brave man.

I also hate knowing he can shrug off the scariest moment of his life thanks to me.

He hasn’t even told me anything yet, but his eyes won’t shut up. They catch the sun just right and they sing to me silently.

“You were hurt,” I whisper.

“I was. That’s not the important part, though. When Haute was trying his damndest to kill me, it got me thinking. Maybe life isn’t worth living without sugar.”

On the surface, it’s a little corny. But the fact that there’s so much truth weighing in his voice makes me raise an eyebrow.

“So you’re telling me that instead of focusing on survival, you were thinking about *sugar*?”

He grins. “My thoughts were a lot less coherent in real time. Cursing and panic and pain everywhere. But I knocked him out with this ugly damn sugar bowl, and while I was busy trying not to bleed out, I thought about you, Junie.”

Wow, that’s heavy.

“And?” I brush my hair back with both hands, flattening the frizzy curls until they stick to my head.

“And I figured out two things. First, sugar can’t be so awful if it saved my skin. I never appreciated the sweet stuff, but it’s a little like art, right? It makes food something beautiful. It’s the kick that starts your morning or the best way to end a fancy dinner. I realized I could use more sweetness in my life. Hell, a lot of it.” He takes my hand then, holding it between his so tenderly my throat goes tight. “Just like I tried

to prove today. If you give me the sweet stuff, Sweet Stuff, I promise you I won't take it for granted again."

Holy flaming hell.

I shift my weight just to make sure I'm still securely on the ground and not floating away.

"That's not how it works, Dex. It isn't that easy." I swallow. He's giving me everything I wanted to hear—so much more, really—but this hollow ache in my chest won't let up. "You can't just force yourself to like something you can't stand."

"Like hell. I can learn to appreciate new things. I can see them, taste them, *feel* them in a different light. I'm just sorry it took this long." He takes my hand, squeezing my fingers so hard I can feel his pulse.

"I know, but..." I can't believe there's a 'but.' I sigh, looking down. "It's not that simple. You went off the radar after it all went down. I didn't know if you were okay or how much danger you were in and... and in the end, it was all thanks to me."

His gaze intensifies.

"No, sweetheart. No, it wasn't."

"It is. Just listen—" I hold up a hand. "You were right, okay? I shouldn't have gone after Haute alone. I know that now. You told me not to mess around and I went and poked the bear anyway. You got hurt because of it. You were *right*, Dex." My voice cracks embarrassingly but I press on. "I could've gotten killed. If you hadn't found me in that laundromat first—if they'd noticed me following them, who knows..."

I don't finish.

I've had nightmares about it for days that leave me jolting awake, my face a sticky mess.

"Junie," Dexter whispers raggedly, and then I'm in his arms and he's stroking my hair. "I know. I know, and fuck, I'm sorry. I should have told you everything. I should've made the threat plain and clear without cutting you down."

His warmth surrounds me.

I grip his lapels, holding them in my fists in a way that's definitely going to make them crumple. But he doesn't complain, not even when I press my snotty face against his shoulder.

This is what I've dreamed about when I'm not being trampled by nightmares.

I've ached for this, imagined him coming back and comforting me, because he's the only one who really understands.

Dex was there.

He's the man who saved my life.

He knows me well enough to save me from myself, and when I'm too stubborn to listen, he still puts his own neck on the line.

But if I let myself settle in his embrace now, I'll never climb back out again.

"I should've known," I tell him, my voice shaky. "I should have and I didn't, and Dex—that told me I could learn a lot from you. As if everything you've done for the Sugar Bowl wasn't already lesson enough. I'm such an idiot."

"Junie, I don't normally go getting mixed up with mobsters—"

"Let me finish." He's not the only one who's been rehearsing this, although my lines were all hypothetical. I never thought I'd get a chance to say this to his face. "All this stuff you do—the multimillion-dollar deals, the stakes you play with—it's totally foreign to me. I don't know anything about it. I can barely keep the Sugar Bowl alive without your help."

His arms tighten defensively around me.

"You're doing one hell of a job. As soon as Haute's money dried up, the customers didn't stop, did they?"

“...no,” I admit sheepishly, smiling because business is better than ever. “I’m no businesswoman. I’m a baker first and I always will be. And that’s okay. I struggled with it for so long, and now that I’m doing better and making money it still feels like pulling teeth... but what I’m trying to say is, I don’t *want* the sort of life you live, Dexter.” This is the hard part, and my throat closes around those words. I squeeze my eyes shut, pretending I’m not confronting him at all. “I mean, I want something with lower stress. Less responsibility. Time for family, travel, art, *life*.”

For a second, he’s dead silent.

I’m just waiting for him to shove me away and walk out of my life forever.

But he doesn’t.

His big chest heaves as he holds me tighter.

“Sweet Stuff, you’re the most dedicated, stubborn pain in the ass I’ve ever met,” he whispers in my ear, stroking a slow line down my back with his fingers. “Are you finished, or do you want to abuse my lifestyle some more?”

“I... I didn’t mean it like that. I’m not judging, I just—”

“You know I’m joking, right?”

I lean back so I can see his face.

He’s still wearing that secret smile just for me, the smile that goes straight to my heart like an arrow.

“So you’re not mad?” I whisper hopefully.

“Why would I be? Except for the fact that you’ve been crying.” He wipes his thumb under my eyes. I refuse to tell him this week has involved a *lot* of tears. “No, Junie, I’m not mad. I’m just fucking dying without you.”

My heart dives.

“But I just basically said you suck at life.”

He shrugs. “And I deserved it. You’re right. I’ve been so wrapped up in work, in carving out my own legacy from the

Rory shadow, that I've missed so many things—life and family and art.”

“And travel,” I remind him, touching his nose.

He shows his teeth.

Dexter Rory actually flipping *grins*.

His eyes warm like the perfect summer sky. “Yeah, about that—where do you want to go first, Junie? I've always wanted to see Italy. I hear Catania's stunning. Warm beaches, breathtaking old buildings, cozy streets, citrus trees, plus you can eat your weight in seafood and pasta any damn day of the week. It's Europe, yeah, but I'm sure they have something with five times the daily recommended sugar intake for you.”

I giggle.

He takes that as a cue to sweep me up, cradling me in his arms.

“Wait.” I ease back a bit so I can look at him. There's an embarrassing wet patch on his shoulder from my tears. “What are you saying, Dex? You talk like it's a done deal, like it's all just that easy.”

“Does it need to be more complicated? I spoke with my brothers this morning. After they asked me a hundred times if the blood loss did any permanent brain damage, we agreed to restructure our duties and take on a couple new hires to help me analyze new properties. I've never been surer of anything in my life, even if it took me thirty-two years to realize it.”

“That's you, all right,” I say with a smile that's breaking my face. “It takes a lot to convince you, but once your mind is made up, *watch out*.”

He chuckles and brings me closer to his lips.

“I'm reducing my hours at the company, effective immediately. Stepping back. With more time on my hands, I'll figure out this whole work-life balance everyone raves about.”

This is probably the time when I should say something big and important, but I'm just opening and closing my mouth like a fish sucking air.

“Life is fragile as hell,” he tells me, more of that warmth in his voice spilling out until it drowns me. And baby, I go down willingly. “Didn’t realize just how much until this past week when I could’ve lost it all. When I almost lost *you*.”

“What about the company?” I manage. “It’s a big move. You’re positive they can manage without you there all the time?”

“Higher Ends will survive just fine without me chained to it. We’ll fill in the gaps. With the Mill deal blown, maybe our profits won’t be as big for the next few years as we adjust to slower growth, but that’s okay. There are more important things. Like driving you up the wall.”

Yep.

I must be dreaming.

No way are we in this dingy alley charting all these dreams—all these ginormous *changes*—just for me.

No way is Dexter Rory altering the constellations in the sky to make me happy.

Oh, but he is, and it’s so freaking beautiful I’m riding this high, and I never want to come down.

“I love you, Juniper Winkley,” he says, and his face has lost its smile. He’s deadly serious as he looks at me. “I’ve known it for a while, but I pretended I didn’t because we told ourselves it was make-believe. Now, I’m not afraid. It was always real to me, and if you’ll have me, I want to find out how sweet life can be. Together.”

“Dude, stop. I’m out of tears,” I warn him, fighting my trembling lips. But he pulls me into him for a second time and I let him. “Jesus. Dex, do you have to be so cheesy with the sweet puns?”

He knows I’m laughing after every word.

And he chuckles again, the happiness reverberating through his chest. “What’s wrong, sweetheart? Too sweet for you after all?”



“You’re obnoxious,” I whisper fondly, my eyes brimming again. But this time—and it feels insane that it can happen this fast—it’s from joy.

Dexter has my whole heart in his palm, but instead of crushing it, he’s giving it new life.

“But I love you, too. You overbearing, irritating, unromantic—”

His kiss shuts me up.

Perfectly timed.

There, I taste my tears, the salt mingling with the leftover sweetness from the cake pop. His lips are gentle at first, a reassurance rather than a demand.

His fingers linger on my chin, tilting my face to his, and even though I’m arguably the most disgusting creature alive right now, he tightens his arm around my waist, holding me against him tightly enough until I lose track of where I end and he begins.

So *this* is what love is supposed to feel like.

“I don’t usually do second chances,” he mutters against my mouth. “But I think we deserve it this time. Don’t you?”

I tug his face back down to mine, so giddy I’m grateful he’s holding me so I don’t float away.

“Of course. Now shut it and kiss me again.”



## SWEET PROMISES (DEXTER)



*Months Later*

If you'd asked me nine months ago where I'd be, I probably would have talked about Higher Ends and its profit reports.

I might've mentioned my cardio goals, my supplement plan, or my golf score on the green after striking a massive deal with Forrest Haute (fucking cringe).

I definitely would *not* have said anything about aprons, kitchens, and cakes.

"There's flour on you," Mother fusses, twisting me around so she can flick it off my arm with her long jade nails. I tried explaining fake nails don't have any place in a kitchen, but she made some comment about acrylics and brushed me off.

So here we are.

Here I am, living a life I never expected.

"Aprons are supposed to get flour on them, you know," I tell her.

"Oh, hush. You'll spoil the effect."

"For God's sake. I don't need you fussing over me. I'm not ten years old."

She purses her lips as she looks at me, her freshly dyed hair hanging over her shoulder in gentle waves. It's the first

time I've seen her with red highlights.

She hasn't said it, no, but I think she views Junie a bit like a new muse for her fashion.

"You look so handsome." Her eyes glitter as she gushes praise. "I can't believe the day has finally come."

"Like I can?" Although I've spent a hilariously long time planning today in every painstaking detail.

Given its simplicity, Junie would laugh herself blue in the face if she knew how much I've been fretting over this.

Planning is my forte, sure, but this is too much. I'm embarrassed by it.

Also, I never should have involved my mother.

The minute you turn Delly Rory loose, anything might happen.

She stands in the middle of the kitchen now, hands on her hips as she surveys the mess we've made like it's an old friend. When she decides to cook at home, she leaves behind astonishing chaos as she tries to recreate family favorites from memory.

These days, she mostly lets the hired chef do the work. *Mostly.*

"So she spends all her time in here? Even when she's not baking?" she asks.

"Not *all* the time." I hold the piping bag over the cake with both hands. Baking it was one thing, but icing this beast is something else.

I don't know how Junie does this day in and day out without losing her shit.

"And she makes all those delicious things by scratch?" Mother asks.

"Yes."

The cake has my total attention now. Small dabs of icing around the side, her name in the middle.

Why is it so fucking difficult?

I'm a grown man with three degrees and almost ten years' experience running a successful company. I should be more capable.

"I can't even imagine." She runs a critical eye over my icing attempt. "The left side's a little uneven, dear."

"Mother! Leave me alone, for the last damn time." It was definitely a mistake to involve her. "Why don't you, I don't know, go polish a knife or something? Anything. Just don't breathe over my shoulder like that. It's distracting."

"I'm only trying to help."

I'm halfway through the *J* for Junie when the door swings open and Junie herself walks into the shop with her grandmother.

Just like we planned—only, she's a few minutes early, or—shit.

Am I running late?

That never happens.

"Distract her," I hiss, nodding at the door.

My mother heads over to divert them while I painstakingly work with my archnemesis to ice out the rest of her name. The *E* is the hardest letter. It looks a little like a child wrote it, but I have just enough time to shove the piping bag to one side and throw the apron over my head before Junie comes in.

"Hey!" She gives me a kiss on the cheek and stops. "Wow, it smells good in here. Don't tell me this was you?"

"I've been telling you for weeks I was going to bake you something," I grumble.

She glances down at the cake and her eyes bulge. "Whoa. It looks seriously good. Dex, don't lie to me, did you really make this?"

"Of course I did. I can touch frosting without bursting into flames, you know," I say, unsure whether I'm relieved or

offended she doesn't think I can pull off a simple cake. "I told you I was going to learn."

"And no one helped you? Not even a little?" She looks over at my mother. "You didn't help him, Delly?"

"Actually, she got in the way," I say.

Mom raises an eyebrow. "I'll admit baking isn't my strong suit, but we're going to fix that today. Right, Jo?"

Jo Winkley gives me an unsubtle wink.

In the last four whirlwind months together—this time for real—she's become one of my biggest supporters.

"That's right," she says cheerfully. Luckily, Junie doesn't notice anything off even though Jo is possibly the worst liar I've ever met.

"I can't believe it," Junie says again, looking down at the cake. "You made this for me. All by yourself."

"Okay, now I'm definitely offended."

"No, I'm impressed." She reaches up and kisses me again, this time on the mouth. Lightly, because two old women are watching, but it's a definite promise for later.

If everything goes according to plan, we'll have a lot more to celebrate then.

"Get ready for shock and awe. You'll never taste another cake like it—and I don't mean that in a bad way," I promise, putting it into one of her boxes and heading through the door.

"Should I have 9-1-1 ready?"

I flash her a severe look that says she'd better not. *Redheaded brat.*

Junie waves to Jo, who pretends to give my mother a few pointers on a cinnamon banana bread cake. I'm sure that's in the cards at some point, but not today.

First we have destiny to deal with.

Junie chatters happily beside me as we head to park just a few blocks away.

It's fall now, and the trees gleam like torches in the russet haze of sun, brilliant red and yellow and orange that paints the evening with an otherworldly glow.

As I lead her to a table under a tree, I even spot a couple cardinals in the branches.

I'll take that as a good sign.

"Look at the lake," she says, pointing as we sit. I glance back to see the leaves reflected in the water like embers. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah," I whisper, but I'm not looking at the water anymore.

No foliage can ever match Junie's hair as it hangs loosely over her shoulders, glittering like ruby threads in the evening sun.

I love it when she wears it loose.

The way it contrasts the forest-green coat she's wearing stalls my breath.

Honestly, the sight makes me a little nervous.

*Perish the fucking thought.*

I guess that's natural, though, when I'm risking my entire ass to reach for the future.

I pull the cake out before I can change my mind or do anything else to fuck this up.

"Ready to try it? Or are you too scared?"

She laughs and turns back to me with sparkling eyes. "You know it. What flavor did you pick?"

"Classic chocolate." I carefully cut her a slice. "I know it's your favorite."

"Yeah, but what about you?"

"It's the most tolerable kind. I've gotten better at this," I tell her, cutting myself a piece that's half the size of hers.

I *have* gotten better at appreciating sweets. I'm not sure I'll ever learn to fully enjoy throwing myself into a three-hour

sugar coma, though I can definitely eat it now without feeling like I'm shaving ten years off my life.

"You really have." She accepts a cake fork from the box and looks at her slice before prodding at the dessert. "Nice texture. You didn't make it too dry."

"Damn, Sweet Stuff, I didn't bring you here to grade it."

"Why *did* you bring me here for a cake picnic, then?" She shoots me a mock glare.

"Just eat. Preferably before I have an aneurism."

"Okay, bossypants." She takes a bite and chews slowly. I try not to fixate on her lips, or guessing how many bites it'll take before she finds her surprise.

In fact, I try not to think about anything at all except for the fact that it's a beautiful autumn day and I'm here with Junie at the edge of forever.

"It's good," she says sincerely, surprise ringing in her voice.

"You could pretend to be less shocked."

"No, I just—for someone who thinks dessert is pure evil, you're pretty good at this. What did Lucifer offer you?"

I snort. "Only you, woman. Somehow, that'll always be enough."

She smiles at that. A long, slow smile that touches her soul with the same wistful energy as the sunlight dancing on the lake. I almost want to interrupt what I've started and kiss her until we forget how to breathe.

But she's so close now.

Then her fork hits something hard near the end of the cake and she glances up at me with a frown. "Oh no. Don't tell me you left a frosting cap in the cake?"

I say nothing.

"Dex? It's too big to be a—"



“Oops. Silly me.” I cut her off, shaking my head, trying not to lay my surprise on too thick. “Better find out what it is.”

She purses her lips.

“Actually, I hate to say it, but it reminds me a little of Haute’s metal discs, except they weren’t this big,” she says bitterly as she hacks away at the back to find a metal box.

I figured she might think that.

“That’s what gave me the idea,” I tell her. Shock flashes in her eyes. “I thought I’d take something ugly and turn it into a treasure. Keep going.”

“It’s...” Words fail her and her mouth moves soundlessly. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Only one way to find out, sweetheart.”

It takes her a second—the steel box is slick with cake residue, but eventually she opens it to find the ring I bought her the first time sitting there, twinkling in the light.

“We can change it if you prefer something new,” I rush out. “If you want a fresh start, I get it, but—”

“You kept it,” she whispers. “You kept the ring?”

I nod, my heart blowing up a size.

“Even when I left it on the kitchen counter and walked out of your life. All these months, I was afraid to ask what happened...”

“You have no clue how many hours I sat staring at that ring, remembering what it looked like on your finger, wishing it could be there again.” I swallow hard. Heavy confessions aren’t my talent. “I know it came to you with a big fat lie. It’s not that romantic in the conventional sense, no, however—”

“It’s perfect.” She looks up sharply, her eyes brimming with tears. “I’ve always loved it. Right from the beginning, when you chose it off total luck, I guess. And it’s not just part of a sham anymore, Dex. It’s a reminder of how we met.”

I move across the grass so I’m standing in front of her now.

Without another word, I kneel.

I pry the box from her hands and open it.

“I know I’ve done this before, too,” I say, watching the smile on her lips. “And I know it wasn’t what you wanted back then. Now, we can start a new tradition—”

“You prepared a big speech. Aww.” She presses a hand to her face. “Oh, sorry. Continue.”

“Apparently, interrupting my proposals is a tradition, too.”

“I said sorry. Go on,” she hisses.

“It’s real now, Junie. Realer than the colors on these trees. Realer than my own pulse. That’s why I’m here, down on one knee, getting my pants soaked and asking for forever.” I shift my leg—that part wasn’t just me being funny, the grass really is wet. “Needless to say, I’ll always be here for you, woman, even when you interrupt me. I’ve loved you almost as long as I’ve known you, and I knew settling for a fake ring and playing house wouldn’t do. I figured out fast I needed to spend my life with you.”

“I never—”

“Let me finish, dammit,” I growl. She mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key. “I love you, Juniper Winkley. More than I ever thought I could love anybody in my life. Enough to believe love isn’t just this cruel obsession that wrecks a person the minute it’s snatched away. We’re here to love on borrowed time because that makes it so precious. And I don’t want to waste another minute without knowing you’ll be my wife. So, sweetheart, will you marry me?”

Breathless seconds crawl by as her hands shake over her mouth. She licks her lips.

“Of course,” she whispers. The tears spill over her cheeks as her voice gets louder. “You *know* I will, Dexter Rory. Don’t pretend you’re clueless.”

“Don’t give a damn what you call me. As long as you’re mine.”

I take the ring and slide it on her waiting finger, staring like a man admiring a work of art.

Just like before, it fits perfectly.

It looks like it belongs, never meant for anyone else.

“Oh my God. I missed it so much.” She gives out then, falling forward into my arms.

“I’m going to assume you mean ‘I love you’ and it’s not just the ring you’re excited about.”

“I love you, you lunk!” She giggles, catching my face and pulling it closer to hers. “I love you, I love you, *I love you.*”

When we kiss, it’s not the usual fireworks.

They’re still there, of course, just as intense as ever. I still want her more than I can breathe.

Only, in this moment with the ring’s coolness pressed against my cheek as she holds me, kissing her feels like coming home.

Like I could kiss this woman for the rest of my days and always find a new thrill on my tongue.

Her mouth curves under mine in an unending smile.

“I was starting to think you’d never ask,” she whispers. “I thought maybe you wanted to take things slow.”

“We did. We gave it four whole months after the fiasco. Practically half a year together, altogether. You remember how fast I proposed the first time?”

Grinning, she pulls away so I can see her roll her eyes. “The first time doesn’t count, Dex. It was business. This is the first and *only* time that matters, I think.”

“You need to stop talking, Sweet Stuff.” I kiss her again, sliding my hand into those gorgeous red curls. I know every inch of her, but I’ll never want to stop exploring. “This may be the only real proposal, but I’m glad as hell they were both with you.”

“Holy shit, are you kidding? They followed us?” She looks up abruptly, over my shoulder.

Behind me, there’s a frantic squeal.

I groan.

My mother, by the sounds of it, and I’d wager that second shriek behind her is probably Jo Winkley ripping her vocal cords.

“Did you plan this part too?” Junie breaks away with a reluctant smile.

“Everything except the screaming,” I tell her. “I asked them to keep it low-key.”

“You did it!” Mother flings her arms around my neck the second she catches up to us, smothering me in too much hair and perfume and cheek kisses. “Oh, Dexter! Oh, my baby boy, I’m so happy for you...”

At least I’m not alone.

When I look up, Junie’s nana holds her like she’s trying to smother her before the wedding day. I think Catness has it easier at bath time.

But she catches my eye over Jo’s shoulder and smiles at me, her eyes still glistening.

“I love you so much,” she mouths.

“Love you more, woman. Love you until the bitter end.”



## SWEET DREAMS (JUNIPER)



**G**etting married feels like falling into a dream.

One of those giddy fever dreams where everything happens without a hitch even when it feels like it shouldn't be possible.

It's November now. A mild autumn day by KC standards with a baby-blue sky and small puffy clouds like vanilla wisps.

The leaves have changed from yellow to deep red and mocha, while brassy debris piles over the grass like an ornate rug.

Lovely colors for a white wedding.

And what better way to celebrate than to walk right into forever with the man I'm trusting to lead us there?

"Are you cold, hon?" Nana whispers as we emerge from her car at the same cute park where Dexter proposed.

Only, today it's all decked out just for us.

Neat white rows of chairs line the way to an arch dripping flowers. Beyond that, there's the lake. It's a deep blue without the reflected leaves, pretty as crystal with its refracted sunlight.

"I'm fine," I tell her softly. "Is it even possible to be chilly on your wedding day?"

I'm serious. The high is like fifty degrees today and I don't feel a thing on my almost-bare shoulders under the papery shawl.

She gives me an adoring look that hurts my heart.

For just a second, I think she remembers a time when she was just as lovestruck and giddy as me.

Sighing, Nana slips her arm through mine.

Thank God we pulled this off while she's still here for me.

Once upon a time, I'd glumly imagined walking down the aisle alone and independent with a halfhearted wedding at forty, if I was lucky.

But this is infinitely better, and so much faster than anything I ever dreamed.

Obviously, it means the world to Nana, too. That fans my butterflies through the full spectrum of feelings, especially when she stops and looks at me with a twinkle of love.

"Annie would be so proud of you today," she whispers.

It's hard to keep walking after hearing my mom's name.

I won't cry.

Because we've practiced this walk a hundred times and I think I only burst into tears for half of them.

*Step together.*

*Together.*

*Right up to where he's waiting.*

Everyone turns to look at us as soon as we're in view, coming over the hill.

It's funny how movies and books always dictate how weddings should be this hyper-stressful affair, so much emotional sacrifice to win the happiest day of your life. But we were in perfect agreement when we decided we wouldn't be *that* couple.

We didn't want huge and traditional and expensive, even if money's no object for Dex.

We wanted special.

We wanted small.

We wanted *us*.

No gaggles of near-strangers and third cousins and distant acquaintances. We just needed the people who matter most.

And they look at me now, all the friends and family and people who've guided us through our lives.

Dexter's brothers are there in the front row, along with his nephew, Colt. Delly stands beside them, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

I look away before I get triggered and go to pieces, too.

No crying on my wedding day.

*I flipping promised.*

Then I look at Dexter and the rest of the world fades to black. Instant tunnel vision.

The rhythm of my feet slows to quicksand.

I want to run, to sprint, to throw myself into the arms of my almost-husband. But Nana's gentle grip holds me back, and I lift my chin as we walk past the rows of guests. The makeshift aisle rug thrown over the grass feels like velvet under my feet.

The air smells like flowers and perfume and just a hint of distant burning brush.

Closer, closer.

Dex picked a navy-blue seersucker suit that brings out the dusky glory of his eyes. The gold cuff links on his sleeves have been with the Rory men for three generations. He told me he'd be carrying on the tradition.

I'm wearing my mother's dress—altered, of course—an airy white minimalist gown folded over me like a crêpe.

A homage to what came before and the better future my mother lost.

To the past, the present, and the future that's still mine to make.

God, he's never looked more handsome. No exaggeration.



And I've never loved him as much as I do today, basking in the sweet, sweet glow, everything waiting for us in the long years to come.

I just hope I don't pass out first.

Fainting from sheer joy doesn't seem too bad, all things considered, but it would still be pretty embarrassing.

*Feet, don't fail me now.*

One halting step at a time, they bring me to the archway altar and the hottest man alive.

Nana gives me a parting bear hug. She's not so much giving me away as she is lingering in the life we shared, the way she finished bringing me up once my parents were gone.

Yes, it's bittersweet, knowing she's witnessing what she always hoped for, a wedding day my mother will never see.

"Love you, June bug," Nana whispers fiercely. Her eyes are wet and mine are brimming.

"I love you too, Nana," I say with a loud sniff.

Then she gives me one last kiss on the cheek and stands back.

Thankfully, Dexter takes my hand a second later as I step up beside him, facing the priest.

"Goddamn, Sweet Stuff. You look hot enough to plunge this park back into summer," he rumbles, oblivious to the priest hearing every word.

My face heats violently.

"Um, thanks. You're not so bad yourself."

"Pretty sure 'handsome' is the term you're looking for."

"I'll let your ego do the talking. Good thing you've got the looks to back it up," I tease.

Chuckling, he leans away.

That's my cue.

I slide my fingers through his and squeeze. It wouldn't be our wedding day if we didn't toss a little crap back and forth.

Since stepping back from the company—which happened immediately, true to his word—he's been a lot more relaxed. Way easier to joke around with.

I fell for the grumpy hardass, but getting to know Dexter the human being? The kindhearted man? That's been an absolute dream.

Now, he's the one pushing me to take some time away from the Sugar Bowl so we can enjoy our honeymoon, and he's right. It's closed today, though, and all my favorite people are here, watching me marry Big Fish.

I think I can already hear Emmy wailing in the distance.

"I love you, Dex," I whisper.

Dexter glances down with a smile just for me.

"I love you so much it hurts," he tells me, and together we face the priest again.

It's not a dream anymore.

It's achingly real.

Achingly wonderful.

Achingly *mine*.

Every promise we make underneath the big blue autumn sky.

Every inch he lifts me off my feet, swinging me up in his arms the instant the priest gives the go-ahead.

Every kiss we savor, giving the crowd a show they'll never forget as his lips and his eyes and the swaying trees leave me dizzy.



THE REST of the day comes on like a whirlwind.

Too fast to remember, and too incredible not to recall the smallest details in happy flashes.

The way Dexter slid the ring on my finger.

How Nana hugged him and how Delly hugged me, welcoming us into each other's family.

The kiss that left me spun out of my own skin and still craving more. I couldn't stand when he finally set me back down.

Our first dance, where I looked into Dexter's eyes while we both laughed too much, remembering our first awkward dance in his office.

A smirking glance from Patton tells us he remembers, too.

Then later, slipping away into the vintage getaway car waiting for us, still giggling like kids. There's no driver tonight.

I'm just grateful one of us stayed sober enough to manage the driving as Dex takes the wheel.

It's straight home to change and then to the airport, where a private jet waits for us with chilled champagne and a cozy bed to sleep off all the excitement until morning.

Though I'm not sure we'll catch much sleep.

The minute we're alone in the executive suite and the plane lifts above the clouds, he takes me straight to the mile high club.

And holy hell, *what a club*.

His hands roam my body, ripping off my clothes.

His tongue delves into my mouth in a primal dance that feels downright obscene.

His hands catch my panties and pull ferociously, and the instant I'm bare, his tongue brings every lewd promise he made through the reception to my thighs, torturing me until I'm biting my lip and *begging*.

"Dexter, please. Oh, shit. I can't—"

“Open your legs for me, sweetheart. Didn’t get more than a little steak and a sliver of cake at dinner for a reason. I saved my appetite.”

Oh, God, did he ever.

His tongue splits me open as his rough hands push my legs apart. He holds me open, his willing captive, while he devours my pussy like it’s his very last meal.

It’s a little insane how fast it hits.

Sheer ecstasy grabs me by the throat and slams me back down again, all barely stifled moans against my hand and trembling legs.

All fire—all just for him—and each lapping stroke of his tongue makes me burn hotter, coalescing in my core until there’s no holding it in.

*Coming!*

I see the stars out the window and then they’re in my eyes.

I see red, white, and bliss.

Then it’s just pure dark, hungry blue as I drown in his eyes, as he clasps my thighs and makes me ride his beard with all its delicious friction.

I’m a gasping mess when I’m finally back in my right mind again.

Just in time to see him naked and watching me with the hungriest eyes, his cock throbbing madly in his hand as he hovers over me, slowly stroking his cock.

“Dex,” I whisper, my face heating as he stares. “What are you doing?”

“Worshipping you. If I didn’t need this pussy so bad, I’d paint you head to fucking toe.” His fist quickens, gliding over his magnificent cock, and he tilts his head back with a low, feral groan.

Holy hell.

My fingernails brace against his abs, scratching their way down his torso.

He's so hard for me.

A man of stone, granite in body and soul, only coming undone when he tugs his cock like I'll always be his dirtiest fantasy.

I'm barely breathing as I watch him, panting and stricken.

And he must see the desperation in my eyes, the need to feel him inside me that eclipses the desire he's holding back.

"Please. Enough teasing tonight."

"That bad, huh?" he growls, touching the throbbing head of his cock to my clit.

I almost die right there, nodding fiercely.

"Thirty-three thousand feet and you're still not airborne. We need to fix that now. Legs open."

I'm moaning before he even pushes his swollen length to my entrance, still rubbing with brutish control, his eyes twin blue flames.

"Fuck, Junie. I'll always love how you feel on my dick." He pushes inside me in one long stroke that presses his balls to my ass.

And he's moving then, faster and harder with each stroke, taking me apart thrust by thrust.

Just before I come, I throw my arms around his neck, holding on so tight and catching one last glimpse of the sweet blue insanity in his eyes.

"Junie—fuck!" He chokes off with a final thrust that reaches my depths.

Then we're a clenching, gasping mess, finishing together in rapture.

I'm not sure when I fall asleep after tumbling down in his arms. We both catch a nap before the plane lands in Calgary and it's time to clean up and put ourselves back together.

Dexter picks up a rental car and drives us the last couple hours to Banff. We climb through the landscape until we reach the small town flanked by mountains and water so clear and peaceful it's breathtaking.

It's colder here, but I don't mind. Snow coats the landscape and clings to the hills like whipped cream.

"What's the verdict? Honeymoon worthy?" he asks. The cabin we've picked out is right at the edge of the town, shielded from civilization by the soaring trees.

Then we turn the corner and it comes into view.

I gasp.

"Oh, wow. The pictures didn't do it justice," I say. Most of the photos were taken during fall and summer, where the sun and trees set off the little wooden structure nicely. Now, it's a haven of winter solitude.

"Good thing we packed warm," he says.

"It looks so cozy."

Dexter parks out front and glances at me. "Happy honeymoon, Juniper Rory."

Laughing, I twist the ring around my third finger, reminding myself that's my name now.

"Happy honeymoon, Dex." I lean over to kiss him. His lips are warm and eager. "Let's get the hell inside. We've been on the road too long."

"Yeah. A little late for our wedding night," he says as we climb out of the car into the sudden chill. It bites my nose and flushes my cheeks. "How about a wedding morning?"

"If you mean ripping my clothes off, that depends if there's a fireplace." I grab my suitcase and haul it in.

Of course, there's an awesome fireplace.

It has the biggest hearth I've ever seen and it starts pumping toasty heat the second it's lit.

The interior looks earthy with splashes of red. The best fit for a Rory honeymoon.

Dexter lifts an eyebrow as he carries the last of our luggage into the bedroom, which has a monstrous bed that takes up half the room by itself.

“Does this suit you, duchess?”

I pretend to think, pressing a finger against my cheek as I look around. “Well, I suppose—”

He tackles me on the bed, pressing his cold nose against my neck until I squeal.

“That flight didn’t last nearly long enough,” he growls, his hips pushing mine into the bed. “*Far* too long to have to wait for my wife.”

“Say it again.” I bite my lip

“*My wife.*”

I slide my hands under his shirt.

No, I don’t care that we both probably need a shower and a long sleep after traveling.

He’s right here, all six foot something of him.

All mine, and that will always be enough.

“You can’t get rid of me now,” I say as I kiss him. “This is it. You’re trapped with me forever.”

“Who said I’m complaining?”

I kiss him harder, and he grinds against me, hinting what’s coming next.

Though the temptation is there to tear those clothes off, to feel his skin on mine, I force myself to slow down.

To work methodically, tracing every part of his body, running my nails over his tense muscles with slow, sensual pleas.

“Tease,” he grinds out.

“What’s the rush? We have all the time in the world.” I wrap my legs around his hips and push until he’s grinding against that sweet spot. The sudden rush of sensation makes me moan. “We don’t have to hurry...”

He nips my earlobe. “That doesn’t mean we have to go slow. Just means we can come up for air and fuck half the night.”

“Dex!”

He runs a hand under my top, across my stomach to the edge of my bra, then under it, palming my breast.

I arch my back into his hand and he laughs.

“Tell me you want to wait now,” he whispers, kissing down my neck. “Tell me and I will.”

It should be illegal for this man to make me feel this good.

I melt under his hands, his kisses, loose-limbed and eager for more.

As his mouth goes to work, he obliterates any rational thought.

“Go on,” he whispers, pulling on my nipple with his teeth.

The sensation arcs to the heat pooling in my core. I’m probably embarrassingly wet, but considering he feels almost painfully hard as he rubs against me, I don’t think it matters.

I grind my hips against him, groaning as I feel his hard-on. “Slow and steady wins the race.”

His other hand finds my other nipple, but instead of pulling on it like I want him to, he just trails his fingers around it.

My bra’s getting in the way—all our clothes, really—but to admit that would be admitting defeat.

He thrusts against me intently, and I tighten my legs around him.

God, if he keeps this up, I’m going to come before he even has me undressed.



“Junie,” he croons. “Think of the shit I could do to you without these pants.”

What? He’s doing plenty to me now.

And thinking is getting difficult.

The only thing I can focus on is what’s happening between my legs and the intense pulsing in my clit.

Maybe it’s because I’ve waited for this moment all day, or maybe it’s always like this when you’re newlyweds. But everything feels more intense, like my body is a live wire craving a current.

On second thought, Dex wins.

I don’t want to take my time.

I want to feel him inside me.

I want my husband *now*.

I yank his t-shirt up and he gets the memo, hauling it off and pulling my sweater away just as fast. A few seconds later and our clothes are heaped on the floor.

I grab him and pull him down on me.

“I want you,” I murmur, positioning myself so he’s right at my entrance. “Dex, please.”

“Now who’s eager?” He flicks his tongue over one nipple, then the other. They’re standing at attention, delightfully sensitive in the warm air. “Say please.”

“If I didn’t love you, I’d hate you right now.”

“Say ‘pretty please,’ wife. Beg for my cock.”

Oh, I love the sound of that. It’s almost as hot as the way our bodies are joining right now.

I don’t wait for him, though.

I pull him closer. I’m so wet he pushes in with one stroke.

“I’m your wife,” I tell him. “And I want you to fuck me.” I wait just long enough for the amusement to flicker in his eyes. “Please. Pretty please.”

He moves, swiveling his hips, sinking deeper.

The moan that spills out of me echoes through the cabin.

“Let it go, sweetheart. There’s no one around,” he says as he settles his body fully over mine. “Make as much noise as you want. The louder the better.”

We fall into a familiar rhythm, and I arch my back into his hands at my breasts.

This time, it feels different—charged with emotion and this special intensity that draws me to the edge faster than usual.

The tension, the tightness, the pleasure, the steady drumming of his thrusts carry me higher until I’m about to snap.

My legs are shaking, desperately clutching his sides as he picks up speed.

“That’s it. That’s fucking it,” he urges. His voice is clipped, too, grating with the same urgency that’s driving me crazy. Husband and wife. Married and mated. “Come for me, Junie. Come now.”

It’s almost embarrassing how well he has me trained.

I shatter apart on his words as he plunges deep.

As I squeeze around him, as my soul blows apart, he finishes too, heaving white-hot fire into my depths with his face screwed up and one animalistic growl after the next tearing from his throat.

When we collapse on the bed together, I’m boneless.

Later, we’ll explore every room in this place, christen every surface, but for now it’s enough that we’re in bed, tangled together with his breath flowering across my damp skin.

Husband and wife.

Consummated.

Spent.

But still so full.

“Junie, look,” he whispers, his voice torn as he gently turns my face. “It’s snowing.”

I glance out the window to see big fluffy flakes spinning through the air.

Soon, our tire tracks will be smeared away, replaced by a fresh coat of pristine white.

A new season.

A new beginning.

I kiss him, long and slow and deep.

“Here’s to us, Mr. Rory,” I whisper against his lips.

“To today and the rest of our lives.” His thumb swipes over my cheek like he’s ready to catch tears, but there are none today.

He’s made me so happy I may never cry again.

For a second, I wonder if this is even real or if I’ll wake up in my ratty apartment again, Catness licking my face instead of my husband’s kisses.

*It’s not a dream, I decide as I rest my head against his shoulder. Dreams always end, but this is just the first night.*

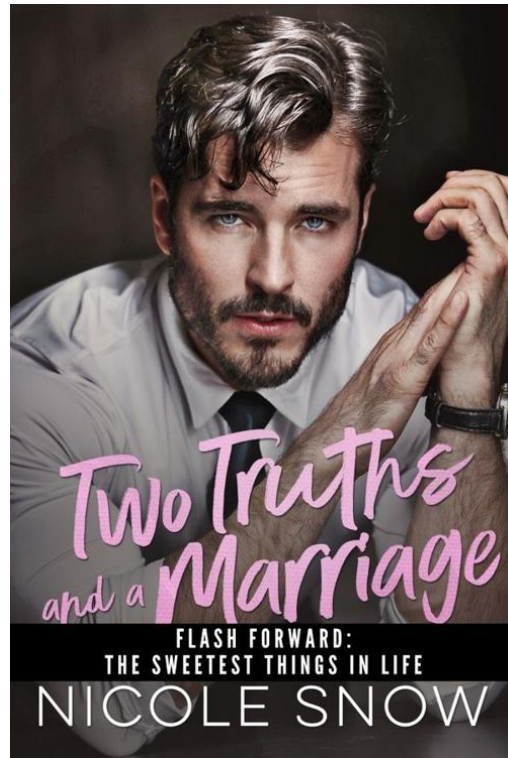
*This is the deepest truth.*

*As long as I’m with him—as long as I’m a Rory—I’ll never ask for anything more from a man who’s delivered the entire world.*



**THANKS FOR READING *Two Truths and a Marriage!* Look for more from the Rory brothers coming soon.**

Need to know what happens after the honeymoon? Find out how much sweeter life is together for the Rory family, fresh with new surprises.



Check out this [special flash forward story here.](https://dl.bookfunnel.com/s162cx7x0b) - <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/s162cx7x0b>

Then read on for a preview of another steamy rom-com packed with grumpy sunshine goodness when Dakota crashes Lincoln's world—and all over a freaking cinnamon roll—in One Bossy Proposal!

# ONE BOSSY PROPOSAL PREVIEW

## While I Pondered (Dakota)

The spring sun shines down on Seattle like a sword aimed at my own personal gloom.

I'm sad and hungry—a dangerous combination.

It's been a year to the day since I buried my heart—and the utter scumbag who dragged it through the mud, doused it in kerosene, and burned it to a blackened crisp—and it feels like an eternity.

Some things, you only sort of get over.

Some things, you don't forget.

*Hold the pity party, Dakota. You're better off without him. You're a thousand miles from home, smack in the middle of a whole new life, I tell myself.*

Eyeballing the gluttonous offerings in the bakery case helps.

It's true. I have rebuilt. Kind of.

I left that small-town dreariness and its regrets behind. I have an interview next week for a job that slaps, and if I don't get it, I'll keep applying until I land something with big-girl pay and a real opportunity to flex my writing muscles.

Without my great escape last summer in a halo of tears, I wouldn't be here in Seattle, practically *drooling* at the sugar-rich delicacies that all seem to have my name on them.

I'd have less time to focus on my writing, too, and I'd still be interning in that one-room closet masquerading as a marketing agency.

Yay, heartbreak.

Yay, Jay Foyt.

His stupidity gave me a whole new life.

“You hungry or did you just come here to admire the goods? Can I get you something?” The barista appears behind the bakery case with a girlish laugh.

“Huh? Oh, sorry—” *Dammit, Dakota, get out of your head.* “Can I get a Regis roll and a small caramel nirvana latte?”

“Coming right up!” She smiles and uses tongs to grab a huge cinnamon roll drizzled in icing. It's so fat I think it crosses time zones. “Lucky lady, you got the last one today! We're a little short. Cinnamon shortage in the morning shipment—go figure.”

Lucky me.

If only my luck with pastries would rub off on other things. Like winning lottery tickets or cigar-chomping big shots in publishing ready to snap up my poetry. I'd even settle for a decent Tinder date who doesn't have a fuckboy bone in his body.

Nope. I'm asking for too much.

Today, Lady Luck grants bargain wishes. She delivers the very last mound of sticky cinnamon sweetness in the case and point-three more pounds on my thighs.

I mean, it's a start, right?

I move to the cash register and pay.

“Glad I got mine before you ran out,” I say, swiping my card. “I'll be sure to savor the flavor—”

“What do you mean you're out?” a deep voice thunders behind me. “I've been here at exactly this time three times a week since Christmas. You're never *out*.”

Holy crap.

And I thought I was having a bad day...

I look back toward the bakery case to see what kind of ogre crawled out of his swamp to rant and rave over a missing cinnamon roll.

“Sorry, sir. The lady in front of you just bought the last roll,” the barista says, wearing a placating frown. “There’s a bit of a weird cinnamon shortage going around—”

“Are you telling me there isn’t another goddamned Regis roll in the entire shop?” The man is tall, built, and entirely pissed off.

“Er, no. Like I said...cinnamon shortage.” Barista girl flashes a pained smile. “The early bird got the worm, I’m afraid. If you’d like to try again tomorrow, we’ll save one for you.”

Barista girl nods at me matter-of-factly.

The ogre turns, whips his head toward me, and glares like his eyes are death rays.

Red alert.

So, he might be just as bad-tempered as the average ogre, but in the looks department, this guy is the anti-Shrek. If the green guy had abs that could punish and tanned skin instead of rocking his Brussels sprout glow, he might catch up to Hot Shrek in front of me.

My breath catches in my chest.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen eyes like amber whiskey, flashing in the morning light.

If he weren’t snarling like a rabid wolverine, he *might* be hotter than the toasty warm roll in my hand. The coolness of his eyes contrasts deliciously with dark hair, a furrowed brow, a jaw so chiseled it shames mere mortals.

He might be in his early thirties. His face looks young yet experienced.

The angles of that face match the cut of his body. He's toned like a former quarterback and dressed like he just walked off the set of *Suits*.

He is a Gucci-wrapped cocktail handcrafted for sin.

Every woman's dark vampire fantasy come to life—or maybe just mine.

When you're a Poe—distant, *distant* relation to Edgar Allan—it comes with the territory.

I definitely wonder if he woke up with a steaming mug of rudeness this morning to plaster that scowl on his face.

I'm starting to notice a pattern in this city. What is it with Seattle minting grumps who look like sex gods?

Is it something in the rain?

Worse, he towers over me, the picture-perfect strongman with a chip on his shoulder that entitles him to roar at the world when it doesn't fall down at his feet.

Although he's annoyingly gorgeous, and his suit probably costs half my yearly salary, I wonder. What gets a man this fire-breathing pissed over missing his morning sugar high?

Sure, I'll be the first to admit that Regis rolls are almost worth losing your mind over. *Almost*.

While Hades stares, I roll my eyes back at him and follow the curve of the counter to wait for my drink.

Precious distance.

After grumbling for a solid minute, he swipes his card like a dagger at the cash register and follows me around the counter.

Uh-oh.

Surely, he's not going to confront me.

He *wouldn't*.

Oh, but he's right next to me now.

Still glaring like I murdered his firstborn.



He pulls out his wallet, opens it, and plucks out a crisp bill, shoving it at me like it's on fire.

"Fifty dollars," Hot Shrek growls.

"Come again?"

"Fifty bucks. I'll pay you five times its value for the trouble."

"What?" I blink, hearing the words but not comprehending them.

He points to the white paper bag in my hand holding my little slice of heaven. "Your Regis roll, lady. I'll buy it off you."

"Wait, you just...you want to buy my cinnamon roll that bad?"

"Isn't that what I just said? And it's a *Regis roll*," he corrects sharply. "You know, the kind worth dying over? The original recipe cooked up in Heart's Edge, Montana, and approved by a scary burned guy who's been all over the national media and keeps getting cameos in movies?"

I laugh. That's exactly what Sweeter Grind's ads promise about the otherworldly Regis roll, a creation of Clarissa and Leo Regis, two small-town sweet shop owners made famous by some crazy drama a few years back.

"*Never mind*," he snaps. "You want to make this sale or what?"

"You should do commercials," I tell him with a huff. "Is that what this is? Some strange guerrilla marketing thing?"

I hold my breath. At least that would explain Mr. GQ Model going absolutely ballistic over something so trivial.

Also, it's the one-year anniversary of the most humiliating day of my life.

I need this roll like I still need to believe there's a shred of goodness in this world. What kind of psycho tries to buy someone's cinnamon roll off them for five times the price, anyway?

“Do I look like a comedian?” he snarls, his eyes rolling.  
“Fifty dollars. Easy money. Trade.”

“Dude, you’re insane,” I whisper back.

“Dudette,” he barks back, slightly more frantic. “I assure you, I am not. I need that roll, and I’m willing to pay you generously. I trust you need the money more than I do.”

I scoff at him so hard my face hurts.

*Rub it in, why don’t you? I guess I should up and be amazed you’re deigning to talk to us ‘little people,’ your pastry-obsessed highness.*

“It must be nice, oh Lord of the Pastries. What do I get for an apple pie? A laptop?” I shake my head.

His *done-with-your-bullshit* glare intensifies.

“Dakota!” A male barista calls my name and plunks my drink on the counter.

Awesome. There’s my cue to exit this asylum and head back to the springtime sanity outside where birds tweet and flowers bloom and nobody goes to war over cinnamon shortages.

I grab my drink and start for the door.

“Wait!” Hot Shrek calls. “Dakota.”

*Ughhh.*

My name shouldn’t sound so deliciously rough on a man’s lips. Especially not a man offering exorbitant sums to strangers for their baked goods.

Knowing I’ll regret this, I stop and meet his eyes.

“What?” I clip.

“We haven’t finished.”

“Right. Because there’s no deal,” I snap, turning again.

Okay. Before, I was just looking forward to stuffing my face with sticky goodness. Now, I *need* this flipping cinnamon roll like oxygen.

If I spite the hottest freak who crawled out of the ogre swamp, I'll have something to laugh about later.

True to the promise I made the barista, I'll savor the flavor while wallowing in a little less of my own misery and reminding myself I'm living a better life now—which apparently includes handsome stalkers begging to throw cash at me.

“Wait. I need it more than you do. I swear,” he says harshly, grabbing my shoulder and spinning me around.

I bat his hand away, doubly annoyed and taken aback.

“You're insane. Touch me again and I'll press charges for robbery. It's a cinnamon roll, dude. Calm down and come back tomorrow when they're replenished.” I panic chug my latte and walk out the door.

Hot Stalker Shrek is undaunted.

He trails me outside as I stroll into the Seattle sunshine, taking a deep breath.

“Seventy-five!” he calls after me.

“What?”

“Seventy-five dollars.”

“Um, no.” I speed walk to the bike rack and unlock my wheels with one hand, balancing the Regis roll and the latte in the other.

“One hundred dollars even,” he belts after me.

Holy Moses. How high will he go?

“One fifty!” he calls two seconds later.

There goes my jaw, crashing to the pavement.

A chill sweeps through me. I'm worried we're leaving eccentric waters for clinically crazy.

Part of me wants to keep him talking just so he doesn't carry me off to his evil lair. I imagine a storage shed stacked to the ceiling with crumpled cinnamon roll boxes.

“Did you really just offer me a hundred and fifty dollars for a cinnamon roll?” I place the latte in a cup holder on my handlebar and climb on the bike.

He gives me an arctic look, like he knows he’s got me now and I’ve already accepted his bizarro deal.

“You’re welcome. You can Uber and still have a nice chunk of change.”

I scan him up and down, purposely glancing at his polished leather shoes a second too long. In another time and place, I’d take a nice big sip of my latte and spray it on his shoes but... that’s not how I roll.

I have my dignity. I plan to have a little more of it when I’m safely away from here, too.

“This may come as a shock, but not all of us worship money, King Midas,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he says with a snort, squaring his hulking shoulders.

“You’re a nutter. Like actually insane.” My eyes flick to his wrists for good measure, legit wondering if I’ll see a hospital band.

“I am not. Have you ever tasted a Regis roll? Seattle’s top food critic described them as—what was it? A category ten mouth-gasm?”

My lips twitch. I try like hell not to burst out into a blushing laugh.

“Man, I am *not* discussing mouth-gasms with you,” I say.

“You’re missing the point,” he says sharply. “Help me and help yourself, Miss Dakota. We never have to see each other again and you’ll be three hundred dollars richer.”

“Three...hundred?” I say slowly, my mouth falling open.

“You heard me.” His eyes flash with hope and triumph, and he starts reaching for his wallet.

*Stay strong.*

*Invisible crucifix.*

*Latte holy water.*

*Do not be tempted by Lucifer.*

“See, you’re not making your case. Just further proving your insanity.” I eye him warily. Maybe there’s some wild story behind how he stole this suit and he really did just escape some mental institution.

That would be the most believable explanation for what’s happening.

Honestly, a lot less scary than thinking guys who look like billionaires want to spend their time reverse robbing strangers for their pastries.

“Five hundred dollars, damn you,” he rumbles. “Final offer.”

My jaw detaches from my face.

*Five hundred flipping smackers?*

That’s more than my student loan payment this month. Almost half my rent. I’m tempted to sign my soul away, but my fingers clench the bag tighter, demanding me to be brave.

*Not today, Coffee Shop Satan.*

A smile that’s almost comically pleading pulls at his lips.

Damn. Somehow, he’s even hotter when he smiles and makes those puppy dog eyes. A face like his should come with a warning.

“I see that got your attention,” he whispers.

“Did it?”

“Your mouth dropped,” he says, making me keenly aware his gaze is fixed on my lips. I don’t even know what to do with that.

He closes the space between us and reaches for my bag, trying to get the drop on me.

“Hey—no! I told you it’s not happening, crazypants.” I don’t like the way he so casually invades my space. I also have

a pesky habit of not taking a single speck of crap from anyone.

Especially this past year.

But there's also this tiny thought nibbling at the back of my brain that screams this man is no different from Jay.

Just richer, stronger, better-looking, and possibly more arrogant.

Keeping this Regis roll out of his grubby paws is a little win for Dakota Poe against mankind. Against every swinging dick who brandishes his selfish ego like a club.

"I'm perfectly sane. I simply need that roll, and I can't walk away empty-handed," he tells me.

"Y'know, I woke up inspired to write today. But I wasn't planning on getting real-world inspiration shoved in my face from someone so ridiculous."

"I have no idea what the hell that means, but I need the roll and you need money. Do we have a deal?"

"Why am I not surprised you can't follow simple English? Are you one of those guys who paid five hundred dollars for some poor geek to boost your grades too?"

He glares at me like an angry bull.

"Watch your step, Big Mouth. You know nothing about me. Let's make a trade and be on our merry way for the sake of our blood pressure." He gives me a slow, assessing look, his eyes sliding up my body with a weight that makes me shiver. "You're on a bike. Don't tell me you couldn't use a few hundred bucks."

"Orrr I could be so loaded I run a green power company and need to look the part," I throw back. "Plus, biking helps blow off some steam. You should try it sometime."

Scowling, he grabs at my white paper bag again.

I shift away at the last second, slapping his big hand away.

Yeah, I've had it.

Narrowing my eyes, I glare back at him, reach into the bag, and pull out the warm roll. In slow motion, I bite off a massive chunk.

I chew it as loudly as I can, smacking my lips like war drums.

The most mouth-gasmic “*Mmmmm-mmm-mmmm!*” I’ve ever mustered in my life rips out of me.

Then I drop the bite-marked roll back into the bag, lick my fingers, and wipe my hands unceremoniously on the front of my jeans.

“See? Not everything is for sale. No deal.”

God.

I’ve seen my share of selfish men, but this one takes the cake—or rather, he doesn’t take the cinnamon roll I won’t let him have. The tantrum brewing in his face when I make it crystal clear he’s not getting this roll would scare the best kindergarten teacher pale.

His jaw clenches.

His bearish brown eyes become brighter, hotter, *louder*. I can hear them cursing me seven ways from Sunday.

It’s not fair.

When he’s majorly pissed off, he’s a hundred times hotter than he was at first glance.

His eyes drop to my lips and linger for a breathless second.

His gaze feels so heavy I hug myself, trying to hide from the intensity of his scorned-god look that feels like it could turn me into a salt pillar.

I want to say something, to break the acid silence with a joke, but I’m not sure it’s possible.

Should I remind him he’s an entitled douchebag?

That he’s pretty freaking lucky I didn’t spit fifty bucks’ worth of roll at his stupid grumpy face?

It doesn’t matter, though.

I don't have time to come up with the perfect f-you before he's turning his massive back to me and stomping off, muttering quietly.

He rounds the corner of the coffee shop and keeps going without a single look back.

Jeez Louise. Shouldn't a guy with that much money and even more ego have a ride?

Whatever.

Not my problem.

I need to get to work.

Rent won't wait for my one-year anniversary personal hell, or encounters with strange men who get in my face about giant pastries.

I take off for the office with three quarters of my Regis roll remaining. I'll enjoy it for its baked perfection, but keeping the precious cargo from Hot Shrek gives me just as many endorphins as the sugar rush.

Captain McGrowly and his mantrum pissed me off so much that I pedal like my life depends on it. I reach the office with time to spare, devouring all the frosted cinnamon goodness before I force myself to deal with the rat race inside.

*Just a few more weeks and you'll be out of here. You've got big plans. You can do this.*

Later, I repeat the mantra over and over when someone who earns twice my salary makes a mistake that throws the whole project into chaos.

Typical day at my overworked, underpaid copywriting position.

I'm at work past sunset in a desperate bid to fix it.

I wish Cinnamon Roll Luck and the high of my little victory would've lasted longer.

Instead, I'm back in my craptacular reality where the only poetry I write is an ode in sweat to fixing everybody else's problems.



**Want to read more? Get One Bossy Proposal HERE.**

# ABOUT NICOLE SNOW

Nicole Snow is a *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She found her love of writing by hashing out love scenes on lunch breaks and plotting her great escape from boardrooms. Her work roared onto the indie romance scene in 2014 with her Grizzlies MC series.

Since then Snow aims for the very best in growly, heart-of-gold alpha heroes, unbelievable suspense, and swoon storms aplenty.

Already hooked on her stuff? [Sign up for her newsletter here](#) for exclusive offers and more from your favorite characters!

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Thanks for reading. And please remember to leave an honest review! Nothing helps an author more.

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