

NATALIE ANN

USA Today Bestselling Author



Angels Above

Paradise
Place

ANGELS ABOVE

NATALIE ANN

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Author's Note

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BLURB

Cal Perkins lost his parents at a young age forever altering his outlook on life. All he's ever wanted to do was make them proud and that guides all his decisions. It might be why he is still single because it feels as if nothing he does is really for him, yet he'll never let anyone know.

When Mia Finley graduated from law school, her hopes and aspirations were to save the world. But years into her career, she's burned out and her dreams are slowly being drained. She relocates closer to family and starts over with her self-confidence at an all-time low. Until she meets a man that has every reason to hate life and yet embraces it. Or so he was trying to show the world. But she learns fast that sometimes you need help to heal old wounds, something the two of them are going to have to navigate together.

PROLOGUE

“I’ll see you when I get home,” Lynn Perkins said.
“I’ve got to work,” Cal said.

At seventeen he had a part-time job stocking shelves at the grocery store. When he turned eighteen his father was going to get him a job at a liquor store doing the same. A buddy of his father’s owned the business and needed the help as he was getting up there in age.

“Then I’ll see you when you get home,” his mother said. “I’m going to try to finish my Christmas shopping, then we can decorate the house later.”

He snorted. His mother was always into the Christmas spirit. He went along with it because it made her happy, but he’d long since outgrown helping her decorate for the holiday.

“Sure,” he said. “We can do that.”

She smiled at him. One of those that told him she knew he was doing it for her. “You’re a good kid, Cal. I know you’d rather go out with your friends. What time do you get out of work?”

He looked at his watch. It was nine in the morning and he was leaving in ten minutes. “I’ll be out at three,” he said.

“I’ll make sure I’m home before that. We’ll decorate and I’ll have spaghetti and meatballs for dinner because it’s your favorite and then you can go do what you want the rest of the night.”

He grinned. “The whole night?”

“You have a curfew,” she reminded him.

He put his sneakers on and grabbed his name tag to pin to his shirt. “Not much longer,” he said.

“Just because you’ll be eighteen in a few months doesn’t mean you don’t get a curfew,” she said. “You live under this roof and you know your father and I give you freedom, but we still like to know when you’ll be home.”

His father was a detective with the Colonie Police Department. It’s not like he’d ever been able to get away with much in his life. Everyone around here knew him. Or if they didn’t, they knew Jack Perkins, and they asked if he was his father.

Cal wasn’t out causing trouble anyway and knew enough not to. He’d never want his parents to think poorly of him. He never wanted to be a disappointment as their only child when he’d heard more than once they’d wanted a big family but just didn’t get that wish.

“I know,” he said. “I’ve heard it all before.” He leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. “Bye, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said. He walked out the door knowing that his mother was most likely going to get him the new gaming system he wanted for Christmas.

It was the only thing he’d asked for and he knew it was expensive, but he never asked for much and they normally tried to get him what he wanted.

His friends had all been saying how hard it was to get the system, but his mother had a way of finding things or getting the deals.

If she wasn’t able to get it, he wouldn’t act disappointed. He’d be fine with it and wait until he could buy it himself when it was more readily available.

He was laid back enough for those things even when a lot of his friends weren’t.

He got to work and punched in, went to the back to find out what he had to do and got busy.

Two hours later, he was laughing with his coworkers while they were loading up the dolly to bring to the store and start stocking more things when he looked up and saw his father next to the store manager.

“Hey, Dad. What’s going on?”

“We need to leave,” his father said. “It’s your mother.”

“What happened to her?” he asked. He felt light headed and sucked in some air fast. His father didn’t get rattled often in life and he could see now that was the case. From the clenched fists to the pale complexion. He felt himself mirroring it.

“I’ll tell you on the way to the hospital,” his father said. “We need to

leave now.”

“I punched you out,” the store manager said. “Go.”

The tone of voice from the store manager told him that everyone seemed to know what was going on but him.

He nodded his head and walked out with his father, saw the police car with the lights flashing parked in front of his father’s truck.

When he got in the truck, the police car took off and his father followed. They were getting an escort and moving through town fast.

“Dad, what is going on?”

“You’re mother’s been shot,” his father said.

“Shot! She was going Christmas shopping,” he said. “How can that be?”

His stomach hit the floor and he felt as if he was going to pass out. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He needed to stay strong for his father. The man who protected him and his mother. Always.

“I don’t know all the details,” his father said. “We’ll get more information later. I only care about your mother. Just know, Cal. It’s not good. You’re old enough to understand that and be told.”

The fact they were racing through the town and running streetlights while he held onto the door with a white-knuckle grip should have been answer enough that was the case.

“Is she going to die?” he asked quietly.

His father didn’t turn to look at him, but Cal saw the tear rolling down the big man’s cheek. “I don’t know. But we have to be braced for that possibility.”

They got to Albany Medical Center in record time, his father leaving his truck and keys with the valet at the entrance as the two of them raced in.

It didn’t matter though.

They were too late.

They got to the front desk, gave their names and then were escorted to a private room where a doctor came in and delivered the news.

Somehow Christmas shopping turned into the end of his mother’s life and Cal wasn’t sure how his world would ever be right again.

OUTSIDE OF THINGS

Sixteen Years Later

“HEY, CAL,” Brian Dawson said when he walked into his lawyer’s office mid-September. “What brings you in today?”

“Sorry to drop in like this,” Cal said. “I was driving by and thought I’d see if you were available. If not, I’ll just leave the information with Beth.”

He was surprised to see Brian standing at the front desk talking to the receptionist. He couldn’t remember her name. Normally he only dealt with Brian or Beth, the paralegal.

“I’m available,” Brian said. “Come into my office.”

Cal moved past the front desk and went to Brian’s office. He’d been coming here for years for his legal affairs. Brian and he went to school together. They weren’t close like best friends tended to be back then or even now.

As adults, he’d call Brian one of his close friends, but he wasn’t sure he had a best friend in his life. Not someone he told everything to, but Brian was damn near close to it.

“I’m buying another house,” Cal said.

“I figured you were buying something,” Brian said. “Normally it’s not selling.”

“Nope,” he said. Cal owned several businesses and rental properties. He was always adding to it but rarely sold any. Maybe because it seemed like all

his investments did well and there was no reason for it.

“Tell me about this house,” Brian said, leaning back in his chair.

“Three-family house in Albany. A nice rental unit. It’s already got tenants on the first floor. The other two floors are empty, as they moved out when the house went up for sale. It will give me time to do some work inside before I find renters.”

“You’ll have no problem finding renters in this market.”

“I’ve got a list of names already of those looking,” he said.

Many knew he had rental properties. Cal was a good and fair landlord. He had enough employees and was well known in the area. Someone was always reaching out to him, if not an employee, then a customer. Oftentimes people came to him when they were selling something too.

He started a list years ago, and when he had an opening, he’d just reach out to one of them first and was always full.

“Even better,” Brian said. “It’s like you’ve got the golden touch when it comes to money.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he said. “I just can’t see myself sitting at a desk or putting a suit on like some people.”

Brian laughed. “Not many do see you that way.”

Guess when you were on the outside of things you tended to notice more.

Or maybe so much had happened to him at a young age that he was always looking out for what would be next.

He’d been blindsided enough in his life.

“Nothing wrong with that,” he said, grinning.

“Nope. You don’t need to wear a suit to be successful,” Brian said. “You manage to juggle more ventures than anyone I know.”

“It keeps me busy,” he said. “Speaking of busy, how are your wife and daughter doing? Harper is two, right?”

“Both are doing great,” Brian said. “Yes, Harper is two. My wife is moving a little slow in the mornings, but that is normal.”

He got a huge smile on his face. “Is Robin expecting again?”

“She is,” Brian said. “She’s due the end of February. Robin and I haven’t said much because we wanted to wait to get past her brother’s wedding which was last Saturday.”

“It’s nice to have so much family around.”

Not anything he had in his life anymore.

If he was jealous of what Brian had, he kept it to himself.

Cal wasn't one to open up that much about his personal life. Not the private things like his feelings or emotions.

He was better off putting a smile on his face and shooting the shit with people.

Life was easier that way.

"It is," Brian said.

"I won't keep you too long," he said. "I know you're busy. I'll shoot you an email with the information on the house. I've got a meeting in an hour to look at a pub and brewery next."

"Do you ever slow down?" Brian asked, shaking his head. "Tell me about that."

"I've got nothing else going on in my life," Cal said. "Might as well fill it with this. You'll still be working at sixty and I won't have to do much other than let everything generate money for me."

Brian laughed. "You know as well as I do that isn't true. You'll never stop working because you'd be bored not socializing with people. Sometimes I think you talk more than most women I know."

He laughed. "That Irish gene from my mother."

"Your father too," Brian said. "Everyone knew and loved your dad."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "They did. Guess I've got them to thank for where I am in life."

Not that he wanted to lose his father either, but life didn't always go the way you wanted.

His parents had set him up for life without even knowing they were doing it.

He just hoped to hell that his parents were looking down on him and were proud of what he'd made of himself.

"I'm sure they are thrilled if they are watching, and you know if there is a way for that, it's happening," Brian said, almost as if he were reading Cal's thoughts. "They both would have loved everything you're doing. How is your grandfather?"

"He's great," he said. "He doesn't slow down much either."

"Still working at the liquor store?" Brian asked.

"Always. I told him he didn't need to, but he said he can't stand sitting home and daytime TV sucks. He enjoys it and it gives him something to do."

He made sure his grandfather didn't do anything more than sit on his stool, watch the TV playing in the corner and wait on customers as they

checked out. Or maybe walked them around and gave them recommendations.

His grandfather worked whatever shifts he wanted and enjoyed it. Cal couldn't ask for much more than that from his only remaining family in the area.

"Good for him," Brian said. "So, the pub?"

"I'm meeting with a guy that has a small pub in Clifton Park. He's been brewing his own beer for a year or so and selling it at the pub. He wants to expand and start bottling and doing kegs. Keeping it local for now in terms of distribution. He needs money for that next step. He buys his liquor from me, so we've known each other for years. I think it's worth looking into."

"You must keep your accountant very busy," Brian said, grinning.

"And then some. First step is understanding what Neil, the owner, is looking to do and if I agree with the approach. I'm going to want some of his pub and he might not agree to that."

"Ahh," Brian said. "Good move."

"I know the pub is cash-flow positive. I need some of that stake."

Cal might only have a two-year degree, but that was by choice. He had a business mind and he was putting it to use. Two more years of school wasn't going to change the goals he had in life and he was just ready to get moving on it.

"You know what you're doing," Brian said. "Oh, hey, Mia. Come in here." Cal turned his head to see an attractive brunette walk forward. She had a briefcase in her hand. His eyes landed on her black pumps, then moved up her legs to the black skirt, blue button-down shirt tucked in, and a black jacket over it, unbuttoned and landing at her waist. "Cal Perkins, this is Mia Finley. She's my newest attorney in the office."

Mia walked forward. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"You too," he said. "Finley. Hmmm, that name sounds familiar. Any relation to Caden?"

Her lips moved in a huge smile. "That would be my brother. How do you know him? Or are you one of his clients, in which case, no need to tell me that."

"I don't live that far from him. Everyone kind of knows everyone else in Paradise Place."

"Actually," Brian said, "if you're good with it, Cal, I'll have Mia handle your house closing. I'd like her to get up to speed with your businesses. This

way you've got access to both of us if something comes up last minute."

He kept his smile in place. He'd have no problem spending time with the sexy attorney. "Works for me," he said.

"Good," Brian said.

Cal stood up. "And I know you're both busy, so I'll let you get to work. I've got to hit the road to make my meeting anyway."

"I'm sure you'll let me know how it works out," Brian said.

"Of course," he said and walked to his truck.

He noticed the BMW not far away and wondered if that was Mia's car. It suited her.

Not him. He was who he was and even though Mia caught his eye, he was a pretty simple man.

Fancy women didn't get him. They wanted him for what he had but then it wore off fast.

His life wasn't about rubbing elbows with the rich in suits, but more about the working man who was humble and understood the value of hard work to get where they were.

So though she was sweet on the eyes, he didn't think they'd have much in common.

Not sure why he was even thinking that and shook his head to go about his day.

Better to focus on what he could control than what-ifs or things that would never come about.

FULFILLMENT SHE CRAVED

“If you’ve got a minute,” Brian said. “Have a seat and I’ll fill you in on Cal and his many business ventures. You can let me know how court went too.”

“I’ve got time,” Mia said, setting her briefcase down. She was hungry, but she’d get a chance to eat at her desk in a few minutes.

She was used to being on the run going from one client to the next.

The fact that in the months she’d been here she’d been able to actually eat at her desk and not in her car or rushing between clients coming into appointments in her tiny office was a big improvement.

“Start with court.”

“It went well,” she said. “It’s so nice to have paying clients. Though they still argue, I’m finding they tend to listen when their money is on the line.”

Brian laughed at her. “Very true.”

“Patty and Greg didn’t fight this time, but I think that had more to do with me sitting down with Greg and telling him to let me do the talking.”

“Divorces are hard things when there is a lot at stake.”

“He’s fighting the alimony. He doesn’t feel he needs to make payments that high. I told him he might not get that wish. He’s fine with the child support.”

Her client was a doctor and his soon-to-be ex-wife had been a stay-at-home wife and mom for ten years. She was used to a certain lifestyle and though there was no way that Greg was going to support two households and Patty was going to have to get a job, she wouldn’t make as much as what she’d been used to having.

Their kids were six and eight and child support would end at eighteen with Greg paying for college. He wasn't arguing any of that either.

"Sounds like he loves his kids."

"He does," she said. "He'd like to have split custody which would cut the support down, but he understands that his job would make that hard. He'd be paying a nanny or imposing on family while the kids were young. At the end of court he told me he was positive Patty was cheating on him and wants to know if it would make a difference."

"Are you just hearing this?" Brian asked.

"Yes. I'm going to look into it. He said he has had his suspicions but now found out a few things."

"What things?" Brian asked. "I know you aren't used to these kinds of cases. We've got a PI on retainer if you need to utilize him. Make sure that Greg is aware of that."

"I was thinking the same thing. No, I'm not used to these kinds of divorces and it's a relief, to be honest. At least I know the kids are being cared for. That's important."

She'd spent most of her career in Philly as an attorney for a not-for-profit. She had more clients than she had time for and no one she could dedicate the proper amount of energy to.

Mia had been burning out mentally and physically. It was not how she saw herself when she went to law school and thought she could help people and advocate for the underprivileged.

She found it wasn't fulfilling and kept her fingers crossed that working for Brian would still give her the gratification she craved.

So far, it had been.

"It is," Brian said. "No regrets coming here?"

"None," she said. "I'm busy. I love it. But I don't feel like I can't take thirty minutes to fully eat my lunch without it going cold."

"That's good to hear. No reason to get burned out."

"Like you were?" she asked.

She knew that was why he hired her. That he'd started his own firm years ago and it was just him and two paralegals and an office assistant.

But months ago, his wife, Robin, had been in the animal shelter working with her sister when Morgan mentioned Mia was looking at moving here. Robin had commented that Brian wanting to hire another attorney but was being very selective.

One thing led to another and here she was.

It was important to her to be by her sister, who she missed deeply.

Her brother too, but she and Morgan had always been close.

Her nephew had been born in June. Caden and his wife were over the moon. Her niece was born six weeks ago to Morgan and Cooper, who were on cloud nine.

She wanted to be around to spend time with the newest additions to the family.

She wanted to babysit on the weekends for them.

She wanted to cuddle with the babies when she was having a bad day.

So far living here, she hadn't had one bad day, and she still got her cuddles in.

"I was," Brian said. "And I knew we were trying for another baby so the timing was perfect. I'm still busy, but now I don't feel as if I have to turn people away. I'm not working as much at night when I can enjoy time with Harper."

"Is she excited about a new baby?" she asked.

"I don't think she understands just yet," Brian said. "It's early anyway."

"Still exciting," she said.

"It is. Let me tell you a little about Cal."

"You look like you're friends," she said.

"We are. We went to school together. Now we both live in Paradise Place. He was here before me. He's pretty outgoing and talkative."

"One of *those*," she said, grinning.

"Everyone loves good old Cal," Brian said. "So yeah. One of them. Self-made millionaire on top of it. I think people see what he made of himself after so much tragedy. It's a feel good story."

"Oh no," she said. "What happened?"

"His mother was killed our senior year in high school. Out Christmas shopping and a fight broke out over a stupid video game or something. There was pushing and shoving and she was trying to calm people down. Lynn was like that. Sweet lady. I'd been to the house as a kid. She was the type of mother that wanted to feed you the whole time you were there. Anyway, one of the guys fighting had a gun on him. Not sure why, but he was waving it around and it fired."

"Cal's mother was shot?"

"She was. She was only trying to help calm the situation. The guy didn't

even mean to fire it. It just happened. It doesn't change the results though."

"No," she said. Her heart broke for that kid losing his mother that way.

"As if that wasn't bad enough, his father was a detective, and when Cal was twenty, his father was shot in the line of duty and killed."

Her hands went to her mouth. "That's horrible. Is he an only child?"

"He is. He has his grandfather. His father's father. It was a hard time for him. He's a great guy. You don't look at him and see what he lost. You see what he works so hard for."

She didn't want to pry too much more, but had to ask, "What about his businesses?"

"There were life insurance monies paid out. Cal's father had invested money too. Apple stock. He'd gotten in early and let it ride. Cal had been going to college and working at a liquor store. When he turned twenty-one, he bought the liquor store from the guy. His first business venture. Then he bought another. He owns an ice cream place that is seasonal. Robin loves going there. I think it closes at the end of October. Then there is a bakery, an Italian restaurant, several rental properties too. He was coming here to say he's closing on another three-family house. I'll give that to you to do. He's got a meeting with a guy to be part owner in a pub and brewery too."

Her head was spinning. "None of them have anything in common," she said.

"Well, if you knew Cal, you'd realize they kind of do."

"How so?" she asked.

"The liquor store was his first job. His father knew the owner and the guy was down on his luck and sick. Cal bought it to help him out. The same with the other liquor store a few years later. The rental properties just started as his first house was a two-family one. The restaurant, they bought their liquor from him, so he knew the guy."

"Let me guess, helping him out?"

Brian grinned. "Could be. You'd have to get that information from Cal. I think most of his ventures end up from people that just know him through the liquor store or his father. His mother too. He doesn't make crazy investments. He doesn't throw his money away. Everything he touches is successful."

"Even if it wasn't when he bought it?" she asked.

Brian shrugged. "Cal knows a lot of people. He inspires loyalty in them too. He has connections and maybe those connections help all those businesses, but he works his ass off too."

“Good for him,” she said. “Yeah, that is a feel good story. And the kind of clients I love to be around.”

It was exactly what she was hoping for with this change.

That and to find someone in her personal life.

She couldn’t help but notice how good looking Cal was, but for all she knew he was married.

“Cal is fun to be around. He treats everyone fairly. His employees all love him. You don’t hear too many negative things about him.”

“There is always something negative,” she said. “No one is perfect.”

“God, no,” Brian said. “I’m sure there are some out there that are jealous. That’s life. But the truth is, Cal is just one of those people that puts others first. A true good guy.”

“Kind of like you,” she said. Which was part of the reason she took this job.

“It’d be a compliment to say that.”

“Then take it as such,” she said. “I’ll let you get to work and I’m going to get some lunch at my desk.”

Mia stood up and grabbed her briefcase. The last thing she wanted to do was stay in her boss’s office gabbing. She wasn’t used to doing that even if Brian always started conversations.

He didn’t pay her to sit around and talk. He paid her to bring the money in to pay for her salary.

She had a big caseload with all billable hours. That was how she was used to working.

But last week, Brian gave her a case to look over. A vehicle accident. She didn’t want to take something that was frivolous. It wasn’t who she was.

It didn’t appear that way though. A car dealership returned a vehicle to a client with a tire not fastened properly. Driving home on the highway, her client lost control of the car when the tire came off, and flipped trying to keep the car from hitting other vehicles.

Gabby Miller suffered multiple broken bones, a collapsed lung and concussion.

Gabby’s medical bills were climbing and she’d been out of work for months with little income. Her client just wanted enough to cover the medical bills and her living expenses. She wanted to go back to work and move on. Not ruin anyone’s life.

Seemed fair to her.

She'd be presenting the case soon and hopefully they could get some settlement without dragging it out. She'd get her portion on that settlement.

Mia took a cut in pay to come here because she knew the potential for more was there. This would be the first she'd experience it.

She might not be as successful as her siblings. She tried not to compare and keep up, but it was hard as the baby of the family.

At this point in her life, she just wanted to be happy.

She felt she was getting there.

THOSE REMINDERS

“Hey, Grandpa,” Cal said a few days later. “You’re here early.”
He was at the liquor store for the delivery before they opened. He had a manager that did this. One at each store. But Chris was on vacation this week and there was no way he was having his grandfather do any lifting.

“I thought I’d come in and help out,” his grandfather said.

“Nope,” he said. “You don’t need to do that.”

“You don’t have to treat me like a baby,” his grandfather said.

He looked at the man who was six foot three. Well, probably six one now with the bone loss of age.

“Never,” he said. “Look at what we’ve got here.”

He held up a bottle of scotch. “Damn,” his grandfather said. “You found some?”

“It wasn’t easy. I’m not sure how much of a big seller it’s going to be. I ordered seven bottles. I’ll put three here and three in Albany.”

That was where his second liquor store was located. Not as big as the one in Latham, but still plenty busy.

“Where is the seventh bottle going to be?” his grandfather asked, turning it around in his hand. It’d sell for over six hundred retail. With the holidays in a few months, there was a shot he’d sell them all but wasn’t holding his breath.

“It’s where it belongs,” Cal said, laughing.

“Mine?” his grandfather asked.

“You’ve been talking about it for months. Maybe a year.”

“You need to sell this,” his grandfather said.

“Nope. It was a seven-bottle minimum to purchase it,” he said. “That bottle is yours.”

Which was a lie. It was six and it made sense to put three in each store. His grandfather deserved to get one.

“You’re pulling my leg, but I’m not going to tell you no.”

“Because I won’t take no for an answer.”

“You’re a good kid,” his grandfather said.

Cal smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. His mother had told him that all the time. His father too.

It made him feel good to get those reminders at times.

“I’m a good adult now,” he said. “Enjoy it.”

“Why don’t we open it together,” his grandfather said. “When was the last time you sat down and had a meal that wasn’t in front of the TV?”

Longer than he could remember. Most of his meals were things he threw in the microwave or picked up. Owning an Italian restaurant, he ran in there half the time and got something from the kitchen or the takeout window.

Not like he ate pizza every night. He’d get a meal to take home. Or a few and heat them up.

He knew he should learn to cook, but he’d never mastered it all that well.

“If you’re cooking,” Cal said. “I’ll be there.”

“You don’t expect me to eat your food, do you?” his grandfather asked.

“Nope. Something on the grill will go down well.”

“Then that is what we’ll have,” his grandfather said. His grandfather watched him going through the inventory. He didn’t need to worry too much, as his grandfather didn’t overdo it. At least when he was around. “Tell me how your meeting went the other day with the pub and brewery.”

Cal realized he hadn’t talked to his grandfather since then. Or seen him.

It’s not like he was here daily. He had too many businesses to check in on, plus he had to spend time in his office on top of it.

He had a few staff. Someone to do a lot of the paperwork, take calls on his properties and deal with landlord issues that always arose.

Though he didn’t work at the ice cream shop, that thankfully was only seasonal, and didn’t work at the restaurant, he did stop in all the time and check things out. He had some good managers and that helped.

He had his finger on every pulse of everything he owned and operated whether he did the work there daily or not.

He spent most of his time working in the liquor stores in his adult life. He had to say he liked it the best.

He'd met so many people that way. Contacts that helped him grow what he had.

"It went well. I like the vision he has. I see the potential. We are still negotiating the money and amount of the business I'll own before we go any further."

He knew Neil didn't want to give up much of his pub, but if Cal was putting up that much money and risk, he wanted to know there was part of it that was pulling a profit right away.

"How's the beer?" his grandfather asked.

"Pretty good. Better than good. His sales in the pub are out of this world. He's got a lot of local distributors lined up once he starts bottling. Other pubs in the area too."

"And you've got those contacts that he wants also?" his grandfather asked.

"Yes. I bring a lot of that to the table. He knows it. I don't like being a salesman."

"Please," his grandfather said, waving his hand. "You were born for it. Just like your father. I think he solved as many cases as he did because everyone opened up to him."

Cal laughed again. "He did have a way of getting people to talk."

"Just like you," his grandfather said. "Not that you share much about yourself."

"I talk all the time," he argued.

"You talk but don't share personal things."

He snorted. "Not much to share. Most know what they know about me. It's not like I've got a wife and kids or anything else in my life other than work."

"And you should start thinking about that. Maybe doing something about it. You're not getting any younger."

He'd heard this before. "Same dance, different song," he said.

"It's supposed to be same song and dance," his grandfather said.

"I like it better this way," he said.

"And you're done talking about that. I'll go unlock the door and open up while you finish up back here."

"Thanks," he said. "I'll come out to see you before I leave."

“I know you will,” his grandfather said.

He got back to work, priced up the product that was needed and went to stock it in the store.

For a Friday at ten, it was busy.

He was moving some wine bottles around to put the most recent in the back. “Can you help me find something?”

“Sure,” he said, turning to look at the woman.

“Cal? Is that you?”

“Hi, Megan,” he said.

“How have you been?” Megan said. “I haven’t seen you in years.”

They’d gone to school together. He always thought she was hot, but she didn’t want much to do with him.

She was out partying and having a good time. Often getting in trouble and doing shit that he knew would have him listening to multiple lectures from his parents.

Besides, she never had a job during school. Her parents didn’t make her. She kind of looked down on others that did.

His parents would have given him things, but he wanted to earn his own money so he could make the decisions on how to spend it himself.

“I’m good,” he said. “How about you?”

“Great,” Megan said. “Wonderful. Just ditched my husband and am back in the area and my life couldn’t be any better.”

He wanted to ask if she had to recite that to herself daily to make it true with as hard as she was stressing the words.

“Sorry about the ex,” he said.

“Don’t be sorry,” Megan said. Her eyes were looking him over. “I can’t believe you’re still working here. I guess you never left.”

He held back the snort. She would have figured he was an employee over the owner. She wouldn’t have bothered much about what happened to him after school.

“Never left,” he said. It wasn’t technically a lie.

“If you aren’t doing anything tonight, or this weekend, maybe we can get together for old times’ sake.”

“I’ve got plans,” he said. Again, not a lie. He could have changed the day with his grandfather but would never do that.

Especially not for a woman that had no other interest than being a bedmate.

He wasn't stupid. He could see it in her eyes. It wasn't him and never had been him.

"Are you seeing someone?" Megan asked. Her hand came out and picked his up. "I don't see a ring."

"No ring and no one," he said.

"Then maybe we can try for another night?" Megan said.

"I'm pretty busy," he said.

She lifted her nose at him. "I'm around if you decide you aren't busy," Megan said.

"What was the wine you were looking for?" he asked.

She pulled her phone out and showed him what she was looking for. He brought her to another section where it was, pulled it off the top shelf and handed it over.

"Thanks. I'm sure I'll be back here and see you again. If you change your mind."

Cal only nodded. He wasn't going to, but it wasn't worth saying anything more to her.

When he finished up, he moved to the front. His grandfather was shaking his head. "What?" he asked his grandfather.

"That woman that just left. She doesn't know you own this store, does she?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Why? What did she say?"

"She was chatting to me about you. That you went to school together and she was surprised you still worked here but that you were friends. She thinks you're hot and wanted me to put a good word in for her."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah. I know what she wants. She made it a point to say she was back in the area and just ditched her husband. I wasn't good enough for her in high school and I'm sure the hell not now. Not for anything more than fun."

His grandfather laughed. "Nothing wrong with some fun now and again."

"No," he said. "But why waste my time with someone that doesn't understand me?"

"You've got a point," his grandfather said. "But if you don't spend any time with someone, you don't know if they can understand you or not."

He sighed. "Megan can't," he said. "So you can drop that one."

Didn't mean that maybe he shouldn't give it a try with the sexy attorney though.

The one that he couldn't get out of his mind the past few days.

Not since he emailed Brian and Brian replied putting Mia on the chain for the information too.

He'd be talking to Mia soon and he'd play it by ear.

It was what he seemed to do most in his life anyway and it was working for him.

PLENTY OF TIME

“**S**he’s so tiny still,” Mia said to her sister on Saturday night when she was holding her niece.

“You don’t think she’s tiny when you’re pushing her out of you,” Morgan said.

She heard Cooper coughing in the kitchen where he was putting dinner together. Her sister had never been the cook of the family. Caden either really. It was the one thing she seemed to find enjoyment in more than her siblings.

Too bad she never had time to do much cooking before.

Now she seemed to have a ton of time to do it. Well, not a ton compared to other people that might work a forty-hour workweek. This past month she was lucky she spent fifty in the office, which was only working through her lunch most times.

She’d come home and do some work too but not like she had in the past.

So far, long gone were the seventy-hour workweeks and back then she still didn’t feel as if she’d ever catch up or get her work done.

“She was eight pounds,” she said.

“Don’t remind me,” Morgan said. “Thanks again, Cooper. Mia and I were tiny babies.”

“Eli was over nine pounds. You could have had a longer labor like Sarah too,” she pointed out.

“No, thank you. I’ll take that as a positive. Do you want to feed her?”

“I’d love to,” she said. Leah was starting to stir in her arms and move around.

Morgan stood up and walked to the kitchen. Her sister looked great for someone who'd given birth seven weeks ago.

When Morgan returned and handed over the bottle, she put it in Leah's mouth.

"She's a greedy one," Morgan said. "Try to burp her after an ounce. She gets mad, but otherwise she gets a bellyache too."

"I can't believe you know that already," she said. "Did you learn that with all the dogs?"

Her sister laughed and looked around the living room. Cooper's two Rottweiler mixes, Harry and David, were in the kitchen watching him and probably hoping for food to fall on the floor. Morgan's two pugs, Mark and Donnie, were sound asleep in their bed now that Mia had stopped giving them attention.

"No," Morgan said. "Through trial and error and lack of sleep. I finally decided to try burping after every ounce and though Leah isn't happy while she's eating. Once she's done she's a much calmer baby."

"Sarah said Eli sleeps all the time now," she said.

"I wouldn't say all the time," Morgan said. "But at four months old, he's taking two long naps during the day and going for five to six hours straight at night before he wants a bottle. It was starting him on cereal and jarred foods. He's fuller."

"I would be too. Who wants to just drink milk all the time?"

"Babies," Morgan said.

"I guess you're right. When are you going back to work?"

"She has nine more weeks," Cooper yelled from the kitchen.

Morgan sighed. "There is your answer."

"It doesn't sound like you're happy about that," she said quietly.

"I'm getting there. I want to be with her. I do. But it's hard when I'm used to working so much. When Leah is sleeping there isn't much for me to do. It's not like I can hold her all day, nor would I."

"She's such a doll to hold," Mia said, pulling the bottle out and putting Leah on her shoulder, then patting her gently. She'd done it a bunch of times now and wasn't as afraid as she was the first time she'd held her brother's son.

"She is," Morgan said.

"Have you figured out daycare yet?" she asked. "Sorry if I'm not around much to help. Work is busy but not so much that I can't be here more."

“You’re getting settled in your new place and life,” Morgan said. “It’s fine. In nine weeks I’m going back to the clinic and Cooper is going to take a month off to stay with Leah. He has a part-time vet filling in for me now who will stay on when I go back and Cooper is off. So we’ve got till the first of the year to get this squared away.”

“That’s so nice,” she said. “You’re a good guy, Cooper.”

“I am,” he yelled back. “Keep telling your sister that so she doesn’t change her mind before the wedding.”

Morgan laughed. “Not happening and he knows it. As for daycare, I’ve got a place lined up, but Sarah isn’t happy where she’s taking Eli.”

“How come?” she asked.

Shouldn’t she know this stuff? Was she still out of touch with her family even though she was closer?

Or maybe it had to do with Morgan having more in common with their sister-in-law and Mia was just left out of it.

She didn’t want that to be the case.

Maybe that was part of the reason she moved too.

She missed her sister even though Morgan had another life with Cooper now.

She enjoyed their sister-in-law, Sarah, too.

But they had significant others...and she didn’t even have a dog.

She was thinking of a fish. She could talk to a fish and not feel like a fool. It’s not like a fish would require a lot of care.

“She said it’s a revolving door of those taking care of Eli. She understands it happens but realizes that maybe it’s not good. We talked with them last week about sharing a nanny.”

“That’s a great idea,” she said. “It’s not like you live that far away from each other.”

“Nope. We’ll switch houses back and forth. Maybe do it monthly. It’s not like we have to worry about the dogs. They go with us to the office,” Morgan said. “And Jet is good too, but I told Sarah if it’s an issue with Jet and a nanny, we’ll take him to the office with us when the nanny is at their house or they can continue with doggie daycare.”

“The more the merrier, right?” she asked.

“It works. Or we can make it work. Then if the nanny can’t for some reason, there are four of us to figure it out taking time off.”

“It’s not like you can just not take patients,” Mia said. “But I could

maybe watch the kids if I don't have court."

"Lots of hands," Morgan said. "We appreciate it."

"You two really should have gone to dinner tonight and let me stay at home with Leah. Or don't you trust me with her?"

"We trust you," Cooper said. "But Morgan wanted to spend some time with you."

Cooper had come back in with the bottle of wine in his hand. She shook her head no and so did her sister.

"I'm glad that you stayed home, but you could go out. Maybe next week?"

"We'll think about it," Morgan said. "I know I've got to get used to leaving her."

"You'll be fine," Cooper said. "You leave her with me to go to the store all the time. Dinner isn't much longer."

"But it's not leaving her with you. You're her father."

Leah had let her burp out and was finishing up the last of her bottle when her eyes started to shut.

"Don't let her fall asleep before her burp," Cooper said.

"See," Morgan said. "That is why I'm not nervous about leaving her. He's better at that than me. I let her fall asleep sometimes. I don't like to be woken up."

"I don't blame you," Mia said. She shifted a little until Leah opened her eyes, then put her on her shoulder once the bottle was done, got the second burp out and settled her in the crook of her arms.

"How is the job going?" Morgan asked.

"Great. I never thought I'd have so much free time even though I still work more than most."

"We know that feeling," Cooper said.

"It's nice to be working on so many different things. Most of my last job was family court or stopping evictions from happening. Sometimes there was a criminal case, you know, domestic violence. I'm glad to be done with that for now."

None were fun. She was there to help the poor who had a lot more problems in their life than her. She'd always felt good about her work.

Until she realized she couldn't help everyone. There wasn't enough time in the day.

"I don't blame you there," Cooper said.

“Though I’ve got to say some divorces aren’t fun when people have money either,” she said, laughing.

“I think divorce isn’t fun regardless,” Morgan said.

“I met someone you guys know,” she said. “A friend of Brian’s that was in the office. He lives in Paradise Place.”

“Who is it?” Morgan asked. “Not that I know that many here.”

“Brian introduced you and he knows Caden and Sarah. He’s lived here a few years. Cal Perkins.”

“He owns a liquor store not that far away,” Cooper said.

“That’s him,” she said. She wouldn’t say any more than that.

“I remember him now,” Morgan said. “Funny. Cute. Did you think he was cute?”

She looked at Cooper and then back to Morgan.

“Maybe I’ll take Leah and put her down,” Cooper said and took his daughter away from her, giving the two sisters time to talk.

“Well?” Morgan asked. “Did you?”

“I did. I don’t know anything about him.”

“I’m sure you do, but you can’t say,” Morgan said, grinning.

“I meant anything personal. I don’t know if he’s single or not. It’s not as if I was going to ask Brian.”

“Why not?” Morgan asked. “Brian would probably think it’s funny.”

“I don’t make it a habit of having a personal life and if I did, I wouldn’t share it with anyone.”

“You shared it with me,” Morgan said.

“I did. Which I’m doing now.”

“Good point,” Morgan said. “I’m sure you’ll see him again. Talk to him. If not, go buy some wine. Maybe you’ll see him there.”

No reason to say that most likely wouldn’t be the case, but she’d keep it in mind.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Everything else okay?” Morgan asked. “How is the apartment?”

“It’s nice,” she said. “Bigger than I had in Philly. I wasn’t sure how I’d like being on the first floor with people above me, but it’s quiet.”

“It helps to know people to find a place that short of notice. A nice secure one too.”

Her sister was right. She ended up getting the place because of her connections to the Butlers.

She probably bumped other people on a list, but she let it go. Things like that happened all the time.

It's not like she could afford to buy a house like her sister had.

Morgan had made more than her for years.

Not all attorneys made big bucks, more so working where she had.

Sure, she wasn't hurting for money and had invested a lot wisely through her brother for years.

But with so many things in her life up in the air, the last thing she wanted to do was take out a mortgage.

Nor did she think she could care for a house, so it was all good in the end.

Plenty of time to figure things out in the future.

"And you're not that far away," Morgan said.

"Nope. It's not like walking distance to Sarah. Maybe someday."

"You'd fit right in here," Morgan said.

She'd like that. But as she said...someday. When she had her life in order like her siblings.

WORKS OUT

A little more than two weeks later, Cal was walking into the law office of the people he was buying the multiple-family home from.

He would have preferred doing it at Brian's office, but it didn't work out and it wasn't like it was all that far out of his way.

It was the first he was going to see Mia again. He'd had some email correspondence with her. Short and sweet and keeping it to work.

"Can I help you?" the woman at the front desk asked.

"Cal Perkins. I'm here for my closing."

"Follow me," the woman said. She got up from behind the desk and he followed her down the hall. "Your attorney arrived already."

"Good," he said. "I know I'm early."

"Yes. The sellers aren't here yet and it's just your attorney in the conference room."

Couldn't be any more perfect in his eyes.

"Thanks," he said when the door was shut behind him.

Mia stood up and reached her hand forward. "Nice to see you again."

He shook hands with her, the heat hitting him in the gut. She sat back down before he could notice if she had on a skirt or pants. She had another suit jacket on over a shirt. White shirt, navy jacket.

She sure was plain in her attire.

"You too," he said. "Brian is normally last minute running in the door."

"I was out with another house closing earlier. I actually was here twenty minutes ago. It wasn't enough time to go back to the office. They were nice enough to let me sit in here and get some work done. It was that or sit in my

car. I would have done that too.”

“No reason for it,” he said. “I’m pretty flexible and appreciate you doing this last minute.”

The closing was scheduled for next week, but the sellers were moving out of town and wanted to get their money. Since he was paying cash, it’s not like they were being held up by a bank. Just the attorneys making their schedules fit. Part of that happening was the sellers’ attorney had a small window and needed it done here. Who was he to argue when he was just as happy to get it done?

“It all works out in the end,” she said. “Can I ask...about your first name?”

He grinned. “Yep. It’s a different one. Now you know why I go by Cal.”

“It’s just not what I expected,” she said. “Not that different. I’m going to assume it’s someone’s surname?”

“My mother’s maiden name. Lynn Callery.”

“Nice Irish last name but not a first name,” she said.

“Exactly. I don’t think they had any intention of calling me that though. Too confusing around food.”

It took her a second and then she laughed. “I get it. Food calorie.”

“Yep,” he said. He was still smiling. She was too. She was hot when she looked like that. It made him wonder if that was why she didn’t dress for attention.

It gave him a minute to appreciate her straight brown hair, high cheekbones. She didn’t have a lot of makeup on. He liked that about her.

Back to being basic in his mind, but something told him she probably wasn’t.

He wondered if he judged her wrong on their first meeting when he thought she wouldn’t be interested in him.

If she was single.

Guess his grandfather’s words were still playing in his head and he’d been waiting for a chance to see Mia again to feel her out.

“I have to say I’ve spent the last week or so looking at your file,” she said. “Just getting familiar with what Brian has done in the past.”

“It’s a hodgepodge of investments. I know.”

People always said that to him. It wasn’t for him though. He knew exactly what he was doing and why, but no one ever really cared enough to ask.

He figured Brian understood it. They’d had a few conversations.

His grandfather was the only one that knew.

“Not really,” she said. “I mean Brian explained some.”

“What did he say?” he asked, leaning back in his chair to get comfortable. Something about her made him relax faster than he normally did.

“That the liquor store was the first business you owned. You worked there and bought it. A friend of your father’s.”

“Yes,” he said. Tom Brown had moved out of state a few years ago. The cold weather not good for his health problems. He’d let Tom continue to work for him after the sale and was sorry to see him go, but they kept in touch.

“It makes sense you’d buy another one. I don’t see anything odd there. Not even the rental properties. That is smart if you ask me. Passive income for the most part.”

“Not completely passive,” he said. “There is always work to be done on the houses or with the tenants, but for the most part, yes. Not a day-to-day type of job.”

“The Italian restaurant and ice cream shop are both food related, so I don’t think that’s odd. Maybe you just like Italian and ice cream.”

“I do,” he said. Though that wasn’t the reason he bought them.

“The bakery is throwing me a bit, but again, you are only a partial owner and I realized shortly after there was one thing in common with them all.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“The liquor store, restaurant, ice cream and bakery, all the previous owners, or co-owner with the bakery, were older. They were either retiring or the business was struggling. My guess is, they were places you knew you could turn around. Places you used to go to? Or had some connection to?”

“You’re good,” he said.

“I am that,” she said. “Don’t suppose you are going to tell me why I’m so good?”

“If we had time I could elaborate more. But it sounds as if the rest of the parties are here.”

The door opened a second later and they got to work. It didn’t take long for him to sign all the documents and hand over the certified check.

He would have rather just had the money transferred into their account, but the sellers wanted a check for the difference of what they owed to the bank.

Once everyone was leaving, he gathered the keys to the house. He was

going over to change the locks on everything except the apartment that was currently being rented.

He'd walk through and see what needed to be updated and then call the contractors he used for a timeline of the work.

Mia was picking up her papers and he decided to wait for her. It'd give him a chance to see what she had on.

When she walked out from behind the table, he noticed the navy pants this time, navy and white pumps.

So much for getting a sneak peek of her legs again.

"Thanks," she said as he held the door open for her.

They walked out to the parking lot. He'd parked next to the BMW that he'd seen at Brian's office. He was right—it was hers. White in color, nothing bold or flashy there either.

Her stomach chose that moment to grumble loudly. He was pretty hungry himself. Maybe he could take advantage of it.

"Do you need to go to court or see another client?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm going back to the office."

"I know Brian gives you a lunch hour. Why don't we go to lunch? My treat. You know, lunch with your client that you can get to learn more about."

She tilted her head to the side. "Billable hours kind of get to know more about you, or a date kind of get to know more about you?"

"I can handle the billable hours if that is what you are thinking."

"But you weren't thinking along those lines," she said, grinning.

He liked the look in her eyes. One of interest and a little bit of humor.

"Not really," he said.

She shifted her bag to look at her watch. "I've got an hour for lunch if you've got time."

"Perfect," he said. "There is a restaurant right around the corner."

"I saw it when I was coming here."

"Then if that is acceptable to you, we can go have lunch."

"I find that acceptable," she said. She was laughing at him. He didn't care. Not if it was working.

They both climbed in their vehicles and drove around the corner, parked and got out.

It didn't seem to bother her that he showed up in jeans and sneakers for the closing. It was what he wore daily. He wasn't a suit-and-tie type of person. Never that.

“Hey, Cal.”

“Hi, Caroline. Table for two.”

“Sure thing,” Caroline said. They knew him here. He supplied their liquor for the bar. He’d be talking to them at some point to see if they wanted to add the beer on tap that he was going to be part owner of soon.

“Do you know everyone?” Mia asked him. There was the humor in her eyes again.

“Hardly,” he said. “But they get their liquor from me here. A lot of restaurants do in the area rather than a distributor.”

He gave a steep discount—maybe not as much of one as a major distributor—and delivered faster. A lot of smaller businesses liked to keep things local and he’d banked on that when he reached out to many years ago to start this.

“Which brings us to the brewery,” she said. “It’s all connected, isn’t it? You’re the face of that.”

He started to laugh. “I’m not sure I’d say that. But yes, I’m well known in the area. I’ve got a lot of fingers in pies and I like sweet things.”

He lifted his eyebrows at her and she only laughed again. He knew it was cheesy on his part to say what he had, but it’s how he always was with people.

Cal was good at making them comfortable so that they opened up to him.

Just like his father in a way. His mother too.

“That might explain the bakery then,” she said. “Now that we’ve got the time, what do you say you tell me about how smart I am for figuring out how they all tie together? I will say that Brian gave me a bit of a clue.”

“What clue is that?” he asked.

“That you help people out.”

He nodded. He figured Brian would have said that. “Everyone needs help at times.”

“They do,” she said. “I should know. I spent the past several years of my career burning out trying to do it. But I learned you can’t help everyone and some people don’t want it even when they say they do.”

He got her to open up so he’d give just enough of himself to see what he got out of her before he decided to try dinner out.

SHARING OF INFORMATION

Mia wasn't quite sure how she ended up here with Cal, but she wasn't going to think much more about it.

She was entitled to lunch and she was taking it with the friendly man that asked her.

Not only did she want to know more about him as a client but she did as a person too.

It was the first man since she'd lived here that she was slightly attracted to and wanted to spend some time with.

From his dark hair that might need a trim, to the close-cut beard.

He was casual and laid back and nothing like most of the men she dated.

All the reason in her mind to try to find out more.

"You know I'm going to want to know more about that statement you just made," he said.

"I'll tell you once you tell me more about you. But first things first, since this isn't billable hours, I should know if you're single or not. Or am I really off base here?"

"Not off base. And yes, I'm single. You?"

"I am," she said. "I moved here just two months ago or so. A little over that. I haven't had much time for a personal life while I adapt to a new job and area."

"But your family lives here," he said.

"My brother has for a few years. Morgan less than a year. My parents still live in Philly. I wouldn't be surprised if they move when they retire. They aren't tied there and we are all here."

Her parents had been talking about it for the last several months. They wanted to be near their grandkids. There was no way she was going to stay in the area she grew up in all by herself.

In her mind nothing was keeping her there.

“I’ve always lived in this area,” he said.

“It shows with how many people know you,” she said.

“It’s still a big area and a lot of people.”

“True. So...tell me more about these businesses and how you became the self-made millionaire everyone wants to be.”

He started to laugh. “I’m not so sure everyone wants to be me.”

“I’m sure more than you realize,” she said. “I might have done a little internet search on you and saw some articles.”

The server came over and got their drink orders, read the specials off and asked if they were ready to order. She hadn’t even looked at the menu that was handed to them by the hostess.

“I’ll have the chicken salad club special.” It sounded good and after looking at the menu she knew she always went with her first choice.

“I’ll have the hot honey fried chicken sandwich and fries,” he said. He hadn’t looked at the menu so that told her he was a regular, not just for business but to eat.

“That sounded good,” she said of his sandwich.

“It is. It’s messy though. I always go through a bunch of napkins. More sticky than anything.”

“I’ll have to try it another time when I’m not in my work clothes. I’m bound to drop something on me if it’s that messy.”

“No reason to stain a white shirt,” he said.

She found it funny they were having this asinine conversation. “Back to you, not my potential laundry issues.”

He grinned at her. He grinned, smiled, and laughed a lot, she realized. She found it odd considering what Brian had said about Cal losing his parents so close together and so young.

“What is it you want to know exactly?”

“Whatever you want to tell me,” she said.

Their drinks were brought out. “How about this? I say something and you say something. The sharing of information. You know, like what might happen on a date.”

“So this is a date?” she asked.

He just grinned at her again. “When I was eighteen my father got me a job stocking shelves at the liquor store I own. I worked there through my two years of college. I got close to the owner. He was a friend of my father’s. When my father died, Tom was great to me. When his health took a turn a year later or so, I had money from my father’s life insurance and other investments left to me and decided to buy the liquor store. I liked the work and the people. I always knew that I didn’t want to work for anyone else. Not sure why, but in my mind I figured I’d be my own boss. Why not just start with something I knew and enjoyed?”

“First,” she said, “I want to say that Brian told me that your mother passed when you were in high school.”

“Did he tell you how?” he asked.

“Not much. It seemed personal to me.” She didn’t want Cal to think Brian was telling too many details and the truth was, Brian hadn’t said much.

“It’s not a secret,” he said. “She went Christmas shopping. A fight broke out over a stupid video game. She tried to calm people down like she always did. She just had this way about her. One of the assholes pulled out a gun. It went off by mistake and hit her in the stomach. She didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine,” he said. “Shit happens in the world. A few years later my father died during a drug bust gone wrong. I like to think they are together. They’re happy, I know it.”

Son of a bitch. How could he think that? Feel that?

She’d be angry and upset at the world and he was talking about it as if it was a story to be told rather than a tragedy that he’d lived. It made her petty problems seem small.

“That’s a lovely way to think of things.”

“Thinking any other way doesn’t change what happened,” he said. “When my father died, everything came to me. It gave me the money I needed to start my life.”

“And the first thing you did with that money was help out a friend of your father’s?” she asked. She knew her voice had gotten all soft.

“Tell me something about you now,” he said.

Mia figured she’d pushed too much, but his silence was the same as admission in her eyes. “You shared something personal so I’ll do the same. My last job was at a not-for-profit. My clients weren’t billed. They were income eligible for our services. Most of those cases were in family court,

custody hearings, divorces, domestic violence or evictions.”

“Depressing things,” he said.

She snorted. “Exactly. Mostly. The client list grew, my time stayed the same.”

“You burned out?” he asked.

She nodded. Mia didn’t want to sound like a wuss. “Your turn. The restaurant was your next business. We’ll skip over your income properties. I could see from your history that the first house you bought was a multi-family one and you lived there too. Makes sense that you’d buy more.”

“Yes to the first house. I was twenty-three when I bought it. I was living with my grandfather after my father died. You could say we needed each other, but then I needed to move on. I stayed there for about five years while I continued to buy more homes and businesses. I’ve lived in Paradise Place for about six years now.”

“You glossed over the restaurant?”

“Just needed to take a breath and get a drink,” he said, picking up his soda. She did the same with her tea. “I grew up going to that place as a kid. My father knew a lot of people.”

“He knew those owners too?” she asked.

“Not like he did Tom. But we were regulars there. I had the liquor store and since there is a restaurant on one side of the place, they served wine. The pizza and takeout were on the other side. I spent more time going in and out of there. They were buying the wine from me at that point though.”

“Those connections again,” she said. “Bet they weren’t buying from the liquor store when Tom owned it.”

“No,” he said. “When they started to fall on hard times, I knew I could help. No way I wanted to lose the place I ate at once a week for most of my life.”

“Most of your life?” she asked.

“We ordered there every Friday since I was a kid.”

A memory he had that he wanted to hold onto. She didn’t want to say that and embarrass him though. She was smart enough to read between the lines.

“I might have done the same thing if it was one of my favorite places.”

Their food was brought out fast and they started to eat.

“There was that,” he said. “So I bought it and let them continue to run it without the stress of being an owner. I didn’t have to do too much. They are still running it and doing better than before.”

“Why were they struggling before if you didn’t do much?” she asked.

“They had financial issues. Personal ones and couldn’t seem to separate the money from the business and their lives. Having to get a salary and not having unlimited access to the money brought in at night forced them to figure out other issues and the business got back on track. The money from the sale helped get their affairs in order.”

“Thankfully it was that simple.”

“Not as simple as it sounds,” he said.

Which told her he probably helped out on a personal level more than he would ever say. “So now you want to know something about me?”

“That’s the game we are playing,” he said.

“I’m not usually good at games,” she said. “I spend all my time working. You could say that is part of the reason it was so easy to pick up and leave.”

“Do you not want to put the effort into a relationship?” he asked.

“I do,” she said. “I have. But it doesn’t work out. Work always interferes. So far I’ve got more time at this job than I ever thought I would. I’m not sure what to do with myself half the time.”

“Go on dates,” he said, smirking.

“There is that,” she said. “Back to you. Or I can guess. The ice cream shop was most likely a place you went to as a kid too?”

“Actually, no,” he said.

She frowned. “A friend of your mother or father?”

Cal laughed. “Got me there. It was a place my mother went to a lot as a kid. One of her childhood friends ran it for years. But they were leaving the area and put it up for sale. I thought, why not? I knew it was always crazy busy. It just meant I couldn’t keep them on to run it if they were moving.”

“I don’t see you there filling cones or whatever else they serve,” she said.

“You’d be shocked where or how much I work when one of my businesses needs it. Which, by the way, is part of the reason we are on this date. Or why I’m single too.”

“I figured as much.” So he bought the ice cream place as a memory for his mother. She had to know. “The bakery was next.”

“It’s your turn,” he said.

Mia took another bite of her sandwich and then a drink. “My life isn’t as exciting as yours. I’m not a self-made millionaire. I grew up in Philly to a middle class family. I’m the baby. Caden was the golden child. Valedictorian of his class. Top five of graduating class in college. He played sports and he

was a model. Like a serious model but stopped when he was in college toward the end to focus on that.”

“I’ve met your brother. I hadn’t realized that, but he is kind of pretty.”

She laughed. “We used to bust his butt about that as a kid. Morgan is the middle child. But the oldest girl. Smart again. I think, though we are close and always have been, we both felt like we’d never measure up to Caden.”

“You both seem pretty successful by the sounds of it,” he said.

“I never got the glamorous life I thought I’d go for when I was in law school.”

“How did you end up doing not-for-profit work?” he asked.

“Your turn. Bakery?”

He winked at her, ate some more of his sandwich and picked at his fries. She said she didn’t like games, but this was a fun way to find out about someone in a short time frame.

“I like sweets,” he said.

“Really?” she asked. “It’s as simple as that? You only own half of it.”

“I do,” he said. “I’m sure you can figure it out so I’ll just say it. My father worked with another officer that got injured and had to retire early. This was about five years ago. They had some young kids and his wife is the other owner of the bakery. When my mother died, Rich was there for my Dad. His wife was there for me in terms of bringing food all the time. Baked goods. She’d had a two-year-old at home and then was pregnant with another. It seemed like the right thing to do. Rich got hurt right when they were getting ready to open the bakery. They didn’t know how they were going to make it work and I stepped in. Lisa runs it. I’ve got little to no say. I get a paycheck each month from it.”

“I’m sure it’s minimal,” she said, laughing.

“No comment,” he said.

“You’re like a regular old Santa Claus to those around you,” she said.

She picked up her sandwich to take another bite and then noticed his smile drop.

“Hardly,” he said. “I’m more like a Scrooge.”

She laughed even harder. Thinking he was joking.

Only he wasn’t and she didn’t know why.

SAY SOMETHING STUPID

Hours later, Cal was at the house he'd just closed on, walking around and wishing he could kick his own ass.

Here he was having a great lunch with Mia and then he had to go and say something stupid.

It was like this trigger he had whenever people talked about Christmas.

He always held it in and thought he did well with Mia.

It was the joke about Santa Claus.

Nope. Not him.

It was the one time of year he hated.

He couldn't stand it.

And the fact Christmas decorations would start being put in stores in a few weeks was only going to annoy him.

He'd gotten used to it though. He looked past it like he did so many other things in his life.

It was only a time of year. Nothing more.

He had staff that took care of getting his businesses ready for the holidays. He wasn't stupid enough to ignore it and lose that money, but he wasn't going to join in the celebration of it either.

The whole lunch changed after he'd made that comment. He tried to bring it back around as best as he could, but Mia sensed it and so did he.

They ended the lunch when she got a call that she had to take. He asked for the bill and paid, they walked to their cars together and got in without making another date.

He didn't even get her number and hated that.

He could call her at the office and was going to tomorrow.

He'd apologize.

He liked her.

A lot.

She seemed to understand him when not many did.

He thought he had a good grasp of her too.

He'd be the first to admit he was wrong to judge her after listening to her childhood.

She worked hard just like him.

Though he never did get to find out why she went into her line of work out of college.

He'd lead with that when he reached out tomorrow.

With his list of things that he wanted to be done in the house, he left for his office.

"Hi, Steph. Busy day?"

"Always," Steph said.

She'd worked for him for about six years. She was married with two kids that he often let her bring into the office if she had no daycare.

Cal liked his small office staff and everyone got along well.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Anything I need to worry about or do you have it covered like I know you always do?"

He handed her the file from the closing. She'd take care of everything.

"Most of it I've got covered. The typical with the tenants in the house you just closed on. They've got worries and concerns, but I've calmed them down."

"In that wonderful motherly way that you do," he said. "I love it."

She gave a mock bow with her hand. "That's what you pay me for. But for the few things I can't take care of I sent you an email."

It was the look on her face that had him frowning. "What's that?"

"One winery wants to give you a sales pitch."

He waved his hand. "I'm used to that."

"You are. And you deal with it."

"What's the other one?" he asked.

"Barb called again," she said.

He sighed. Barb was the new regional salesperson where he got a lot of his food for the restaurant and ice cream shop. They didn't just sell ice cream there and many came for quick meals of hot dogs, burgers and fries.

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell her I don’t need to meet.”

“She likes you,” Steph said. “Like really likes you. Maybe you need to be one of those chicks that puts a fake diamond on their hand so that men leave them alone when they’re out.”

He held his hand up. “I’m not sure diamonds are my thing. Maybe a big thick square one. What do you think?”

“Emerald cut,” Steph said. “That would work well on those big hands of yours.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. And I’ll deal with Barb.”

“If you email her, she’s just going to keep it up. She wants to hear your sexy voice,” Steph said with a grin.

“You think my voice is sexy?”

“Todd is jealous whenever I say it,” Steph said of her husband. “The other night I told him to talk like you.”

“You’re horrible,” he said, laughing. He hoped to hell he wasn’t blushing either. “It’s a good thing your husband likes me or he’d come at me with a gun one night.”

“Never,” Steph said.

Todd was an officer at the Colonie Police. He was hired shortly after Steph started working for him. Cal had put a good word in for the guy. Something he didn’t do often, but he felt Todd would do a good job since he knew a few that Todd worked with at the sheriff’s department part time.

Todd believed he was only hired because of Cal and was very thankful for that.

He wasn’t sure if it was him or not, but Steph did a great job and he didn’t want to lose her. They’d been talking of moving if they had to. Maybe he was just selfish doing what he did, assuring they stayed in the area.

“I’ll call her now and get it over with,” he said. “You’re the best.”

“You know it,” Steph shouted to him when he walked into his office.

Steph had her own office just off the front too. There was a small waiting area with a few chairs, but she could see people coming in and out. No one did without appointments anyway, so it’s not like they needed someone watching the front.

Sean was his accountant and stayed in his office by himself leaving most people alone. It worked for them. He knew Steph busted on Sean often, but Sean ignored her.

Cal sat at his computer. He should just bring a laptop back and forth but

couldn't be bothered. It was easier to have a computer here and another at home. He did more work there than here anyway, though he showed up here most days.

Once he made his way through the bulk of his email and answered what he could, he decided to call Barb and get it over with.

"Hello, Cal," Barb answered on the first ring. It was her cell phone. She'd always said to call her on that as she was on the road a lot.

"Hi, Barb. Steph gave me a message that you called."

"Yes," Barb said. "We haven't touched base lately. I was wondering if you had time to meet this week and go over a few things. You know I like to have a face to face with most of my clients. I need to assure the company we are meeting your needs."

It was the way she said 'meeting your needs' that had him rolling his eyes.

"Everything is good," he said. "I haven't heard any complaints from my staff when it comes to ordering. The ice cream shop will be closing soon so obviously the orders are less now."

They were winding down and wouldn't need to buy as much as when they were in full swing over the summer. Not in ice cream or the other foods.

"That's always good to hear," Barb said. "I'd still like to treat you to dinner one night."

It went from lunch to dinner now. "I'm good," he said. "I've been pretty busy lately. No reason to work late at night."

"All part of the job," Barb said, being pushy like always. "You know that. We used to meet more frequently."

That was when Barb was an account rep and wanted to meet with him. In the beginning he was meeting with people all the time. It was good for business. Now he didn't have the time and didn't need to do it.

More so when he knew there was an ulterior motive.

Barb had hinted at them getting to know each other better more than once over the years. Normally when she was between men.

No, thank you.

He had another woman on his mind and one he had to apologize to.

"You're a big wig now," he said, laughing. He knew it'd feed her ego. "You don't need to spend your time with me. We both have a lot of staff to do our work."

"We do," Barb said. "We can get a drink and talk about how great it is to

be king of the world.”

He wrinkled his nose. He'd never been that way about anyone that worked for him.

He might not work in the restaurant, bakery or even the ice cream shop now, but he knew all his employees' names. He stopped in to say hi and chat. He wanted them to know he wasn't...king, for lack of a better word. Everything that his employees did for him meant something and he tried to let them know that.

He took care of those that took care of him.

“I'll have to take a pass right now,” he said. “I've got a lot going on. Another new venture.”

“Anything you need our products for?” Barb asked. He could sense the disappointment in her voice so she was going to return to sales.

“I'll let you know if we do,” he said.

He hung up after that and got back to work.

When he saw Neil calling, he answered. “Hey, Neil. Have you put more thought into everything?”

“I did,” Neil said. “If you've got time tomorrow, maybe we can talk?”

“I'll be there if you give me a time that works for you,” he said.

“Why not ten before I open,” Neil said. “I think we can come to a good agreement.”

Cal smiled. “I'm sure we can.”

“See you then,” Neil said. At least that was good news. He'd take it after he messed up earlier and had to figure out a way to fix it so that he could go on another date with Mia.

If she'd have him.

ONE SILLY COMMENT

Mia heard voices in the front office. Deep male voices.
One was Brian's. The other was Cal.

She was so mad at herself last night when she played back their lunch conversation in her mind.

Things had been going so well and then, bam, it all changed over one silly comment.

Cal had been so funny and laughing at everything that she thought he was joking with his Scrooge comment. Until he wasn't.

Then he wasn't smiling much either afterward.

Though he tried to lighten the mood, it just didn't happen.

She got a call she had to take; they ended their lunch and parted ways.

So much for a good lunch and the potential of another date.

She just wasn't meant to find someone, she was sure.

The loser baby of the family. Mia always worried she couldn't do anything right, and yet, now she was proving that.

She looked up when she heard a knock at her door. "Hi," she said to Cal.

"Hey," he said. He was smiling again. "Got a minute to talk?"

"I do," she said.

He shut her door and came in to sit down. "I want to apologize for yesterday."

"Why?" she asked.

She'd done some digging online last night. Once she remembered that Brian had said Lynn Perkins had been shot while Christmas shopping, she figured that played a huge part in Cal's reaction.

But when she saw the article about Jack Perkins being killed two weeks before Christmas, her heart sank. It'd been close to the anniversary of his wife's death. What a horrible reminder that those you loved were gone during a time when family meant the most to people.

Or was celebrated the most.

"The way we left our lunch," he said. "I never did get to find out why you went the route you did with the not-for-profit. I was hoping maybe we could continue that conversation over...let's say dinner?"

Mia wasn't one for shying away from anything.

"So I didn't ruin it with my comment about Santa?"

He sighed. "No. That is why I'm apologizing. I shouldn't have reacted that way. I normally have it under control around the holidays."

She nodded. "I felt horrible last night. I later remembered the timing of your mother's passing. I did some digging online and found out about the timing of your father's death. I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to be insensitive."

"Don't apologize," he said. "You're not insensitive. It's me. It's my problem. I know it. Most around me know and tiptoe and I hate that too."

She supposed that this was the one thing that made him seem human and not so perfect.

Not that anyone was perfect, but from what she knew about him, he sure the hell seemed it.

From being hard working to the reasons he bought the businesses he did.

Mia could see right away that he was trying to keep memories of his parents alive and yet during the time when he'd lost them, it was almost like he wanted to forget that time existed.

It seemed like a contradiction, but grief could cause people to do odd things.

She shouldn't and wouldn't be someone to judge that.

She couldn't imagine what he went through at such a young age not once but twice.

"It doesn't mean you aren't justified in what you feel," she said. "Now I know."

"Please don't do that," he said. "I need to get over people tiptoeing. It's just I don't like Christmas. It's out there. Nothing more than that. Think of it as someone that doesn't like chocolate."

She laughed at the grin on his face. "Chocolate?"

“Yeah. Doesn’t a huge population of the world love chocolate? I equate that to Christmas. Think about it. What do you think when you hear someone say they don’t like chocolate?”

“If I ever heard anyone say that I’d think they were nuts,” she said.

“Then I’m nuts,” he said, shrugging cheerfully.

“As long as you can realize it,” she said. Seemed he wanted to brush this off and she’d do that for now. “There you go.”

“There I go,” he agreed. “Dinner? You still didn’t tell me why you took your last job.”

She kept hoping to avoid that but realized it might not happen.

She wasn’t sure why, but it felt silly to her now.

“Dinner could work,” she said. “How about I cook?”

“Really?” he asked. “Phew. I must not have messed up that badly if you want to cook for me. I hardly ever get home-cooked meals. Only from my grandfather.”

“You don’t like to cook?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it, I just don’t know how to do much.”

“I think you could do anything you wanted to in life,” she said. “Maybe it’s laziness.”

This time he burst out laughing. “I like you. Not many would say what you are to me.”

She felt her face flush. She wasn’t normally someone who flirted quite like this. Then she had to remember he was a client and in her office on top of it.

They would have to address this and she’d have to speak to Brian about it too. Full disclosure type of thing.

“Sorry,” she said. “That was uncalled for and inappropriate.”

“No,” he said. “It’s the truth. I never learned and never bothered to learn. I’ve got enough places to go get food and not pay for it.”

“Valid point. Many would say that is smart. Almost like having your own private cook.”

“I’ll be sure to mention that to my grandfather when he brings it up again.”

She grabbed her business card and flipped it over. She put her cell phone number on the back and her address. “Here you go. How does Saturday sound?”

“Sounds perfect to me.” He took the card, flipped it over and took a

picture of what she wrote down, then put it in his pocket.

“Afraid you might lose it?” she asked.

“More like wash it. I’m not good at emptying my pockets when I do laundry.”

“Now you’re covered,” she said. “I’ve got your number. I could have just texted you the information.”

“Would you have reached out to me if I didn’t stop over today?”

“I honestly don’t know. I did think I offended you laughing when you were being serious.”

“Never,” he said. “I was going to reach out last night but realized I didn’t have your direct number. I could have emailed you. I’m sure you would have gotten it within minutes but face to face is better.

And showed the type of person he was.

Back to thinking he was almost perfect.

That could be dangerous, as no one was perfect.

It just showed how desperate she might be to find something that her siblings had.

“I appreciate that,” she said. Her computer was dinging left and right with email notices.

“You’re busy,” he said. “I came to tell Brian and will let you know too. He said you’ll handle it. I came to an agreement with Neil on the pub and brewery. I’ll send over the information. He said to have my attorney draw it up and he’ll read it over and sign it.”

“No attorney to send it to for him?” she asked.

He sighed. “No. He’s pretty simple. I’m not sure how I feel about that, but his business is in good shape. He knows I’ve got an attorney to look things over on a business end.”

“Just one more thing you bring to the table,” she said.

“There is that,” he said. “It will work out.”

“It seems most things work out for you,” she said.

“Not as many as I’d like. I hope to change that though.” He winked and stood up. She got the feeling he meant her but would push that off.

It was too early to get worked up.

Which was funny since she was worked up last night that she blew it and now she was telling herself to pump the brakes.

He left her office shortly after that and she glanced at her emails to see if it was anything that needed her immediate reply.

There was nothing that couldn't wait, but talking to Brian needed to be done.

"Got a minute?" she asked when she was standing in his office door.

"I do," Brian said. "Come in."

He was grinning at her. It's like he knew what she was going to say. "I just met with Cal."

"I sent him in there to talk to you. You know about the brewery."

"Yeah. He told me. Did he say anything else?"

Brian was still laughing. "That you had lunch yesterday and he acted like an ass. That's odd for him."

"He didn't act like an ass," she said. "I just was taken back."

"You mentioned Christmas. Once he told me that I knew what happened."

She sighed. "Guess everyone knows but me."

"There would be no reason for you to know. If I knew you were going to have a date I would have warned you."

"He called it a date?" she asked.

"He did. Wanted me to know his intentions and that he was going to apologize and hope he could beg you to forgive him and give him a second chance."

"You're okay with this?" she asked. "You're laughing over it."

"What you do in your personal life is up to you," Brian said. "You're professional enough to not let it affect your work. If it did and things were messy, then I'd just deal with Cal, but I don't see that happening. He's not the type to end anything with people feeling bad."

"Oh, really?" she asked.

"Wrong choice of words," Brian said. "Cal doesn't normally make people mad. If he does or it happens, he smooths it over. He's got this mentality that he just wants to leave clean footsteps in the sand."

"An interesting outlook on life," she said.

"He's an interesting person. Don't you think?"

"Very," she said. "Almost too good to be true."

"I think a lot of people feel that way about him, but what you see is what you get. I can tell you that much."

"That's good to know," she said. "I won't let it affect anything here."

"So he got you to give him a second chance?" Brian asked.

"It's not like he did anything wrong though he seems to think he did. I

said I'd cook for him on Saturday. He's your friend. As you can tell, he likes to talk. Some restaurant chairs are uncomfortable."

"Good logic. Make sure you tell him that," Brian said.

"I'll do that if it comes up," she said.

She left Brian's office and went back to work.

Guess things did work out in the end.

Or at least for now.

That was how she was living her life.

For now.

The future could wait.

A CHANCE THING

“Do you miss not going to the shelter?” Mia asked Morgan on Saturday morning.

“Some,” Morgan said.

Leah was sleeping in the swing in the living room. The two of them were in the kitchen having coffee and scones that Mia had picked up this morning after she’d gone to the store.

“I know you’re itching to get back to work, aren’t you?”

Morgan sighed. “I feel like a failure as a mother because I want to work and not stay at home with Leah. But it’s just not me.”

She ran her hand over her sister’s shoulder. Here she was feeling like a failure in her life.

Not as successful as her siblings.

Still alone, let alone not having a family.

She should have been paying more attention to Morgan than her own insecurities.

“Don’t be that way,” she said. “Or think it. You’re doing what you always wanted to do in life. You shouldn’t have to give up one to be another. I’m not sure why society feels that way. This isn’t 1940 where the woman stays home and cooks all the meals and cleans and cares for ten kids.”

“Ten kids,” Morgan said, laughing. “Please. I can’t think of another right now let alone ten. Cooper, he’s over the moon and already talking about when we’ll have another. We aren’t even married yet.”

“You’ll be married soon and you love him. Be happy that he’s so excited to be a father and does so much. How many men aren’t like that?”

“A lot,” Morgan said. “And I’m very fortunate. But you know, I spent a lot of money on schooling to get where I am. So many changes in my life in the past year.”

“Not just for you but everyone,” she said. She had to remember that too.

“You’re right. I’ve read it’s normal to feel this way. I’m good,” Morgan said, taking a bite of the scone. “These are great. Where did you get them?”

“At a bakery not that far from here.”

The one that Cal owned part of. She figured she might as well give them a try and found the place packed full of sweet concoctions and a line out the door.

“I’m glad you thought of it,” Morgan said. “And came to give me company. But I sense something is going on with you. What is it?”

Mia let out a sigh. “I’m concerned about you,” she said.

Morgan laughed. “I buy that, but there is nothing to be concerned about.” Morgan reached her hand over. “I’m happy. I’ve got a great job, a wonderful baby daddy, and a beautiful daughter that I can’t get enough of.”

“And four rowdy boys that are well behaved,” Mia added. She looked over and saw the four dogs outside on the deck, sunning. There was a fenced-in yard for them all to run.

“That is very true. Some would say my life is perfect, but we know that isn’t possible. My hormones are out of whack and I know it. I’m not depressed or anything. Don’t think that. Sarah and I talked and she said she felt the same way. It’s a mother’s guilt, but you’re right. Being a mother doesn’t mean I can’t be a vet at the same time.”

She didn’t want to be jealous that Morgan went to Sarah to talk about this. It made sense since Sarah was in the same boat. Sarah was a nurse too. Another medical professional.

“Do you think Mom felt it?” she asked.

“She told me she did. But by the time she got to you she was rushing back to work with no guilt at all.”

Morgan was laughing and Mia forced a smile. “Figured as much.”

“Hey,” Morgan said. “I was joking. Really. What’s going on with you? Do you regret moving here?”

“No!” she said. When she realized she was louder than she meant to be she lowered her voice. “Sometimes I just look at you and Caden and think I’m the loser.”

“Not even close. Why do you feel that way?”

“I had all these dreams and goals in my career and they didn’t happen.”

“Yet,” Morgan said. “You just turned thirty-two a few months ago. There is a lot of time left for you to save the world and now you get paid for it. Paid a lot more for your hard work. It sounds as if you’ve got a wonderful boss. I know and have met Brian. He seems pretty easy to get along with.”

“He is,” she said. “I’m glad I’m working for him. I’ve been busy with my own caseload and helping him with a few things. I hope to have a settlement soon on my first solo case and I should get a nice check with that.”

“All good things. But there is something more going on. As if you’re nervous over something.”

“I should have known you’d figure it out. I’ve got a date tonight.”

Morgan jumped up and did a little dance. “Why are you nervous? Who is it? Tell me all about it.”

“It’s Cal Perkins,” she said.

“Ohhh, nice and yummy. Good for you. Did he ask you out or did you ask him?”

“It was kind of a chance thing,” she said. She explained about the house closing earlier in the week and the spontaneous lunch they’d had.

“You like it when things like that happen,” Morgan said. “You’re kind of the romantic type.”

“Not really,” she said. “That is you.”

“True,” Morgan said. “But don’t we all want things to just fall into our laps like that?”

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “We talked a lot. I mean he likes to talk. He’s so funny and good natured and then, bam, he just changed and I thought he was joking.”

“That’s not good. Tell me about it.”

She explained the situation with Cal’s mother, then his father. How it all led up to the Santa joke and Cal saying he was Scrooge.

“As you can tell, I put my foot in my mouth and didn’t even know it.”

“But he came and apologized to you the next day. That says a lot about his character.”

“It does. He told Brian what was going on and his intention to ask me out.”

“Again, his character. That trumps a knee jerk that he had over a traumatic experience in his life.”

“Very much so,” she said. She picked her coffee up and finished. “Want

another?”

“I’m good,” Morgan said. “I’m trying to cut back now. I’m sure once I’m back to work I’ll be drinking more. Are you still having five cups a day?”

Mia laughed. “No. It was a hard habit to break, but now that I’m not running around so much like before with work, I don’t need it.”

“Says the person who is drinking her second cup since being here and I’m sure you had a cup at home,” Morgan said.

“I did. I have two in the morning and another mid-morning. Then I’m done for the day. So I only had one at home knowing I’d have my second here and it’s mid-morning so my third. Not bad, right?”

“Good for you,” Morgan said. “Tell me more about Cal and then we’ll get to the part of why you’re nervous and you’re not someone who gets nervous on a date. Especially when it sounds as if lunch was going great before the Santa comment.”

“He’s so successful. After everything he’s gone through, he used the money he’s earned to not only create a great life for himself but also for those around him.” She explained about the liquor store, the restaurant and the bakery. Since those were things they talked about on their date, she wasn’t saying anything that was confidential. “He has multiple rental properties too.”

“Sounds like a great guy,” Morgan said. “I’ve got one of those myself. You know, saving puppies on the street.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You do. I find that Cal has this sensitive side to him, but he doesn’t want to show it. I mean why else buy the businesses he did? They all had a purpose to him outside of making money.”

“It sounds it. He’s honoring his parents somehow. He’s using the money that was left to him to build more and help others. You said a lot of people came forward and helped out when his mother died, right?”

“Lisa did. I got the scones there this morning. He said she brought food over all the time and she checked in with him. When her husband got hurt on the job and had to retire earlier than planned, they were just starting the bakery. He wanted to make sure they had that chance.”

“Sounds to me like you two have a lot in common. You always wanted to make a difference in people’s lives and he’s doing the same.”

“He’s succeeded though where I haven’t been,” she said, her voice lowering.

“Mia,” Morgan said. “Stop it. Stop comparing yourself to everyone else.

You never used to do that.”

“Didn’t I?” she asked.

Morgan’s head went side to side. “I guess you have. But we told you before to stop it. Everyone is different and shouldn’t judge or be judged against anyone else. I know we always compared ourselves to Caden and it was ridiculous. Look at how stupid he was pushing himself to do more and more. You and I would have never done that. Right?”

“Not like he did,” she said. “No. I was burning out mentally and physically, but maybe since we saw what it did to Caden, I knew enough to dial it back.”

“A lifestyle change to prevent it,” Morgan said. “That’s what you did by moving. I guess what is bothering me the most is you’ve always been so confident in your life decisions and now...not so much.”

“I wanted to be here for my niece and nephew. With my siblings. Maybe I missed my best friend.”

Morgan got up and hugged her. “I’m still here. Even when we lived by the other we rarely saw each other and you know it.”

“I do,” she said. “And now that I’m close by I love how much we see each other. It was the right move for me. For my family and for my career.”

“That’s right,” Morgan said. “And tonight you are having a second date. What are you doing?”

“I’m cooking for him,” she said.

“Good for you. You love to cook. Dazzle him with one of your hobbies. Something you haven’t had a chance to do recently. Talk like you did on your lunch and lock lips with him. That will tell you what you need to know.”

She laughed. “I miss touching a man. Good lord, I’m not sure how long it’s been. And if Cal doesn’t try to kiss me, I’ll make sure he doesn’t leave without me making the move.”

“That’s the sister I know and love. Get back to who you used to be. Enjoy yourself and stop worrying about what others think of you. You’re a great person and you know it. Any man would be proud to be with you.”

“You’re right. They should be. You’re exactly what I needed today.” When Leah started to fuss, she moved over to look at her niece. “Can I feed her before I leave?”

“You can,” Morgan said. “If you don’t mind, I’ve got some laundry I need to change over.”

“Go do what you need to. I’ve got this. I’ll let the dogs in too. It’s like

they noticed she's up and have to watch her."

She found that funny but walked to the door where all four dogs were looking through the glass at the baby in the swing.

"They are good at guarding her," Morgan said. "I'll get her bottle and the five of them are all yours for twenty minutes."

"Take your time," she said. "I've got nothing going on other than dinner tonight. It beats sitting around the house staring at the clock."

Something she'd never done in her life before.

Why did this date feel as if it was going to mean so much?

A BAD PERSON

Cal got out of his truck and grabbed the box next to it.

Mia said she had dinner covered, but he didn't want to come empty handed.

He had no idea if she drank or not, but he did know one thing about her.

He found her apartment on the first floor, rang the bell and then waited.

She opened it up quickly. Almost as if she was waiting by the door. "Hi," she said. "Come in."

He came in and handed her the box. "Dessert," he said. "Since you're cooking I figured it's the least I can do. And it smells great in here."

She looked down at the box in his hand. "Yum. I was there this morning and picked up some scones for Morgan and me when I was visiting."

"Probably cheesy on my part stopping at a place I own," he said.

She waved her hand. "No way. I'd be there every day if I owned it. Can I peek inside or is it a secret?"

"Go ahead," he said.

She lifted the lid and started to laugh. "Chocolate. Now I know you're being funny and thoughtful."

"Since I don't like Christmas, but I do like chocolate. It'd seem odd if I didn't like them both."

He felt it was his olive branch to not only make a joke about this but at least put it out on the table.

He didn't want her to think he couldn't even talk about the holiday.

That she had to be careful about even bringing it up.

It wasn't that. He just didn't like it.

Didn't like to celebrate and hoped the day came and went quickly. Like Labor Day. No one prepared for it before, then didn't think much of it when it was gone.

Instead he had to endure months of pre-celebration details for Christmas.

"You're being a good sport about this," she said.

"I want you to know I'm not a weirdo," he said. "Though many think I am."

"Hardly that," she said, grinning. "You have your reasons. We all have reasons for things we like or don't like in life. No one should judge you for that."

"Thanks," he said.

"Take your jacket off. Where are my manners?"

He pulled off his fleece and saw the closet by the door and hung it up. "Shoes on or off?" The place looked very neat and she didn't have shoes on.

"You can keep them on. I'm not anal about those things. I just don't wear shoes around the house. I'm normally barefoot or in slippers."

He looked down at her white socks. "You're not in either of those things right now."

"Because I didn't want you to laugh at my slippers."

"Now I've got to know," he said.

She moved to the kitchen and set the box down. He couldn't figure out what was cooking, but he knew it was Italian.

"Hang on while I get them. No laughing."

"I can't promise anything," he said.

She came back out a minute later and there were slippers on her feet that were in the shape of bear claws. Polar bear claws.

"I see you want to laugh," she said.

He took a breath. "No," he said. "Just how do you walk in them without tripping? They are bigger than you."

"Not that big, but I will admit that I did trip a few times. Morgan got them for me a few years ago. I was always complaining my feet were cold in my old apartment. These helped."

"I'm sure they do," he said. "And dinner smells great."

"Thanks," she said. "I like to cook and don't do it as often as I wish. Since you own an Italian restaurant, I figured this was a safe bet. But then I started to second-guess myself that it might not live up to what you're used to. By then I was too far into it. It's lasagna. It will be done in about ten

minutes and then should sit and rest for a bit.”

“I love lasagna,” he said. “I love anything with sauce and cheese. Any kind of cheese. Did I tell you I love food in general? More so anything I don’t have to cook or prepare?”

“You didn’t, but now I know,” she said. “Can I get you something to drink? I’ve got beer and red wine. Both I find funny considering some of the businesses you own or will own. I’m not sure what you like to drink.”

“Beer is fine,” he said. “I was going to bring wine but had no idea if you drank it.”

“I love wine,” she said. “Get me with my sister and we could do some damage. Well, that was before. She doesn’t so much now.”

“Good to know,” he said. “I should have brought it anyway.”

She turned and got him a beer. “I looked up the kind of beer at the pub you’re buying, then I tried to match something similar. I’m not sure I did that great of a job.”

He was touched she went to the effort. “I’m sure it’s fine,” he said.

She poured him the beer and handed it over, then got herself a glass of red wine. He took note of what she was drinking for future reference.

“Do you work on the weekend?” she asked.

“I don’t think I ever get a day off completely. But I don’t go into my office. Normally on the weekend I just stop into the businesses if I’m out and about. See if anything is going on.”

“Pick up some food?” she asked.

“Usually that more than anything. I just like everyone to know I’m around if they need me. Most understand that and I’ve got a lot of great teams running the places.”

“I’m sure you inspire a lot of loyalty,” she said.

“Doesn’t everyone like to think that?” He wasn’t naive to think everyone liked him, because that wasn’t realistic, but he hoped they at least respected him. “So...we didn’t get to my last question on our lunch date. Why did you take your last job? I know why you left it.”

She opened the oven, checked the dinner first and then pulled it out to sit. “I’ve got a salad and some bread also. Some snacks if you’re hungry now.”

“I’m good,” he said. “I get the feeling you don’t want to answer this question.”

“It’s not that I don’t. I think it’s more that I’m embarrassed over it. Or the outcome.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” he said.

“When I went to law school, I had all these ideals in my head about making a difference in the world.”

“Saving people?” he asked.

“Something like that. I don’t think I thought I’d save the world, just make a difference in some part of it.”

“I’m sure you did that plenty of times.”

“I did. And when it happened it was rewarding and fed my ego and confidence that it was the right decision.”

“But not as much as you wanted it to be?” he asked. “Or not feeding it the way it needs to be?”

She picked up her wine and moved to the living room. Her place wasn’t that big. He could see the kitchen from where she sat on the couch. Rather than sit in the chair there, he joined her on the couch.

She grinned and turned so she was facing him, put one knee up. She was wearing baggy jeans that were in style but showed her tiny waist with a purple cotton shirt she had tucked in.

It still wasn’t bold or fancy, but it was better than the plain suits he’d seen her in.

“I didn’t save as many people as I thought and the rewarding part didn’t last as long either. It made me feel like a bad person that their win fed me the need to keep going.”

“Why?” he asked. “You were doing your job. One that was demanding, stressful and time consuming. Taking time to celebrate is a good thing to keep you recharged to do it again. It wouldn’t pull you away from the next person that needed your help.”

He saw her eyes start to fill when he said those words. He was doing one shitty job impressing Mia and wasn’t sure why he always seemed to say the same thing.

“That is very nice of you to say.”

“Then why do you look upset? Talk about fumbling on a date. Good lord, I’m starting to think I suck at this and it’s why I’m still single.”

She put her glass down, then took his beer out of his hand and set it next to her wine.

Her hands went to his face and her mouth to his.

Guess he wasn’t fumbling as much as he feared.

The kiss started out slow and then she nudged his mouth open, her tongue

sliding in.

He tasted the sweet wine on her lips, the two of them making out like teens who couldn't get enough.

But they weren't teens. They were adults and she finally lifted her head.

"Now I feel better."

"Glad to know," he said. "Can you explain why you did that when I thought I was making a mess of things?"

"You're not making a mess of things. What you said I needed to hear. I told my sister this morning that I felt like such a failure in my career compared to them."

"Don't compare yourself to people. I can't stand it when people do it to me and I would never to anyone else."

"Morgan told me that too. The truth is, I saw what you made of your life and the circumstances around it and how it came about and here I left my last job because it was just so overwhelming for me."

"There you are again, comparing me and you. Don't do that. I'm sure you've touched and helped many more people than I have."

"In numbers," she said. "Sure. But they forget me after. This is where the embarrassing part comes from. For some reason I thought I'd help my clients and they'd be thankful and remember I was the one that made a change in their life."

"I'm sure they do," he said.

She started to laugh. "No," she said. "Not all. Probably not many. And to think that was selfish on my part too and I shouldn't be that way. I never used to be either. I don't know where in my life made me think that those down on their luck would be grateful to me. I was providing a free service to them. That they needed in their life. A life that many would never want to live. So there is the other embarrassing part. Why did I think so highly of myself? And when that happened, I guess my confidence went down the drain along with thinking I was a bad person needing them to feed my ego."

He would have never expected to hear this from her. He didn't want her to feel that way either.

"Everyone is entitled to feel the way they want. I'm sure you weren't pushing it on others."

"I wasn't," she said. "It was this internal feeling that I had. I never felt like I could do enough half the time toward the end. It was one caseload after another. Even winning didn't feel like winning. There was little to no joy in

my job. So again, selfish of me to want to find joy when those I was representing just wanted to survive.”

“Stop,” he said. “You can’t be the best you are if you can’t put the effort in. And in order to have the energy for the effort you need to see some rainbows to know it’s worth it to continue on effectively. It sounds as if it’s exactly as you said. You were burning out mentally and physically. You’re no help to your clients if you can’t perform.”

“You get it,” she said. “And I think I just needed to hear that from someone else other than my family. I hope you aren’t just saying that because I kissed you and you want to get me in bed.”

He laughed at the grin on her face. “Oh, I definitely want to get you in bed, but it won’t be tonight and I don’t say things to women to get that. I am who I am and either a woman wants me for that or they don’t.”

“I want you,” she said. “And for me to say that so early into seeing someone says a lot about how I feel. I worry you’ll think I’m a nutcase. Or a headcase now.”

“No more than I worried you thought it about me and my hatred for Christmas.”

“Not the same thing,” she said, picking her wine up and taking another sip. Guess they were done kissing, though he had to admit he was thrilled she’d taken the first step.

“No,” he said. “It’s not, but not for anyone to judge either. It’s between us. Can I admit something to you?”

“Of course,” she said.

He hadn’t planned on saying this to her, but since she bared so much of her soul to him, it felt like the thing to do.

“When I first saw you I thought you were smoking. Then I told myself there is no way you’d have anything to do with me.”

“Why would you think that?” she asked. “Do I come across as stuck-up?”

“You don’t,” he said. “But I’ve spent a lot of my adult life around women who like the way I look and the money behind my name, but not how I got that money.”

“Not fancy enough for them?” she asked.

“Exactly.”

“That’s not me,” she said. “I’m not some fancy lawyer as you can tell. I don’t dress over the top, as I didn’t want to make my clients feel uncomfortable. I only wear suits when I’m in court or have a meeting outside

the office.”

“Is that why your suits are plain?”

“Plain?” she asked, frowning. “I’m not sure if I want to be insulted or not.”

He laughed and tapped her on the nose. “Don’t be. I mean black and navy. Simple straightforward colors.”

“Yeah. I didn’t need to flaunt anything to the poor I was serving, though many I worked with did. I wanted them to be comfortable around me. To trust me. They can’t do that if they think I’m looking down on them by my attire.”

“Because you cared,” he said. “Simple as that.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“It’s not something they might have realized you were doing, but they would have realized you did the other if you were showing up in five-hundred-dollar suits and shoes. And...if you really needed your ego fed, you wouldn’t have cared and done it anyway.”

She laughed. “Not that I could have afforded that, but you make a good point.”

“Now that you are working at a different job, you could change that, but you aren’t. It’s not who you are. Don’t try to be someone you’re not. Just remember that.”

“I will,” she said. “Thank you for this talk. Why don’t we get dinner on the table and we can stop with all airing out our feelings. How about we talk more about fun things? Things we like to do.”

“I like to eat,” he said. “So how about I help you set the table and cut into that lasagna?”

“Sounds like a great idea to me. And while we are doing that, we can go back to what we did at lunch. You tell me something about you and I’ll tell you something about me. Fun things. Hobbies, likes and dislikes.”

“Again, works for me.” They got up to go to the kitchen. “It’s your turn. I said I liked to eat.”

“I like to cook,” she said.

“A perfect match then.”

She laughed. “I think you might be right.”

And he never thought that with another woman before and hoped to hell he wasn’t getting ahead of himself.

CHILDHOOD MEMORY

“Will you laugh at me if I said I’ve been excited about this all week?”

“No,” Cal said when he picked Mia up at her place the following Saturday. “It just tells me how much you can’t wait to spend time with me.”

She laughed at the adorable way he’d said that. The rough beard on his cheeks showed he hadn’t shaved in a few days. She noticed he did that a lot. Sometimes it was more trim, other times not there at all. Almost as if it was a last minute decision each morning when he woke up.

“There is that too,” she said, “but it has more to do with a childhood memory than anything else.”

Last weekend they’d played their game of taking turns telling each other things and somehow haunted houses came out.

She’d been once in high school with friends and Morgan. Her sister was terrified. She thought it was great.

Mia hadn’t realized how much she’d enjoyed it until Cal told her about a place he’d been a few times as a teen.

When he texted her a few days ago to say he found out that the haunted house was still there and open this weekend, and that he’d love to go if she was willing, she jumped on the opportunity to spend more time with him.

They’d gone to dinner last night and then back to her place for an hour or so, spent a lot of time making out and then he got a call about something going on at the liquor store in Albany and had to leave.

“Nothing wrong with childhood memories,” he said.

She noticed for a guy that detested Christmas so much he had no problem talking about any other memory in his life. Oftentimes with fondness too.

He was such a contradiction to her.

“No,” she said. “There isn’t. Everything okay last night?”

“Yeah,” he said. “One of the guys that was scheduled to close had a family emergency and had to leave. I have a firm rule of no one ever closing alone at any of my businesses. They know that.”

“Good for you,” she said.

“It’s a safety thing. No one can ever walk out alone. They go together. End of story. It’s one of those fireable offenses with me and I don’t have a lot.”

She squinted one eye at him. She bet he gave a lot of leeway to his staff. But he cared and not many employers did.

“I’m sure you don’t. It’s a good thing. My last job, we had a lot of issues. One of the attorneys had to call the police on a domestic violence situation. They were in the office later at night and the doors were locked, thankfully, but the guy was outside and high. He had a gun. He was threatening to break in. It helped the case more but was scary as hell.”

“Were you in the building?” he asked, frowning at her. She grabbed her jacket and turned to look at him.

“Yeah. I was on another level and locked myself in. We all had self-defense training after that though.”

“How long ago was this?” he asked.

“Last year,” she said. “Ready to go?”

She didn’t want to talk about that time. She’d lied to her family about being at work that late. They’d just lecture her, as they knew she was putting in too many hours as it was and then to add on them being worried about her safety hadn’t been something she wanted to heap onto their shoulders.

“I’m glad you’re not there anymore,” he said. “For a number of reasons. Brian has a security system at his place.”

“He does,” she said. “We did too. The police would have been called if someone broke in.”

“But it takes time to get there,” he pointed out.

“It does,” she said. She wanted to drop this. She knew his father was a detective and had been killed on the job. Though he didn’t seem to have a problem talking about his past, this was one of those things that maybe neither of them wanted to address.

Nor did she want someone to get all protective of her.

“Was that what caused you to leave?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Not fully.” They were walking out to his truck. “You know that I felt I just couldn’t do enough. I’d been feeling that for years. Once Morgan made the move here, the wheels started to turn in my head. I thought I’d be fine with her gone but realized I wasn’t. I missed her. It’s sad to think my best friend was my sister.”

“Why is that?” he asked. “I’d think that would be great. I’m an only child. I don’t even have many cousins. None around here.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “I had friends in school and college. Close friends. But we all went our own way. Those in law school with me went onto bigger and better things. None of us had time to keep in touch.”

She hadn’t extended herself much. She was so excited to get hired right away and was slightly insulted when many told her she was nuts and wasting her time and education choosing the career path she had.

Mia didn’t think so back then. She didn’t think so now. She was trying to get to a point where she knew she just had to redirect and that was where she was at.

It was better for her peace of mind to feel she didn’t fail and rather tried something and discovered she was ready to move on.

Maybe talking to Cal about it the other night helped her feel that way. She’d have to thank him for it at some point.

“I know that feeling. I had friends in high school, but many moved on or out of the area.”

“Please,” she said. “I bet you have more friends than I’ll have in a lifetime. You talk to everyone. People speak so fondly of you. Not only has Brian said how much of a chatterbox you are but my brother also commented how you’re a social butterfly at the picnic.”

He laughed at her. “Those are acquaintances.”

“Those are people that if you called them for something, most would give you a hand,” she said. “If you ever bothered to ask for help.”

They were driving now and he turned to look at her. “You’re right. But not the people that I would go have a beer with much on a Friday night. That’s a smaller group.”

“I don’t believe that. I think you have a lot of people you socialize with but don’t open up to,” she corrected.

He hesitated and then said, “Same thing.”

“Not really. Someone like you could never be lonely.”

He laughed. Not a funny sound. “Loneliness doesn’t mean you are alone.”

“You’re right,” she said, sighing. “Which is another reason I moved here. I was both. Lonely and alone. Though I don’t see Morgan much. Well, it’s about the same as I did when we both lived in Philly, but it’s knowing she is so close by to see in person. Not just a phone call.”

“That does make a difference,” he said.

“Tell me about this place,” she said. She didn’t always like to go down these paths of serious discussions.

“My memories of it are this old Victorian home. It’s part of one of the colleges. I’m not sure what they use it for when it’s not a haunted house. I think it’s the theater department.”

“I’m sure they use it for that. Plays or setting up films. Lots of things they could do and it’d be fun.”

“Did you take any classes like that in college?” he asked, grinning at her.

“I did one as an elective. It was fun but hard work. I thought it’d be easy. And boy, was I wrong.”

“I bet you aced all your classes.”

She snorted. “No way. Caden was the smart one. I got good grades, but I felt like I had to work twice as hard as others to get it.”

“Not everyone has things easy in life,” he said, grinning.

“No,” she said. “I bet many look at you and think it’s easy, what you made of your life. That you’re your own boss and can do what you want.”

“You’d be right and they’d be wrong,” he said.

“It’s not easy having all that responsibility on your shoulders. Being on call all the time,” she said.

“I figured you’d understand something about that. It’s all on me. A lot of people rely on me. I’ve got no one to push a late night call off to and if something happened to one of my employees because I did that, I’d never be able to live with myself.”

“And that is what makes you such a great person.”

“Hence, the reason you were looking forward to this date all week,” he said, smirking adorably.

She laughed at how he brought it around to him again. Her hand moved over and patted his thigh. “I’ve been looking forward to a lot of things, but we’ll start with this. Then maybe when we are done, could you show me your

house?”

“Sure,” he said. “It’s not too far from your brother’s. Your sister’s house is in part of the newer end. And I have to say, I wasn’t sure if you’d tell your family or not about me.”

“Is that a problem?” she asked. She wasn’t sure where he was going with this. “My boss knows.”

“No problem,” he said. “Not at all.”

He was grinning again. She wasn’t sure why and wouldn’t bother to ask. He’d tell her if he wanted to. And with the way he talked, she was positive she’d get it out of him at some point.

MADE HIM FEEL GOOD

The fact that Mia told her family about him gave him hope that this was going to be more than a few dates and move on.

They'd been on three dates so far, but this was the first they'd actually gone out and done something other than getting food.

He couldn't remember the last time he did something fun like this and, like her, had been looking forward to this all week.

After last Saturday when they'd talked about all the things they liked or hobbies, he realized they had more in common than he could imagine.

From food, to music, sports and haunted houses.

Mia was full of surprises. Even wanting to go and see his house.

"This place is huge. And kind of creepy on the outside and it's not even dark out yet," she said when he pulled up fifteen minutes later.

"Just like I remember it," he said. "It's been years. Are you going to jump into my arms if someone scares you?"

"Would you care if I did?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at him. She was in fitted jeans this time. A baggier shirt with knee-high leather boots on. If he noticed one thing about her clothing, it was that she only accented one part of her body.

Top or bottom, the rest was a little less fitted. Though the shirt was tucked in, you couldn't see her tiny waist, as it didn't hug her.

She still looked stunning to him and put it together with her tan jacket that hit her waist.

"No way," he said. "I have no problem getting my arms around you."

He reached for her hand, threaded their fingers together and she grinned

at him.

He wasn't sure the last time he held hands with a woman. Probably high school. It didn't feel juvenile to him though.

"All you had to do was ask for my arms around you," he said.

He paid for their tickets at the front door. There were a lot of people there and they couldn't get in just yet. "I feel out of place. Are we too old for this?"

"No way," he said. "My parents used to bring me. They loved this."

"Really?" she asked. "You don't talk about them much. I mean either way, good or bad."

"Not much bad to say," he said. "They were great people. Both of them. They are together now."

"You just have such a good attitude about it," she said softly.

"As I've said many times, it's not something I can change so why live in anger over it?"

They were let in and started to move around. The first snake that moved across the floor had her screaming and all but climbing up his body.

He actually picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His dick stood up to join the party even though he could see she was terrified.

When he started to laugh she slapped his arm. "Holy shit. You should have told me there'd be things like that. I thought there would be mummies or bloody people jumping out of places. Body parts. I didn't think there would be fake snakes."

She slid down his body until her feet were on the ground. "You knew they were fake," he said. "Let's go in here. The opposite room of the snake."

"Knowing it's fake and seeing it crawling toward me aren't the same. I've got a thing about bugs and reptiles."

"Now I know," he said. "I'm good at being a bug killer. I'll protect you."

If he felt the need to protect her more than just from fake bugs he kept that thought to himself.

She bumped shoulders with him and they walked through the rest of the house.

Yep, she jumped and grabbed him a few times. Hid behind him a couple others, but never got in his arms as she had with the snake.

He was disappointed.

"Can we stop and get a coffee for the drive back?" she asked. "I didn't think it was going to be this cold out today or I would have put a warmer jacket on."

“Sure,” he said.

They went through the drive-thru of a Starbucks and each got a coffee, then returned to Paradise Place so he could show her his house.

“Does your throat ever get dry from all the talking?” she asked.

He turned to wink at her. “Nope. It’s how you find out about people.”

“So you can help them?” she asked.

“Nah. Just being nice. It’s good for business and contacts. I get that from my father. He had a way to get people to open up to him.”

“I can see where that would come in handy in his job. What did your mother do? You never said.”

“She worked at a bank,” he said. “In the offices, not in the branches. I’m not sure what she did. She moved around a lot but was in the offices kind of behind the scenes work.”

He still had all his accounts at those banks and when he went in, many would comment about his mother and how much they loved her. It made him feel good.

He tried hard to be like them. Or how they’d want him to be in life.

“My mother’s a social worker. My father is a professor,” she said. “Middle class though I know many don’t think that when they hear about our careers. My parents helped us with what they could in college. Caden actually got a free ride. Morgan and I have loans we are paying off. Caden has been good at investing our money over the years. I haven’t had as much to invest as my sister. I’m sure her loans are paid for.”

“Her house is huge and beautiful,” he said. “But there are two of them there.”

“She bought it alone when she moved here. Had a big down payment. Cooper sold his childhood home that he’d lived in. Morgan’s house is better equipped for raising a family. Bigger and more modern.”

“My house isn’t as big as many here, but it’s a good size. More than enough space for me.”

“You didn’t grow up in Paradise Place. Not if you went to school with Brian because he didn’t go to the school district attached to this.”

“No,” he said. “I didn’t grow up here. My mother had friends who lived here. She talked about it all the time. How it’d be a great place to live and raise a family.”

They pulled into his driveway and he hit the button to open his garage.

Once he was parked, they got out and he opened the door to a mudroom.

“I’m not surprised that is why you bought a house here,” she said.

He just nodded his head. No reason to say anymore. It was obvious she figured out most of what he did in his life was to hold onto things that gave him a connection to his parents.

“My kitchen,” he said, holding his hand out as if he was on a game show pointing out new appliances.

She started to laugh. “You’re a riot. This is nice and big for someone who doesn’t cook.”

“I wasn’t fussy about what my kitchen looked like other than I wanted it to be modern. The house is about ten years old and, as I said, I’ve been here a while. I haven’t done much to it other than paint.”

He showed her around the three bedrooms, two full baths, living room, family room, office and dining room on the first floor. He had a three season room he loved too.

“This is big. Is your basement finished?”

“It is,” he said.

They went downstairs. “I’m not surprised you have a big bar down there. I bet this is where you entertain people that come over.”

“I do,” he said. “When I have people over which isn’t often.”

They moved to the main level and then the stairs to a loft. “Okay, this is cool. If I was a kid, I’d want this to be my space.”

He looked around the open area with workout equipment in it. He’d turned it into a gym.

“It would have been a cool space growing up,” he said. “But since it’s only me, it works. There is a three-piece bathroom and a spare bedroom too. Who knows, maybe someday kids will be up here.”

He hoped. If he could find the right woman to have a family with.

Someone that shared his values and understood that just because he had money didn’t mean he was going to throw it away on a fancy and flashy lifestyle.

At the root of it, he was who he was and wasn’t changing for anyone.

Though looking at Mia, the scary thought popped into his head, he might change for her.

He only hoped she wouldn’t want him to.

PLANS FOR THE NIGHT

“Are you taking Harper out trick or treating?” Mia asked Brian on Halloween.

“I am. Not far. Just to my parents and sister’s, and Robin’s brother’s house. Our neighbor in the back, Blair, has a son that is the same age. Not much more than that.

“Sounds like fun. I miss doing that. I mean I used to love to hand candy out when I was a teen. Not many came to my place where I lived before this.”

“Are you going to hand it out tonight?” Brian asked.

She wouldn’t lie to her boss. He didn’t ask where she was handing it out or if she was doing it alone. “Yes, I am.”

“It’s pretty crazy around Paradise Place on Halloween,” Brian said.

She was going to find out. Hence, the reason she asked if he was taking Harper. She’d like to know if he was going to show up at Cal’s or not, but it didn’t seem as if that was the case.

“I’m sure it is. I can’t remember if Morgan did it or not last year. I don’t even remember if she was in the house. Maybe just got there. She’s doing it this year though. Cooper said he’d stay in the finished basement with the dogs and Leah so they don’t get worked up with the doorbell.”

“We’ll get back in time to hand out candy too,” Brian said. “I’m leaving in a few to get it all done before dinner since it’s only family.”

“Sounds like the smart thing to do,” she said and watched her boss walk out of her office.

It’d been a few weeks that she’d been dating Cal.

They had a lot of fun together. She was looking for even more.

He knew how much she loved handing out candy. Again, one of those conversations the two of them had one day. She swore he knew more about her than anyone else she'd dated for twenty times the length of time.

When he suggested she come over and hand out candy tonight, she jumped at the chance.

Then she realized he probably wanted her to cook for him. Or at least she teased him about it.

He said he'd take care of dinner. Which she knew meant he was picking it up.

She didn't care one way or another.

At five, she left the office and drove the twenty minutes to Cal's house. Not a bad commute. She was about twenty-five minutes away, but only ten from Cal's house.

When she pulled into his driveway, she saw lights on in the house but not the front porch. She supposed that made sense. She'd seen some kids already out on her drive here.

She got out and was going to go to the front door, but the garage door opened so she changed directions and went through that way.

"Hey," he said to her. He eyed the bag on her shoulder. "Are you going to change?"

"I'd like to," she said.

"You know where the bathrooms are. No reason to get sauce on your clothes."

"What did you get?" she asked.

"Pizza and wings. A salad too."

"It all sounds yummy."

She moved to the half bath and shut it on him, then changed out of her work clothes and into jeans and a sweater. She had another outfit for work too...just in case the rest of the night went as she hoped.

Not that she said one word to Cal about it, but she was pretty sure he'd have no issues with it.

When she came out of the bathroom, Cal was at the island in his kitchen. Plates out, pizza box open along with the wings and salad.

She dove right in and then started to laugh at the massive bowl of candy on the counter.

She'd offered to pick up candy and he said not to. That he had it covered. Something he did every year and the kids loved it.

“Go on,” he said. “Say it. I’m nuts.”

“You give kids a full-sized candy bar?” she asked. It was obvious. There had to be over a hundred of them there.

“I do,” he said. “I just buy them in bulk. I let the kids pick what they want.”

“It doesn’t cause fights?” she asked. Though he had all the good ones there and she wasn’t surprised.

“Not yet it hasn’t. Watch this be the first year.”

They started eating their dinner and she asked, “Why do you do that? What made you want to?”

“What kid doesn’t love getting a full-sized candy bar for Halloween? I figured why not do it?”

“I suppose you’ve got a point. And since you said the kids love it, something tells me they all know what house to come to.”

“I might have heard it said before that my neighbors get more and more kids at their house each year.”

She laughed. “It will be a fun night. I should have thought of dressing up. I did that as a kid too, but it didn’t cross my mind. I’m surprised you don’t decorate the house if you like doing it so much.”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m not much into decorating.”

“I never really was either. Just...”

Mia trailed off and stopped herself from saying Christmas. That she loved to decorate for that holiday.

“You can say it,” he said. “It’s not like I’m going to break out into hives.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked.

“It hasn’t happened once. Just don’t ask me to put on an ugly sweater if I go to any parties.”

“You actually go to parties?” she asked.

“If I can’t avoid it,” he said. “I’m not an ass, but I show up and leave after an appropriate amount of time.”

She felt bad for him. Considering the businesses he owned, she’d bet he couldn’t avoid things. The liquor stores probably did a booming business along with the bakery.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” she said. “I want to get ready to hand out candy anyway.”

And she didn’t want to put him in a bad mood. Not when her body was ready to do more than give chocolate to kids.

“Why don’t you finish your pizza and I’ll go flip the light on.” She heard laughing. “Come here and look.”

Mia put her pizza down and walked to the front of the house. He pushed the curtain back a little and she saw kids all outside kind of standing around waiting for him.

It reminded her of the Pied Piper a bit. Or...Santa Claus. No way she was saying that.

“Oh my God, you weren’t kidding. Turn the light on and I’ll go get the candy.”

She ran back to the kitchen and grabbed the big bowl just in time for the doorbell to ring.

Cal took it out of her hand. “Go finish your dinner, then you can do the rest.”

She wanted to say no, but she was hungry and went back to clean her plate.

Five minutes later she had the food put away and Cal was still at the front door letting kids pick out the bar they wanted.

“What happens if you run out?” she asked.

“I won’t. I’ve got a few more boxes in a cabinet. I always buy more than I think I need. What doesn’t go I bring to the stores for employees.”

“That’s nice,” she said.

For the next two hours she handed out candy to probably a hundred kids. Had to be more because Cal opened up another box of them that he had.

She was going to ask when he’d shut the light off. It was seven thirty and she had plans for the night.

“If you’ve had enough I can shut the light,” he said when he looked up and down the street. “I don’t like to shut it off if I think there are more kids waiting to come, but they look to be done.”

“You could just leave what is left on the steps with a note to take one each,” she said. “If you’re afraid someone got turned away.”

“Nah,” he said. “I might want some of them too.”

“I’ll take a few off your hands,” she said.

He locked the front door, shut the light and then put the bowl on the table in the formal living room.

“We didn’t have much time for me to even get a kiss,” he said.

“Now you’re talking my language,” she said. “If you’re up for it, I’ve got a change of work clothes.”

He grabbed her hips and yanked her against his body.

“Is that answer enough for you?”

Considering he was hard as a rock, she did get the answer she wanted.

“I’m not sure why you waited so long.”

“The kids wanted their candy,” he said.

“No,” she said. “For tonight. I wonder if I didn’t bring it up if you would have.”

“I was waiting for you,” he said.

She found that sweet and not surprising at all.

He grabbed her hand and started to pull her to his bedroom, then shut the door.

“I’ve been thinking about this for weeks. Maybe since the first lunch we had.”

“Then you aren’t alone,” he said. “Could be why I was so mad at myself for the way I acted.”

“Let’s not talk. There are more important things to do.” And she didn’t want to run the risk of one of them putting their foot in their mouths.

There were other things she could put in her mouth. He could too.

The fact he reached for her sweater and pulled it up over her head fast said he had the same idea as her.

They were both reaching for the other’s clothing, shedding articles fast, the two of them doing the naked dance around his room until he picked her up and almost tossed her on the bed.

Mia started to laugh and realized that she might not have laughed much in her life when it came to sex.

She’d never been with a man that made her feel like Cal did.

He silenced her laughter with a kiss. One meant to scorch.

Her hips bucked up against his, the heat of his cock rubbing between her lower lips.

She was almost gone enough to let him in, but he must have realized what was happening at the same time she was.

They were just so in tune with each other.

He rolled fast, found a condom in a drawer and opened it. She pulled it out of his hand, nudged him on his back, straddled his thighs and rolled it down.

She moved over to line him up and sat down.

“Oh God,” she said. “I can’t even tell you how good that feels.”

“I can tell you,” he said. His eyes were closed. There was a growth of beard on his face and his hips were lifting as she was sliding up and down.

“Another time,” she said. “No distractions.”

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. Soft and sweet and full of heat.

He reached forward and put his hands on her waist, then tugged her closer to him fast so that she landed on her hands around his shoulders.

It put her breasts right in front of his mouth, him opening up and latching on.

Her head went back at the sensations filling her body.

She started to move faster on his cock, him meeting and retreating with her.

His teeth came down and started to nibble a little and she let out a moan.

It'd been way too long since she'd been in this position and her body had decided that the pressure was too much.

She was moving so fast now she felt like she was the clumsy puppy with two big feet running upstairs.

Cal must have sensed what was happening, his hand going to her hips and holding her into place as he just lifted up harder and faster into her.

Her moaning got louder, but she couldn't seem to get to where she needed to be.

Then the next thing she knew she was on her back. He rolled her so fast, had her legs up, her knees almost at her ears and she was screaming out his name as everything in her body opened up and flooded out.

He was pumping into her so hard and rapid, grunting like she was moaning and then just collapsed down on top of her.

Her legs slid down and her eyes shut. Or maybe they'd been shut the whole time, but she couldn't remember.

“I'm glad I've got clothes with me for tomorrow,” she said.

“Why?” he asked. He rolled and flopped, the two of them staring at the ceiling.

“Because I'm not sure I can get up to go pee right now let alone get dressed and drive home.”

“I think I'm in the same boat. Give it a few minutes. I was hoping we could try again, but you might have just worn me out.”

She turned on her side. “Maybe I can crawl and get us each a chocolate bar for energy.”

He leaned forward and gave her a loud smacking kiss on the mouth. “I

knew you were perfect.”

“I might have been thinking the same thing.”

INSPIRATIONAL AND ANNOYING

The following Wednesday, Mia ran home to change after work and then rushed to Cal's house.

If it wasn't for the fact that she was meeting his grandfather, Jim Perkins, tonight, she would have canceled and stayed home to lick her wounds.

Instead she put a smile on her face and went to the front door.

"Hey," Cal said when he opened it. He leaned in and kissed her. He had a massive grin on his face and she found it both inspirational and annoying that he was almost always happy.

She'd only ever seen him angry—which wasn't even much—when she commented on him being Santa.

"Hi," she said.

"What's wrong?" he asked right away.

"Nothing," she said.

"Come on now," he said. "I can tell. When you force a smile, it looks like your lips are frozen from a Botox injection."

She started to laugh. He did have the ability to make her do that. "How much do you know about Botox?"

"Only what I overhear women talking about and it's not a lot because I normally run in the other direction. You're not nervous about meeting my grandfather, are you? He's harmless."

"No," she said. "I'm not."

"Then what is it?"

She didn't want to talk about her rotten day. "It's fine. Just work."

“It can’t be fine if you’re upset. Or maybe you’re annoyed. Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re upset.”

She walked over and flopped on the couch. “When is your grandfather getting here?”

“Not for another thirty minutes,” he said. “He’s packing up dinner.”

“You’re not cooking for him?” she asked, frowning.

“My grandfather has long since given up trying to teach me to cook or coming here and having sandwiches or what I pick up. He made chili which he knows I love and he’s going to stop and get bread with it.”

“That’s a lot of work for him to bring it,” she said.

“Nope,” he said. “It’s in a crockpot and he gets little bread bowls. I’m good at hollowing them out and putting the chili in it with cheese. That’s my job. Now tell me what happened at work today and stop trying to change the subject.”

She let out a sigh. “A bad court day. I’m such a loser. I’m embarrassed on top of it.”

He frowned again. “Now I need to know what happened for you to feel like a loser.”

“I can’t even win in traffic court, Cal. *Traffic court*. I mean come on. It was my first case that I was going to get a verdict here. It’s not even anything big in the scheme of things, but everything else I’ve been doing is preparing for court or trial but nothing finalized. You know that. This is my first since I moved. Should have been a slam dunk.”

She just wanted to grind her teeth, but she’d learned a valuable lesson.

“Tell me how you lose in traffic court,” he said. “And what was lost?”

“My client, Penelope, she lost her license. The reason she hired me was to at least save her license more than anything else. She’s been in numerous accidents and has had speeding and other traffic violations almost every few months for the past several years.”

“Damn,” he said. “Sounds like she needs Driver’s Ed or something.”

“I have to go back to court and pretty much beg for a work license at this point along with safe driving courses. We lost because of her too.”

“What did she do?” he asked.

“She came fifteen minutes late. The judge was getting pissed. You don’t do that. More so when you’re new and it’s your first time meeting the judge. One that happens to be a bit of a hard ass.”

“Yikes,” he said. “It doesn’t sound as if it was your fault though. Why are

you being so hard on yourself?”

“Because it is my fault as it’s my responsibility to be on my client’s case and make sure she shows up on time. On top of that she came in in sweats and an old ripped T-shirt. I’m not saying you should dress up in a suit, but show some humility and give the judge and his courtroom some respect.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Did you tell Penelope to do that?”

“I did. It’s one of the first things I always say when going to court. I normally dealt with lower income clients and they might come in jeans, but they were clean and not looking like they just rolled out of bed from an all-weekend bender.”

“Not any better,” he said.

“Nope. Then Penelope kept interrupting him and the judge snapped at me to get control of my client.”

She’d been trying to do that, but Penelope kept shushing her and whining. That her father was paying for this and she couldn’t lose her license or she might get fired and she couldn’t lose another job.

She wanted to say Penelope should have thought of all that before she was driving fifty in a thirty zone a month ago.

The fact that there were so many points on Penelope’s license made it hard for her to argue that she should keep her license, but she was going to try.

That behavior hadn’t helped at all.

“That had to hurt,” he said.

“Stung like a bitch,” she admitted. “I didn’t want to raise my voice, but I leaned over and very angrily whispered to cut the shit that she was going to lose her license if she didn’t stop it.”

“Did she stop?”

“She did at that point, but it was too late. The judge read Penelope the riot act. Told her she was an ungrateful entitled child. No twenty-five-year-old wants to hear that. Then suspended her license for six months and mandated her to several driving courses.”

“Is there anything you can do?” he asked.

“Appeal. I’ll start that tomorrow. I told Brian what happened. He’d said this judge is harsh on anyone that shows no remorse or isn’t humble in his courtroom. If I’d known that before I would have stressed it to Penelope.”

“Do you think it would have made a difference?” he asked.

“Probably not. I’m sure Brian regrets hiring me.”

He started to laugh. "I doubt that. And maybe Penelope will learn from this. Do you think you have a chance for an appeal or whatever you need to do?"

"Oh, there is no getting her an unrestricted license back for those six months. That's a done deal. What I'm going to do is request a work license. If she decides she wants to drive outside of working hours and gets caught, she's on her own. I feel like there will be a lot of groveling involved, but I'll do it for the client."

"I wouldn't want your job, but sometimes we have to do those things in the end. You shouldn't let it bother you. I'm not sure what you could have done differently. Think of it this way. If you went back in time and stressed her behavior and attire and she still did those things, then what?"

"She would have still lost, and I'd still feel like an idiot, but not a failure."

"You shouldn't feel like any of those things," he said. "You can't control other people's behavior or the outcome of their behavior."

"I know," she said. "But lawyers are paid to help control that outcome."

"To a point," he said. "You know that. Come on, you have to. More so with your other clients from your past job."

"You're right," she said, putting her head back. "I guess I'm just getting down on myself and hate that. I had all these dreams in my head about moving here and my new job."

"What isn't working out?" he asked. "I thought for sure I'd be a highlight."

Mia turned her head and squinted an eye at him. "Totally the highlight," she said. "I think I'm just bummed that I thought I'd be riding higher than I am. I know I'll get there. I have to stop being so hard on myself. I spent so much of my career feeling like I let people down and was hoping for some...redemption in my self-esteem here. Does that make me sound childish?"

"Not at all," he said. "You're entitled to feel that way and you're not being childish. I don't think you've got low self-esteem at all."

"I never used to," she said. "I actually thought I was doing great here. Maybe I went into court cocky today. I believe that was it. I was thinking it was just traffic court. Most times when someone hires a lawyer, fines are delivered, fees are paid and everyone moves on."

"Then there you go. Learn and move on. Be confident," he said.

“And not cocky,” she said. “Thanks. I think your grandfather is here. I heard the door.”

“I’ll go help,” he said, standing up. “He likes scotch if you want to pour him a glass.”

She got up and opened the cabinet and saw so many bottles of things she had no idea what they were and wasn’t about to guess.

She’d wait for them to come back and ask which one. No reason to guess and get it wrong. She was sick of getting things wrong.

“Hi,” she said when Cal came back with his grandfather.

“You must be Mia. I’m Jim.”

She moved forward and shook hands with Cal’s grandfather. “You two look alike.”

“I told Cal he got my good looks. Seems to be working for him since he landed you.”

She smiled. “He must get his charm from you too,” she said.

“I’m charming, Grandpa. Did you know that?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Everyone loves Cal. Or so I’ve heard most of my life. The same with my son, Jack. He could talk anyone around into trusting him and being his friend.”

“That’s a nice trait to have,” she said. “I’m sure people liked to be around him.”

“They did,” Cal said. “Though I’m not sure everyone loves me. That’s kind of a generalization.”

“Just like they like to be around Cal,” Jim said.

She’d seen that already. When they’d go out, he knew so many people that would come over and talk.

He’d feel bad and introduce her. She was fine with the interruptions. She was coming to realize in a small area like this, being a businessman, that came with the territory. Morgan told her that she and Cooper were always stopped when they were out too.

“Dinner smells good,” she said. “Can I help with anything? Cal told me to pour you a scotch, but I’m afraid I’m not sure which one you like the best.”

“I’m not fussy,” Jim said. “Cal only keeps the good stuff stocked in the house.”

“The red label,” Cal said to her as he pulled the bread out of a bag.

“I’m told Cal has the honor of preparing the bread bowls.” She found the bottle with the red label and poured a glass for Jim and handed it over.

“He never lets anyone else do it,” Jim said.

“I’m the master,” he said. “Doing my part for dinner. I always cleaned up, right, Grandpa?”

“Always,” Jim said. “That’s Cal for you, doing his part.”

“It shows,” she said.

And she had to wonder how she ended up with someone that so many looked up to and wanted to be around.

It just didn’t seem like there was much wrong with the guy other than his hatred for Christmas.

Honestly, it wasn’t that big of a deal either and she wasn’t so sure why she let it bother her.

Maybe because it was her favorite holiday as a child and so much of her life in the past few years had just felt negative that she was looking forward to finding that happiness with her siblings, their families and her new life here.

Finding Cal had been a bonus, but now she’d have to settle during what she’d wanted to be a joyful holiday time knowing that it might not be with him.

ALWAYS HAD IT WORSE

“**M**y sister is going to be thrilled with the wine,” Mia said a few days later on their way to Morgan’s house for dinner.

Cal had been excited that Mia had met his grandfather. The two of them hit it off.

After Mia and his grandfather had gone home, he was in bed that night when Mia texted him to say how much she appreciated him.

That he made her see the good in things and to stop focusing on what went wrong and spend that time on what she could change to do right.

He played it down, not wanting her to think he was this do-gooder or ray of sunshine. He wasn’t. He hated to have that put on his shoulders all the time.

He was who he was, but when he was having a bad day, he just tried to remember that someone always had it worse.

Or that there was a time in his life that was much worse.

Not everyone loved him like many thought and he didn’t think otherwise.

“I’m glad,” he said. “Are you going to drink tonight?”

“I’ll have a glass for sure,” she said. “I had one at your house on Wednesday with your grandfather.”

“Just one,” he said. “Right? You’re not driving tonight though.”

“So maybe I’ll have two,” she said. “But you know, traffic court and all. Don’t need to get any tickets.”

He grinned at her. “Glad you are seeing the humor in it.”

“It’s all I can do. I did get Penelope her work license.”

“There you go,” he said. “And if she messes up, that’s on her.”

“Oh, I told her that. I played it up with everything I had to do and bend over backward and told her to not make me regret doing it.”

“Did you have to do a lot?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “That judge didn’t decide for the work license. If he did, who knows the outcome? It’s all part of the process and I understand that. Sometimes people need to hit rock bottom to see if they can climb back out. Not that Penelope has hit rock bottom compared to most people.”

“Not even close,” he said. “But in her world, she probably feels that way.”

“Not my problem,” she said. “I’m trying to get to that point. I can’t help everyone. I have to remind myself of that.”

“That’s right,” he said. “You’ll burn out if you think you can.”

“Which is how I got here to begin with. The house on the left,” she said.

Cal didn’t live that far from Morgan’s house, but they’d run out to get the wine and had made their way back.

He was happy Mia was spending the night and they’d have some time together. It felt like they didn’t get nearly as much as he wanted and he was to blame more than her.

She had a job working days and though she did work at night, she was home most of the time.

Him, he was working and out all hours of the day and night and weekends. It’d always been that way. Thankfully it didn’t seem as if Mia had an issue with it though.

He pulled into the driveway of the newer house that was massive. “This is big,” he said.

“Yeah. They are filling it with dogs and now a child,” she said.

“Can’t wait to see the dogs,” he said. “I always thought I’d get one, but I’m not home enough. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“That is how I’ve felt. But you could take a dog with you everywhere,” she said. “Well, not the bakery or restaurant. But you aren’t in there much. You could have a dog in your offices, in your truck with you, even in the liquor store, right? In the back?”

“I could,” he said. “As I said, I thought of it. I don’t know, maybe someday.”

It just felt as if it was one more thing to be responsible for on his shoulders and every time he thought of pulling the trigger he backed out.

He didn’t want to let anyone down. Not even a dog.

He supposed that was why he did most of what he had in his life. He always had this fear of letting his parents down. Or his memory of them.

“You know where to go to get one if you want a shelter dog. I’m sure you’re the saving type and would do that.”

He wasn’t comfortable with what Mia thought of him. He wasn’t close to perfect and everyone was damaged at some point in their lives from something that happened to them.

He worried that at times she used him as a measuring stick and brought herself down and he wanted to make sure that didn’t happen.

There was no way he could do her job. She was great at it and she cared. She cared whether she did a good job or not and that said a lot about a person’s character.

“I do know where to go,” he said.

They got out of his truck and he grabbed the bag of the wine and Mia had the beer he’d picked up.

The front door was opened before they even reached it. “Hi, Cal. Good to see you again,” Cooper said. “Not sure if you remember me or not. Lots of faces at the picnic a few months ago and it was my first and all.”

He did remember what the guy looked like. It was hard not to when Brian went out of his way to introduce them. “Robin has a lot of nice things to say about you and your shelter. Luke and Leia are great dogs.”

“Robin is my best volunteer,” Cooper said. “I’d be lost without her. And since I know she’s got another baby coming, I’ll be without her for a period of time. But she’s got more important things to focus on in her life.”

“She does,” Mia said. “Robin stopped in the other day to thank me again for working with Brian. I think it was her all along that pushed him to get someone so he could take some more time off.”

Cal wouldn’t be surprised, but Brian was good at balancing work and family. He’d seen it enough.

“I’m sure he wanted to do it,” he said. “He loves his wife and Harper and is excited for the next baby.”

Lucky bastard. He’d always wished he could find what his parents had in life and was losing hope.

Until Mia came into his life.

“Come in,” Cooper said. “Morgan is changing Leah right now. Good timing with her messy diaper.”

“I’d say,” Mia said.

The two of them moved into the house. He was surprised by the four dogs that were calmly walking with them to the back. There'd been some barking and then they all stopped.

"Can I pet them?" Cal asked.

"Go right ahead," Cooper said. "Harry and David are pretty well behaved. They will go mind their own business after. Mark and Donnie might find their way onto your lap. No matter how much we push them down, they come back up."

"It's fine," he said.

"Cal and I were just talking about dogs. He said someday he might get one and I told him he knows where to go."

"We can hook you up," Morgan said, coming into the room.

"Let me have my niece and you take the beer."

They set the beer and wine down on the island. "I'll get everyone a glass of something," Morgan said. "Cooper is doing the cooking."

"Cal doesn't cook," Mia said. "He buys everything. But his grandfather came over the other day with a big pot of chili and Cal is a master at hollowing out the bread for it."

"We all have to be good at something," he said.

"I hear you're pretty good at a lot of things," Morgan said.

He didn't know what to make of that statement and then turned to look at Mia and saw her flush. "What are you saying about me?"

"Not that," she said.

He'd have to ask her later. He didn't picture her as the type to talk about personal information like that, but he could be wrong.

"Why don't we have a seat," Morgan said. "Cooper has some snacks he was going to put out. Mia, tell us how work is going."

"You're just itching to return, aren't you?" Mia asked.

"Soon," Morgan said. "I told Mia I felt like a horrible mother that I wanted to return to work. She made me realize that I can be a mother and a vet at the same time. One doesn't define the other. I give stay-at-home mothers credit, but it's not for me. I just worked too hard in my career."

"That's good advice," he said, looking at Mia. "I hope it's advice she takes someday."

"I'm sure if I don't, my sister will remind me."

"Do you want kids?" Morgan asked him. Mia was smirking at him.

"I do. At some point. Though I'm not getting any younger."

“The same,” Mia said. “Someday for me.”

He wondered if that was a sly way for Morgan to get information that Mia might want. Though he didn’t understand that since he’d been told enough he never shut up and would talk about anything.

After that, they talked more about the brewery he was investing in, the animal shelter Cooper and Morgan ran, and Mia’s work.

It was a nice mix of conversations and he got to see his girlfriend with a baby in her arms and witness a soft side to her that he enjoyed seeing.

“Have you talked to Mom lately?” Morgan asked Mia.

“Not this week. We normally talk on Sunday. Just texting. Why?”

“She was asking about Thanksgiving,” Morgan said. “I know Caden and Sarah wished they could have come tonight, but Sarah was a little under the weather. They weren’t sure what you were doing for Thanksgiving.”

“I’m not cooking,” she said. “That is for sure. Who is?”

“Sarah is doing it this year since I did it last year,” Morgan said. “It’s us, Mom and Dad, Sarah’s parents and Harris, Kaelyn and the kids.”

“Harris Walker and Kaelyn Butler, with their kids, Scarlet and River,” she said to Cal. “But you know that, don’t you?”

“I do,” he said, laughing.

“I’ll be there,” she said. She turned to look at him. “Do you have plans? Can you come?”

“No plans,” he said. He wanted to spend it with her and it was falling right into his lap. “I’d love to go.”

“What about your grandfather?” she asked. “I don’t want him alone.”

“He’s not,” he said. “He lives in a retirement community now. They do a big Thanksgiving dinner and he likes to spend time socializing there.”

In the past he’d make excuses that he was busy so that his grandfather didn’t feel as if he couldn’t enjoy himself.

There was never any fun when it was the two of them for that meal and they’d normally go out to eat. He couldn’t remember the last time he had a home-cooked Thanksgiving meal. Before his father was gone most likely.

“There you have it,” Mia said. “Add two more to the list. I’ll make sure to tell Mom when I talk to her tomorrow.”

A few hours later, they were leaving Morgan’s house and driving to his not far away.

“Your sister and Cooper are great people.”

“They are,” she said. “Thanks for putting up with my family. Sorry if I

put you on the spot about Thanksgiving.”

“You didn’t,” he said, reaching his hand over to hold hers. “I wanted to spend it with you and it worked out well to come about that way.”

“Me too,” she said. “Morgan is good that way. It’s like she knows what I need or want and makes sure I get it.”

“So all those questions were for your benefit and not hers?” he asked.

Mia laughed. “No. She was being nosy. Being the baby of the family, I had everyone always watching out for me. It’s kind of annoying, but I get it.”

“That’s nice,” he said. “I’m sure you did your fair share of watching out for them too.”

“In my way,” she said. “And you’ll get to meet my parents in a few weeks. If you’re okay with that?”

“More than okay,” he said. “I know things might feel as if they are moving fast.”

“No,” she said. “They aren’t. Or don’t. I can’t explain it.”

“No need to explain,” he said. “I feel the same way.”

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Me too.”

He was going to do everything he could not to lose this.

A GREAT GUY

“I hear you had a good time at Morgan’s last night,” her mother said to her on Sunday afternoon.

“We did,” she said. “I’m assuming you talked to Morgan. Did she call you or did you call her?”

“I called her. I call pretty much daily to see how she is doing or check in on Leah.”

Mia hadn’t realized that. Her mother didn’t call *her* daily.

Though she was sure it’d annoy her if that was the case. The daily texts were enough in her mind.

But she supposed if she was home with just a baby and dogs she might want some more adult conversations too.

“Morgan seems to be doing well to me,” she said.

“Oh, she’s doing great,” her mother said. “But she is itching to get back to work.”

“First Monday in December,” she said. “I heard about it last night. Not sure how Cooper got her to agree to all that time off.”

“I think Morgan is settling in now that the baby is in a routine. Plus Cooper figured the first of the year is best to start Leah with a nanny. They still haven’t gotten it worked out yet.”

“I know, Mom. We talked last night.”

Mia was laughing when she said it. She supposed her mother was used to filling her in in the past year since Morgan had only recently moved here. But now she was back to talking to her sister more and knowing what was going on.

It was funny to her that Cooper and Caden were the ones struggling to find a nanny that they liked. They'd gotten it narrowed down to three people and hoped to make a decision soon, but Cooper still wanted some time with the baby.

"I forget," her mother said.

"It's fine. But we did have a good time. Cal can get along with anyone."

Her mother laughed at her dry tone. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I mean it didn't come off the way I wanted it to. He's a great guy."

"That's not a bad thing," her mother said. "Talk to me more. Something is bothering you."

"I can't put my finger on it. I like him a lot. Maybe it's just that everything is moving so fast and I'm looking for something to be wrong."

"I was just going to suggest that to you," her mother said. "The question is why you are looking for something."

"This is so stupid and I hate even voicing it. I mean it sounds ridiculous to me."

"It's not if it's something you feel," her mother said. "Tell me."

"In the past few years I've seen more negative than positive. Cal is just this positive guy and I'm waiting for it to be too good to be true."

"It's not ridiculous," her mother said. "But you are looking at it wrong. He's had some tragic things happen in his life. Maybe he is the way he is to overcome that?"

"I don't know. I think you're right. From what I've heard of him and his parents, they were pretty good-natured to begin with. I think what happened to him would have broken me."

"No," her mother said. "It wouldn't have. You're stronger than that. I'm concerned about you."

"Don't be," she said, sighing. "This is your social worker background coming out."

Her mother sighed. "Mia. You've always been headstrong. I know being the baby you felt you had to prove yourself more to everyone else. I'm trying to find out where the daughter I had that wanted to fight for so many people has gone."

"I think she's just gotten worn down. I thought for sure moving here I'd be revived."

"I thought you were," her mother said.

“I was.”

“Please don’t tell me that stupid traffic court case got you down,” her mother said.

She was laughing. “It did that day, but I’m fine now. I’m used to not winning or fighting hard to get a little win at my last job.”

“Then I don’t see the problem here,” her mother said. “You love working for Brian and you love the area. It sounds as if you’ve got a great boyfriend that we can’t wait to meet.”

“I don’t know what my problem is either other than I think I’m just waiting for it to crash down on me.”

“There you go again, looking for the negative,” her mother said. “Mia. That isn’t like you.”

“*I know,*” she whined.

“There has to be a reason for it. Are you falling in love with Cal?”

She let out a big sigh. “I think I am. I think that is the problem. I’m scared. Do I open myself up to this guy and then if it doesn’t work out, that is one more hit in my life?”

“Why not look at this as the glass half full thing? You’re in a new place. Have a new job. A great guy. If things don’t work out, then you learn from them. It’s early yet and you know it.”

“You’re right. I honestly think my biggest problem is I look at Cal and think, holy shit, after everything he’s had happen in his life and he’s gone through, look at how happy he is.”

“That’s right,” her mother said. “Look at how happy he is. You’ve always been the one to look for the good and I understand you got burned out. But get back to being that person. Let Cal help you get there.”

Why the hell hadn’t she thought of it that way?

Now she felt like an idiot.

“I needed to hear that, Mom. Thank you.”

“That’s what mothers are for.”

She’d left Cal’s house a few hours ago and came home to do laundry and clean the house. She had some work to do too.

Cal had said he was going to the liquor store to get some work done. He had to check on inventory and order or something like that.

She figured the guy just never sat still or took a day off.

He’d joked about it once, but she started to realize that maybe he was lonely for a man who was surrounded by so many that seemed to love him.

She grabbed her purse and decided she'd go buy some wine.

It didn't take her long to get there and she noticed Cal's truck off to the side toward the back.

She went in the door and couldn't believe how huge the place was. She had to figure out how to talk to Cal. She'd bet he wasn't out front or in the store.

She was moving down a few aisles when she heard his laugh.

Turning the corner, she saw him talking to a woman. She hopped back to see what was going on.

"Cal," the woman said. "You have to let me set you up with my friend. You'd get along great. I know it."

"Bethani, I appreciate the offer, but I'm seeing someone."

Mia let out a breath. She was glad he'd said something. She wasn't sure why she didn't think he would.

Nothing about him said he'd ever cheat or lie.

There she was again, looking for the bad and she was going to stop it.

"Well, come on now, Cal. Why didn't I know this?"

"Didn't know I had to announce it to the world. It's not like I see you often. What has it been, a few years?"

"Not even a year," Bethani said. "I hardly ever see you in here. I was just lucky to run into you now. So tell me about this woman you're seeing."

"And spoil the surprise?" Cal asked.

Bethani laughed. Mia felt like an idiot spying as she was.

"Tell me, is it serious?"

Cal grinned. "It is to me."

"Now I know it is," Bethani said. "You never admit that. Normally you're all about not kissing and telling. Can't wait to find out about the lucky girl. Or if it doesn't work out, then I've got a few friends for you."

"I'm good," he said and Bethani moved off.

"Well, if anything changes," Bethani said, laughing after she stopped to turn and speak again.

She went to move away and heard, "You can come out now, Mia."

She scrunched her nose up and turned the corner. "How did you know I was here?"

He pointed up to the mirror in the corner. She looked around and noticed multiple ones everywhere. "I saw you walking down another aisle and then not again. I know this store well and I figured where you were."

“Did you only say what you did to that woman because I was listening?”

“No,” he said. “She’s a gossip. I wouldn’t say anything to her unless I didn’t care if people knew. Or maybe I wanted more to know. You overhearing it was a side benefit.”

It was the look in his eyes and the fact he reached for her hand and gave her a kiss that told her he was telling the truth.

Not that she thought he’d lie either, but her mind had been all over the place today.

She came here to get that to stop and tell him.

“That’s good to know. Can we talk?”

“Oh boy,” he said. “You came here to talk to me? Maybe I shouldn’t have told Bethani what I had. She could be spreading the news and then the next time I see her I might have to let her set me up with her friend.”

He gave a mock shiver and she playfully slapped his arm. “Stop it. It’s not bad. I just was talking to my mother and realized some things and told myself that I wanted you to know. I’m not really that spontaneous.”

Which shocked her that she did what she had. Normally she thought everything to death. As she’d been doing for weeks.

“Let’s go in the back,” he said.

She noticed he had a tablet in his hand. “Are you sure I’m not interrupting you?”

“You can interrupt me anytime you want. In this case though, I’m just doing one more walk through before I place orders. You know, the holiday rush and all.”

She followed him to the back and then to a small office. It wasn’t pretty and more functional, but she reminded herself he had an office space he worked out of and this was a shared one. That he had a manager for the store and he only came in to look things over or help out.

“I know you’re busy today, but I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” he asked. He was frowning and looking concerned.

“That I’ve been acting like an idiot. Or not myself. That is more like it. Talking to my mother I realized how negative I’ve been about so many things. That I burned out and moved here and though I hated that, I made the decision to start over. I did the best I could at my last job and I wasn’t doing what I could for my clients.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. That you knew you did what you could and sometimes it takes a bigger person to admit it’s time for a change.

Making changes is hard for anyone.”

“It is,” she said. “But my mother reminded me I’ve always been this fighter. That I had to fight being the baby because I wanted everyone to see I was as good as Caden and Morgan.”

“That’s the good thing about being an only child,” he said. “But I’m sure your siblings didn’t see it as you do.”

She loved he was grinning at her. “You’ve got a point. And I told my mother that there have been so many knocks in my life lately that I’m looking for more where I never did that before. I’ve got all these great things happening to me and here I am looking for the shoe to drop.”

“It’s human nature.”

“See,” she said, pointing at him. “That, right there. You’ve had all these tragic things in your life and yet you are still a positive person or trying to make me feel better about myself. You’re too good to be true.”

He snorted. “Hardly that. I’m everything you say or said. Some of it is my nature, the other, well, I’ve been at that rock bottom you’ve talked about. Been there emotionally. Nothing is that bad. I can control these things, I couldn’t control that.”

“My mother said I should let you help me get back to the person I used to be. That’s why I grabbed my purse and ran out the door. You are helping me and I didn’t even realize it and here I am still looking for something to go wrong. I wanted you to know that I see that now. I recognize it. I’m going to stop.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m not,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m being realistic and aware. The past month or so, that isn’t the person I am. I don’t know how I let myself get in this hole, but no more. It’s over.” She grabbed his face and gave him a big smacking kiss on the lips. “You hear me, it’s over.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You know, a lesser man might pale when their girlfriend said it was over.”

She yanked him closer and hugged him. “We aren’t,” she said. “And I think that was some of why I was acting the way I was. What I feel for you is stronger than anyone else I’ve been with and it’s a shorter period of time. I’m looking for something to go wrong rather than appreciating everything that is going right.”

OUTLOOK ON LIFE

Cal was holding Mia and running his hand over her head.

When he'd seen her come into the store, he was thrilled.

She'd left his house after breakfast when he would have rather spent the day with her.

But he knew she had work to do and there was always something he could find to kill the time.

It's not like he wanted to stay home alone and watch TV or stare at the wall. He'd been doing that enough at night, like he was used to.

But hearing everything she'd just confessed to him made him realize how much he cared for her.

He wanted to say he was falling in love with her.

He was positive he was, but he didn't think she was ready to hear it. Not yet.

"I know you think I'm perfect."

She laughed. "Sometimes."

"I'm not," he said. "No one is. I just have a different outlook on life than many do. Things happen to us to shape that. If my parents hadn't died, I doubt I'd be where I am in life."

He'd thought of that enough. Maybe that was why he worked so hard to remember the way they were and could continue to make them proud.

"I don't believe it," she said. "Maybe you wouldn't have the career you do. Or as many zeroes in the bank. But you'd still be the same person deep down. That comes from within and you know it."

It was humbling to hear her say those words to him. "Thank you. I'd like

to think so, but you just don't know."

"You do know. If I'd taken a job at a high-powered law firm out of college like some of my friends did, I could still be burned out but for a whole different reason. You know that. But it wouldn't have changed how I felt about it all. That maybe I wouldn't have been able to help as many people as I would have liked. My bank account would have a lot more zeroes in it though. See, kind of the opposites here."

"I'm glad you can look at it that way," he said. "I think you're right. We need these things to happen in our lives to help us make other decisions."

"And now that I came here and bared my soul to you once again, I guess I should go buy my wine and let you get back to work. I know you had a lot to do this week."

He frowned. "Is that why you left so early?"

"What?" she asked, moving out of his arms.

"Did you leave so early because I was talking about how crazy things were going to get with the holidays coming up?"

It was one of those conversations that was talked about last night at Morgan's. How busy the liquor stores were for Thanksgiving and Christmastime. Even the bakery and the restaurant. He wasn't worrying about the brewery and pub. That paperwork hadn't been finalized, but by the first of the year they'd be full swing into brewing and bottling. He'd be out there talking with his contacts once he owned part of the business.

He was hoping that was finalized in a few weeks too.

"I didn't want you to put off work because I was there," she said. "It didn't seem as if it was things you could do from home and even then, me hanging out there wouldn't make it easy."

"I feel bad for that," he said. "It was just conversation. I've got managers that can do this."

She tilted her head. "You work so much because you don't want to stay home by yourself, right?"

"Who likes to sit home alone?" he asked, laughing.

"A lot of people," she said, grinning. "But they aren't social like you are. I guess I didn't think much of it."

"But you've got work to do too," he said. "I know that."

"I do."

"Would you want to do it at my place? I'll leave you alone, but maybe having you in the house while I watched football, I wouldn't be alone but

wouldn't bug you either."

"It took a lot for you to say that, didn't it?" she asked.

It had. He'd never admitted it to anyone before.

"See, you know me," he said. "You see it because you look for it in people. You worry that you're failing, but you're not. You see what people need even when you're worrying you don't."

"Wow. My mother was right."

"About what?" he asked.

"Letting you help me. That statement right there reminded me all the reasons I did what I had for years. And that I haven't lost the need to do it. It doesn't have to be in my career either."

"That's right," he said, pulling her close. "You're doing it for me. Your boyfriend."

"We seem to talk so much with each other, but there are times I wonder if we don't always say the important things. I think it's because for as much as you talk, you're very guarded."

"I am," he said. "I don't let a lot of people in as much as many think."

"Because you're afraid of losing them too," she said in wonder. Almost as if it just occurred to her.

"You're not the only one that might be insecure, Mia," he said softly. "Some people just hide it better than others."

"I guess you're right. Why don't I go buy my wine, go home and get my laptop and a change of clothes? Do you care if I spend the night?"

"I'd love it if you spent the night," he said.

"Do you have any food in your house for me to cook you dinner?"

A smile filled his face. "Not what you'd want, I'm sure. Tell me what you want to cook and I'll stop and get it at the store."

"You buy what you want to eat," she said.

"Then go pack. Tell me the wine you want. I'll just grab it. No reason to pay for it. I own the place."

"I don't know what I want. I'm not all that fussy. Get something that goes with whatever dinner you want." She gave him one more kiss. "I'll see you in an hour. Or do you need more time?"

"An hour is good," he said, looking at his watch. It was only one at this point.

"See you at your house."

He finished up his work, grabbed two bottles of wine. One red and one

white. He'd cover his bases for when he got to the store to buy some food.

"I'm heading out now," he told Mark, who was at the register. There were more people working on the floor. He was positive they'd seen him with Mia in the office.

"Everything okay?" Mark asked.

"Yes. Mia and I were just talking and now I'm heading home to meet her there."

Mark lifted his eyebrow. "The girl you're seeing?"

"Yes," he said.

Mark grinned. "One of the customers earlier checked out and was chatting. She's in here a lot. Said she knows you and is always trying to set you up and you said you were dating someone. She was trying to get information out of me."

"And you had nothing to give. Her name is Mia and we've been seeing each other a little over a month. She's an attorney who works with Brian. She moved here recently from Philly."

"Makes sense," Mark said. "You're not someone to date a customer no matter how often they hit on you. This had to be someone you'd have more serious conversations with."

"Something like that." He'd said more than he planned but realized there was no reason not to let people know about Mia. It'd be making the rounds soon enough, he was positive.

He drove to the store, ran into four more people that wanted to stop and talk. It never bothered him before, but now when he had someone to get home to, he didn't always want to shoot the shit.

He had pork chops in his hand, a bag of instant flavored rice and some carrots he picked up in produce as he walked through quickly. All easy enough things, he was sure.

He'd managed to beat her to his house but barely when he looked at his watch.

When the garage door was shutting he saw her pulling in and hit the button for the other side to open up, then waved her over to it.

"Are you sure you want me to park here?" she asked, getting out.

"Why not?" he asked. "No reason for you to leave it out and have frost on it in the morning."

"I'm used to having to clean my car off or warming it up. I might get spoiled this way."

“Get spoiled,” he said.

He held the door open for her with his foot while he carried in the wine and food.

“What did you buy?” she asked.

“Pork chops, rice and carrots,” he said. “I’ve got snacks here already.”

“You’ve got lots of snacks here,” she said. “And eggs and bread. If I can get up early enough I might even make you some breakfast.”

“Now that is sweet,” he said. “But I’ll make it since you’re doing dinner. I can handle scrambled eggs and toast. I eat it enough.”

“I’m going to let you do that,” she said, bumping into him on purpose.

She moved past him into his room. She had a suit on a hanger. “Just put your clothes anywhere.”

“I planned on it,” she said, letting out a laugh.

He went to the living room, turned the TV on to the football game. He’d planned on being home by four anyway to watch the Giants, but for now he’d settled on this game.

Mia came out with her laptop bag and pulled her laptop out, settled on his couch and opened it up. “You know the time I wasted moving around today? I could have just stayed here.”

“You could have,” he said. “Maybe you’ll consider it going forward on the weekends. If it works?”

“I can make it work,” she said, winking at him.

He’d take it as another step in the right direction even if he didn’t get to say that he loved her.

WANT TO CELEBRATE

“We’ve got the wine,” Mia said, walking into her brother Caden’s house two weeks later for Thanksgiving.

Her parents were already there. Morgan and Cooper would be over soon and she wanted to get here before Sarah’s side of the family so that she could introduce Cal to everyone.

“I’ll take it,” Sarah said. “Did you bring the whole store?”

She grinned. “I had to stop Cal. I told him eight bottles was too much.”

He would have brought a case, but she’d told him they weren’t lushes. He reminded her the bottles weren’t big and there were twelve adults there.

That’s when she said they didn’t each need a bottle a person. Not everyone drank wine, the guys would have beer most likely and the women weren’t getting drunk.

“I wanted to make sure there was enough,” he said and put the box down on the counter.

“More than enough,” Caden said. “Nice to see you again.”

“You too,” he said, shaking hands with her brother, then Sarah.

“Mom, Dad, this is Cal Perkins. Cal, my mother, Anne, and my father, Joel.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her parents’ hands.

“We’ve heard so much about you,” her mother said. “All good things, don’t worry.”

“I don’t have a lot of bad to say about him,” she said. “I won’t insult him and say he’s perfect again. I’m learning he’s not the more I stay at his house.”

There was a lot of laughter to that statement.

She'd been joking but not really.

He didn't cook, which she knew. But he did clean up when she cooked.

He left his dirty clothes on the floor more times than not until he finally grabbed them to toss them in a basket.

When he shaved, there were the remains of whisker shavings left that the water didn't rinse away until he cleaned his sink.

Since there were two sinks in the bathroom, she didn't have to worry about it but noticed it just the same.

"Hey," he said. "You're no angel. You snore."

Her jaw dropped. "I do not," she said.

"Okay, fine. You talk in your sleep."

"No," she said. "That is you."

"He's right," Morgan said. "You always talked in your sleep when you were tired or stressed."

"Oh," she said. "No one has said anything to me before."

"We did when you were a kid," her father said. "It's possible as an adult you don't do it much or no one wants to say anything. Obviously Cal has no problem pointing it out."

"He only did it because I said what I did," she said. "He probably enjoys the fact I talk in my sleep. I'm sure I'm doing more of it because he's talking back to me."

"Well," he said. "You don't know that, do you, being that you're sleeping and all."

She'd spent the past few weekends at his house. It was working for them better than she thought it might.

He'd even left a few times to do some work and she stayed and worked or cooked. She cleaned some too. Those whiskers and all. She'd done some of his laundry when she washed the sheets.

It's not as if he was a slob, but she could tell right away he wasn't used to living with someone.

Not that she was either.

"You make a good point. And I need some wine," she said.

"It's barely noon," her mother said.

"So? I want to celebrate," she said.

"What do you have to celebrate?" Cal asked.

"Nothing quite yet, but I'm getting there. I mean, it's going to work out and I'm excited."

“Tell us,” her mother said.

“I’ve been working on a personal injury lawsuit for a few months. My first one and I’m solo on it. The plan has been to settle without going to trial and the car dealership’s attorneys have finally decided to start negotiations. I put my offer on the table. Higher than I knew we’d get, but we have to start somewhere. They countered and it wasn’t unrealistic. It’s actually where we thought we’d land so we’ve got more wiggle room.”

She’d expected them to cut the three million dollars down to one million or less. The goal was to get anywhere from one and a half to two million. They could get more going to trial for sure, but it’d be long and drawn out and her client didn’t want that. She just needed to pay her bills that were piling up before she lost her house.

When the counter came back at one and a half million she’d wanted to jump for joy. First time out, it was a win, but she was going to try to get more for her client and went back with two million. It’s what she did, got the best she could. It’d be expected they’d go back and forth a few times.

Her client would still easily net over a million after legal fees and that had been the ultimate goal with the amount of debt Gabby had piling up.

“That’s great,” her father said.

“I know. This is huge. I needed it. I mean, it felt like a slam dunk, but that means nothing. A slam dunk could still take years, but I don’t see it. I countered and it’s in her court from there.”

“This will be your first big settlement amount, won’t it?” Caden asked.

“I can see it in your eyes,” she said. “You’re waiting to see how much of it you can invest. The bulk of it goes to Brian. I’m not sure my piece yet.”

The firm would get thirty-three percent after excess costs, of which there hadn’t been much. Brian would decide what to give her from that. He’d made an offhand comment about ten percent of that, which was fifty thousand as it stood if the car dealership didn’t budge.

The thought of getting that much at once was something she couldn’t have imagined years ago working in a not-for-profit and just getting a paycheck.

So yeah, that one check was almost three times the cut in salary she’d taken to come here. And it was one case of many she’d be doing a year.

“Nothing like watching your money grow,” Cal said. “Shares of my father’s Apple stock got me started.”

“What?” Caden asked. “Do tell.”

“Oh man. Here we go. Nerd talk,” Sarah said when Caden started to rub his hands together.

Cal laughed. “Back in the late nineties my father played four numbers in the daily lotto and won five thousand dollars. He felt lucky and told my mother he was going to take a risk and invest it. They threw a bunch of names in a hat of companies they were going to take a risk on.”

“Your father bought five thousand dollars worth of Apple stock over twenty years ago?” Mia asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t know any of that. Or I didn’t remember. After he passed it all came to me. I used his life insurance to buy the liquor store. Or secure the loan. I just kept rolling my money over. I never wanted to touch that when I realized how much it was worth, but in the long run I knew I could do more with it too. Or make a difference. It’s never good to leave all your apples in one cart.”

“You’re speaking my language,” Caden said.

“I ended up cashing out half of it to get to where I am today. I couldn’t bring myself to cash it all out.”

Her jaw dropped listening to this.

Brian had said Cal was a self-made millionaire, but he still had a nice nest egg in investments and she’d bet it wasn’t just in that stock either.

A lot of his wealth was assets, she knew. Rental properties and businesses. She didn’t know all of his revenue streams or how he paid himself. It wasn’t her concern and she wouldn’t ask.

Weeks ago this would have made her feel inferior, but today, it just made her proud of the decisions her boyfriend had made.

“Good decision,” Caden said. “Right now there are some stocks I won’t sell, and that is one of them.”

“Do I have any?” Morgan asked, walking in the door. “You know I don’t look at those things. I let you do it all and I just care about the statements. But the truth is, I don’t even look at them when they come in. It’s not like I’m going to cash anything out.”

“You both have shares in Apple and many others,” Caden said. “I’m pretty smart with my family’s money.”

“Yay me,” Mia said. “Then I’ll consider giving you some of my settlement.”

The talks of investments stopped after that when Sarah’s parents came in followed by Harris and Kaelyn.

Mia got to play with toddlers and hold babies.

She got shooed out of the kitchen by her mother and Sarah's mother, Gina. Even Sarah was pushed out and told to go relax with everyone else.

Cal seemed to get along with everyone, but no one was a stranger to him either, other than her parents.

She had to remind herself that he was outgoing and sociable. More than she'd ever been.

"You ready to start decorating?" Sarah asked her. "I heard you go all out for Christmas. Or Caden said you used to as a kid."

She looked at Cal, but he wasn't even paying attention. He was talking with Cooper about something.

"It's the only holiday I've decorated for in years. Not all out or anything. My last place was tiny. I've got more room where I am and plan on getting stuff out soon."

"Tomorrow," Caden said. "I know you. I remember you were decorating your room as a kid before Mom started."

"Not quite tomorrow," she said and then changed the subject. She knew there was no way Cal would decorate and she'd have to figure out how to get through the next month without upsetting him or stepping on toes.

When dinner was done, Harris moved over to talk to Cal. She'd always been in awe of him, being a professional athlete, former pitcher with the Mets, but she'd gotten used to it now. He was just her brother's brother-in-law at this point.

One who had a massive baseball clinic, along with other indoor sports being used out of his facility.

"I was going to talk to you at the picnic," Harris said to Cal, "but I hadn't gotten everything finalized yet. I was working it out and now it's ready to go. Or will be the first of the year." Harris waved his hand. "We've got two things starting new. One, kids birthday parties. I want to partner with someone for cakes and pizza. No reason to do it in house, but I want someone I can trust too. Whitney has filled me in on some of the businesses that you own. I hadn't known about the bakery."

It still amazed her how the six degrees of separation in Paradise Place worked with everyone.

Whitney Butler-Bridges was kind of like Cal in terms of knowing so many people and who did what.

"That sounds great," Cal said. "We can definitely work with that easily

enough. Both places are open seven days a week. I'm assuming the parties will be on the weekends?"

"And Friday night," Harris said. "Keeping it simple. The other big thing is indoor softball leagues for adults that will be flowing outdoors in the nice weather. That took more work with existing leagues to get them moved. They actually approached me for the use of my field. The problem there is most are going to want to drink or want alcohol and I don't have a liquor license. For obvious reasons when everything I've done is with kids. I thought I could pick your brain."

"You can," he said. "Anytime. I'm also finalizing a partnership with a brewer in Clifton Park."

"Interesting," Harris said. "Let me give you my number. We need to talk more."

Mia watched as Harris and Cal exchanged numbers and then lifted her eyebrow at him. "I can see the wheels turning in your head. I know a good lawyer if you need to draw up contracts."

"You'll be the first to know," he said.

Once dessert was cleaned up, she and Cal took their leave with everyone else. There were only two bottles of wine left. She'd been shocked so much had been consumed, but she'd had three glasses herself throughout the day and was feeling pretty good.

"You really do have the Midas touch," she said when they got back to his place.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Only you can go to a family holiday dinner and come out with potential business."

"He came to me," he said. "And nothing is finalized."

"Please," she said, waving her hand. "You've got a reputation and people know it. Harris, he's a good guy. He'd want to keep it with someone he knows or can trust."

"I'm sure we can work something out. I'm not one for mixing work and personal relations. I'll make it clear to him."

"You two aren't related," she said.

"No. But we share relations. In a way."

"I suppose you're right, all things considered."

It's not like she and Cal were married or anything. But if they were, Harris would be Cal's sister-in-law's brother. So yeah...kind of.

She had no idea why her mind was even going down a road like that though.

No, that was wrong.

Her mind was doing it because she realized weeks ago she was in love with Cal Perkins and that was why she was so terrified of things failing.

NOT GOING TO BREAK

“Can we talk for a minute?” Cal asked her.

“Sure,” she said. “Everything okay?”

He’d overheard her talking with her family about Christmas.

Not just decorating but where they were going to celebrate. Who was doing what. Gifts to buy for her parents.

Things that were normal but stuff he stayed away from.

He hated that she kept looking over at him and then changing the subject.

“Don’t feel as if you can’t talk about Christmas around me.”

“What?” she asked.

He laughed. “Just because I don’t like Christmas and it was a bad time in my life. Or around my life doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it.”

“I know,” she said.

“You say that, but I can see it. Think of it as chocolate again. Do you not eat chocolate around someone who doesn’t like it? Or don’t you even think about it?”

“Good point,” she said. “But someone who doesn’t like chocolate isn’t the same as what you went through.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“It brings up bad memories in your life,” she said.

“Everyone has bad memories in their life,” he argued. “That doesn’t mean I expect the world to stop around me. My businesses all decorate for the holidays.”

He wanted no part of it, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t have others do it. He wasn’t rude by any means, but he left it in their hands and no one even

asked him anymore.

It was no different than any other holiday they prepared for.

He even sucked up the Christmas music that would be played in the liquor stores starting tomorrow. He got through because he basically put earbuds in and played something else if he was on the floor or pretended something else was playing.

“I know,” she said.

“I want you to say you believe me. I’m not going to break over something silly like that.”

“Maybe you need to,” she said.

He frowned. “Mia. It’s been years. Let it go. I’m fine. I really am. Don’t change what you want to do because of my dislike of something. I mean it. I’m sure there are things out there you don’t like. You know, like sardines. Doesn’t mean I’m going to stop eating them.”

He watched when she did an involuntary gag. “They are gross.”

“Nope, they aren’t. And I’m still going to bring them home and eat them around you. See my point?”

“I suppose,” she said, putting her arms around his neck. “How about we go try to work off some of this food and drink we consumed today?”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Really, I am.”

He looked at her closely and saw the grin on her face. “I did notice you drank more wine than normal.”

“And you worried I was doing it because of the talk about Christmas?” she asked and burst out laughing.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Nope. It was just really good wine.”

“Good to know,” he said.

“And I had three glasses and I’m loose and limber with a turkey belly going on. I need to work it off and get it flat again. How about you help me?”

“I can do that,” he said.

“Right here,” she said, pulling his shirt up and over his head.

They were in his family room in the back of the house.

“Can’t wait?” he asked.

“Nope. We always have sex in the bedroom. I don’t want to be that boring person. We are too young and have no dogs or kids or anything else running around and getting in our way.”

He pulled her shirt up and over her head too. Might as well both get naked.

“I want to be insulted that you are insinuating that I’m boring.”

“I never thought you might be boring, but maybe you are. Prove me wrong.”

She reached for the button on his jeans, undid his pants and lowered them down fast with his underwear.

He kicked his sneakers out of the way and pulled the rest of his clothing off while she did the same thing.

Before he could decide where to move her, she got on her knees in front of him and lowered her mouth to his cock.

She didn’t even start out slow but all but dove on him, sucking him in and stroking up and down fast.

“Jesus,” he said. It was a full-on assault he hadn’t seen coming even though they were both naked.

He had to admit it was the first time he’d stood here and got a blow job by a woman and the fact it was the woman he loved should have said everything he needed to know.

His hands went into her hair and tried to slow her down, but she didn’t seem to want that to happen.

It was the first time she’d taken charge like this and he was going to let her have her way.

In his mind, it felt like she needed that as much as he did.

When she pulled her head back and just started to lick around the tip, he felt his eyes roll back into his head.

“You need to stop,” he said. He pulled her up to her feet. “I need a condom.”

“Or not,” she said. “I got a little shot in the arm. It’s been a month or so. We are good if you are.”

“Ah,” he said. “Part of being spontaneous.”

“I’m trying,” she said. “And stop talking. Good lord, you always want to talk.”

He laughed and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, his dick found her moist heat and slid in. Then he moved a few feet so that he was up against a wall.

Not that he thought he couldn’t hold her up, but he needed some leverage to enjoy this. Or make sure she did.

He had one hand on the wall, his other under her ass and he was moving in and out of her.

Her hands went into his hair, her mouth to his.

She'd never been this aggressive before with anything and he found he was thrilled.

Maybe he was boring and he was missing this in his life too.

Her fingers moved from his hair down his back and started to leave marks as he thrust in and out of her.

Her ankles were wrapped around his hips tight and she was starting to moan.

He knew she was close, he was too.

He kept doing what he was, knowing it'd get them both there.

Their hips bucked forward and back.

Their mouths and tongues tangling.

She started to come, her muscles squeezing him tight and he followed right after her.

Her head went back, his mouth to her neck.

When every spasm was out of his body, he found himself kissing her lightly.

"That was awesome," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "It was. I guess I need more of this in my life."

"See, boring," she said. Her legs slid down and touched the floor. "Now you're not so much."

"I guess not," he said. "And you learned to be spontaneous again."

"That's right," she said. "We are learning from each other."

She walked past him and into the hall bath not that far away. He reached for his jeans and underwear and pulled them on.

She came back out and got her underwear and shirt and put them on. He could see her nipples through the soft cotton.

"Do you know why we are learning from each other?" he asked. He just wasn't sure he could keep his feelings in much longer.

"Because we are good together?" she asked.

"We are," he said, pulling her close. "But more than that. Maybe you don't want to hear what I've got to say."

"I always want to hear what you've got to say," she said softly.

It was as if she knew the words that were going to come out of his mouth and was just waiting on them herself.

“That I’m falling in love with you. I think I have been for a while now.”

“It’s a good thing,” she said. “Because I’ve felt it just as long.”

“How come you haven’t said anything before now?” he asked.

“Because I overthink everything. But you know, get some good wine in me and everything shakes loose.”

He laughed. “I’m going to have to remember that. I love you, Mia.”

“I love you too, Cal.”

She moved out of his arms and then reached for her jeans. When she stood up she burst out laughing. She was laughing so hard that tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“What?” he asked. “Is there something on my face?”

“No,” she said. “Look at your glass doors.”

He turned and looked and realized he hadn’t been screwing Mia against the wall but the glass. Now there were two handprints and her butt cheeks showing from their bodies.

“Wow,” he said. “Good decorating look, don’t you think?”

“Most definitely. But it’s not staying.”

She moved to his kitchen, found the cleaner and came back to take care of it.

“You’re really good for me,” he said. “I guess I never realized that sometimes I don’t let loose as much as I should.”

“You’re good for me too. I rarely let loose so I’m glad we are doing it together.”

NOTHING TO REGRET

“To Mia,” Brian said when everyone had their drinks at the table.

“Come on now,” she said. “This is a Christmas party, not a work celebration.”

“Why can’t it be both?” Robin asked. “I hear congrats are in order.”

Mia smiled. It’d only taken a few weeks for them to get word that the car dealership had settled. They accepted the counter and Gabby was awarded two million dollars.

“Thanks,” she said. “I know we could have gotten more. Not being greedy or anything.”

“We could have in court,” Brian said. “But how much more is the question? It would have been more time and manpower on our end.”

“And bills stacking up on Gabby’s. She made the right decision.”

She was glad that Gabby believed in her. She didn’t want to steer her client wrong and in the end laid out all the outcomes.

Everyone just wanted to move on from this. There was no get rich scheme and not something she ever wanted a part of.

“That’s right,” Brian said. “So it’s a win and your first. I’m glad. I was starting to get worried you’d regret the move and the job here.”

Cal was sitting next to her and laughed. “No way. She’s got me. Nothing to regret there.”

There was laughter around the table. She hadn’t been positive that Cal would have wanted to come with her tonight.

There were twelve people at the table. The four of them, two paralegals, a secretary, an office manager and their significant others.

She'd been trying to remember what Cal had said. That she shouldn't tiptoe around him and his hatred toward Christmas.

The fact he was eating sardines left and right made her think he was working hard to get her to see it shouldn't bother her. She didn't even think he liked sardines as much as he did and she found it both funny and sweet.

She had decorated her little place and made it very cheerful. Cal didn't have anything in his, not even a tree.

He'd been to her house once and saw what she had up and didn't say a word. She refused to take it to heart and reminded herself that it was nothing more than him not commenting on if she put any artwork on the wall.

"He's right," she said. "Even if you weren't a great boss—which you are—I'd still not regret it."

"Now that is how you win the ladies over," Robin said. "Brian told me you were always a smooth talker and I guess he was right."

Mia laughed and leaned her head over onto Cal's shoulder.

"I am thrilled with the win and the job. Everything. I'm close to family too. That is what this was all about. If it wasn't for Robin talking to Cooper about it, I'm sure this never would have come about."

She'd thought of that more. That sometimes things just happened in life without you even realizing it.

There was no way to control it no matter how much you might wish it so.

All the hard work she'd done in her life for her career helped but didn't guarantee the results she wanted.

She refused to feel bad about that anymore since it brought her here.

Just like she refused to get down on herself either for thinking there would be one outcome and getting another.

"Hey, you don't know that," Cal said. "You could have been here visiting your sister and come into my store for some wine. We could have struck up a conversation."

"And you would have wanted to have a long distance relationship?" she asked, laughing at him.

"For you, I'm pretty sure I would have." He winked at her and she only kept her grin in place.

When dinner was done they went back to his house. She hadn't changed after work since where they were going was a bit fancier. Cal on the other hand had nice pants on and a sweater.

"Did I tell you how nice you look today?" she asked. "You even trimmed

up the beard.”

“I know you like it when I leave whisker burns on you, but I wanted you to know I could show up in more than jeans.”

“I love you just the way you are,” she said.

“That might be an exaggeration, but I get it.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, frowning.

“It means we all have something that the other would like changed. Be honest with yourself.”

“Oh, you mean like leaving whiskers in the sink?” she asked.

“Or my midnight snacking that wakes you up?”

She snorted over that. “I don’t know anyone who gets up in the middle of the night like you do for a snack.”

“I’m hungry,” he said, tugging on a lock of her hair.

“If I wake up hungry I roll over and go back to sleep,” she said. “I don’t want to go get food because then I’ll never get back to sleep.”

“To each their own,” he said.

“So what would you change about me?” she asked.

She wasn’t so sure why she was asking this. Not many like to have faults or their character challenged or changed.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Please. You just said everyone has something that could be changed.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’d change you being so hard on yourself, but you do seem to be getting better with that.”

“I am,” she said. “But how about something that I do that annoys you.”

“Now you’re just setting me up,” he said, wiggling his finger at her. “I’m no fool.”

“No, you’re not a fool, but I would like to know. You know some of the things that annoy me.”

“Okay. One thing.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“You nibble on your thumbnail when you’re thinking. And you click your teeth against it.” He shuddered. “It’s annoying.”

She laughed. “My old roommate told me that too. I guess I didn’t realize I did it as much.”

“Roommate?” he asked. “You didn’t tell me you had a roommate.”

“In college,” she said. “After college the only roommate I had was Morgan. We shared a place for a while and then each decided we wanted our

own place. I wanted one closer to my office since I was working later and she wanted one closer to hers. We were still close but not living together. Have you ever lived with a woman?"

"Nope," he said. "You with a man?"

"No more than what you and I do," she admitted. "I've never gotten serious enough with someone to want to do it."

"The same."

"And though I love you, I hope you aren't thinking of asking me to move in," she said. "It's kind of early."

She could tell by the look on his face it might have crossed his mind, but no way. That would be jumping faster than she'd ever done in her life and she wasn't about to do it.

"It is," he said. "No, I'm not suggesting it."

"Good," she said. "I like what we've got."

"Me too," he said. "Why don't we change and go watch TV in bed? It's been a long week for you."

"It has and that sounds like a great way to spend the night."

She just wanted to relax with him.

Mia knew the past two weeks hadn't been good for him, but he didn't want to talk about the anniversary of his parents' death.

She'd brought it up once and he said he was fine. She had to accept he was and not push.

She'd brought up his loneliness once to him and he brushed it off. Only one other time did he say that it was hard to do something even when he knew he should.

She just had to let him have his space and try to relax when they were together.

The calm she wanted tonight didn't last long though when she heard a phone ringing.

Cal reached over to his bedside table and grabbed his phone. "Hello? What? Yeah, I'll meet you there in twenty minutes or so."

"What's going on?" she asked. She hoped to hell it wasn't his grandfather with as fast as he was jumping out of bed.

"There was a break-in at the liquor store. That was the police."

"Oh my God," she said. "Was anyone hurt?"

"I hope not. They were closed, but my alarms were tripped."

"I'll go with you," she said, getting out of bed. He had the light on in the

closet and she heard him pulling clothes off of shelves.

“No, you can stay here,” he said. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

“And I’ll just sit here worrying,” she said. “It’s not like I’m going back to sleep. You might need your lawyer with you.”

“I doubt that,” he said. “But I’m not sure I can tell you no. Well, I can, but you aren’t listening. So hurry up. You’ve got five minutes or I’m leaving without you.”

She ran to the bathroom first and then into the closet to get a pair of jeans and a shirt. Extra clothes she’d been leaving here.

The way he was snapping his fingers and telling her to hurry added another thing to the list she found annoying.

Perfect? Nope, he wasn’t. But he was still hers.

THOUGHT WE WERE GOOD

“**H**ave you ever had this happen before?” Mia asked him when they were driving to his store in Latham.

“No,” he said.

“The police didn’t say anything else?” she asked.

He turned to look at her. “No.”

“Normally you have more to say, but I’ll be quiet.”

Cal felt bad, but he didn’t have anything to add, not with his brain running a mile a minute.

This had never happened before, but he always knew it could.

It could have been a false alarm, but he was positive it wasn’t. They would have said so and didn’t. They said he’d been broken into. That meant someone entered his place of employment.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just thinking. There isn’t much money there. Just the cash to start the day. Not as many pay in cash anymore. The manager closed tonight, which means he would have dropped the money at the night box at the bank. We don’t like keeping it on the premises during certain times of the year when it could be high.”

This time of year sales were five to ten times more than any other time. And though most paid with credit cards, there was still cash.

“That’s good,” she said. “But you’ve got a lot of product that someone could steal,” she said.

“Exactly. I’ve got cameras too so I’ll know.”

They pulled up shortly after and saw two police cars there, their lights flashing.

Cal parked his truck fast and got out; she followed.

When she ran to keep up with him, she noticed that he was going toward the back entrance and not the front.

“Cal Perkins,” he said to the officer outside the door. “This is my place.”

The officer moved away. “It’s a mess in here.”

Mia’s hand flew to her mouth when she walked in. He felt like he wanted to put his fist through the wall. The backroom looked as if someone threw a party. There were boxes tipped over and bottles broken everywhere. As if people were throwing them against a wall.

“What does the store look like?” she asked.

“The store is fine,” the officer said. “I’m not sure why that is though.”

“Because the alarm trips with the police first,” Cal said. “It’s silent. Then one minute later, it’s loud and they know they’ve been caught.”

“Smart,” the officer said.

“Why do you do it that way?” she asked.

“Two reasons. It’s only silent if the door is opened in the back. Not if something is broken or someone goes through the front.”

“You mean opened as in having a key?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “They’ve got twenty seconds to put the code in. Then another forty if they messed up so it’s not blowing their eardrums out. The police are alerted after twenty seconds if the person doesn’t override it.”

“How many know how to override it?” she asked.

“Not many,” he said. Just him, his two managers who opened or closed and his grandfather.

He moved into the store and looked around to see if there was anything out of place or missing and there was nothing he could see. He supposed on the bright side it was good and he could still open for business tomorrow.

Though his stock in the back was all but gone at this point.

“It looks as if they tried to take out the security cameras,” the officer said.

“Yeah.” He was looking up at the camera in the back and the monitor that recorded everything. Bottles were thrown at it. There was a lot of rage here. “I’ve got another system no one knows about.”

“What?” she asked. “Why?”

“Let’s just say my father told me to always watch every angle of everything. My grandfather is the only other person who knows there is a second system here. It feeds right to my laptop.” Which of course he left at home in his rush to get here.

“Let us take your statement,” the officer said. “Then we need to see that footage. You’ll need to come up with a list of the damages. I’m sure it’s going to take time looking around here.”

“Not too much,” he said. “I know what was back here and not put up front. It’s easy enough to go through the inventory and get that cost. It doesn’t seem as if much is savable. At least to sell.”

If the bottle wasn’t broken it looked to be dirty.

“Do you want me to go back to your house and get your laptop while you try to figure out the damages here and give your statement?” Mia asked.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, handing over the keys to her.

“I guess it’s a good thing I came. I’ll be back soon.”

He watched Mia walk out. The officer asked him, “Do you know of anyone that would want to do this to you?”

“No,” he said. “Has anyone else in the area had any issues?”

“Burglaries, yes,” the officer said. “But you’re saying you don’t think much was taken?”

“They could have taken liquor for sure and it’d be hard to tell what was taken and what was busted at this point. I’ll know more when my laptop is here.”

He wondered if that was part of it. To have it look more like vandalism than a theft.

The police were taking pictures; he was doing the same. He’d need it for his insurance claim.

When Mia returned, he wanted to start to clean up, but the police had told him not yet. It was frustrating at this point.

“Here,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said, reaching for it. He turned it on and brought up the security systems. First the one everyone knew about. “It’s dark. Their face is turned away from the camera too.”

They all watched as multiple bottles were thrown against the camera until it was knocked down, then did the same with the computer, which was on the floor covered in wine and liquor. Probably hoping to fry it.

“Looks like the show is over,” the officer said. “That was about one minute. The alarms should be going off soon.”

“Yeah. They came right in without even trying to put a code in,” he said.

He couldn’t tell if a key was used or the person was good at picking a lock. The police hadn’t said the lock was busted though.

He signed into his other camera and they watched the same exact show. This time they could see the computer on the floor sparking and when that happened, the lights turned on rather than just the flashlight the person had been using.

“Got a good angle of the person there,” the officer said.

“Shit,” Cal said.

“Do you know him?” Mia asked.

“Yeah. Tyler Steele. He worked for me. I had to let him go about six months ago though.”

“What did he do?” she asked.

“He stole from me. There was money missing a few times when he worked. People make mistakes and he said he didn’t do it. Or maybe he miscounted. That he’d never been good at math.”

The officer snorted. “You bought that?”

He wanted to snarl. “No. But I gave him a chance to come clean. I let him know that I was aware of what was happening. It stopped after that and I thought we were good. I knew he didn’t have the best life or upbringing and figured maybe he was down on his luck. Shit happens in people’s lives. I gave him extra hours at times to help him out even when I didn’t need the help.”

He didn’t know the officers here right now. He knew most of the Colonie PD, but not these two. They looked young to him too. No one that would have known his father.

“Then why did you fire him?” the officer asked.

“Because though the theft of the money stopped, product was missing. I had him on camera and he knew it.”

“The system that was out in the open?” she asked. “He was crazy enough to steal knowing he was being watched?”

“He was desperate and thought no one would catch him. He was stocking the shelves and tried to slip a bottle here and there off to the side. That is what I’d see. But then I moved the camera the next time he was working and he didn’t realize it and I saw what he was doing. Putting them to the side out of range and then getting them later when he left.”

“You didn’t report it?” the officer asked.

“No.” He didn’t want the kid to have it on his record and now wished that he had. Though it probably wouldn’t have stopped this from happening. Maybe it would have been worse.

“How long was he employed?”

“Just eight months or so,” Cal said. He started to click around. “I’ll have to call my office manager to access his personnel records.”

“We’ve got an address from his license in the system. We’ll send someone over in the morning to get him.”

It was close to three in the morning at this point. No reason to go banging on doors if Tyler moved. He had no clue. Not everyone updated the address on their license.

“If you can get us an estimate of the damages,” the officer said. “Just drop it by and we’ll finish this up. It looks as if he walked out with a few cases and then the alarms went off.”

“Yeah,” he said. Tyler knew enough to grab the good stuff.

“How much do you think he got?” Mia asked him.

“If they are going by retail value, he left with four cases of liquor. Two are valued at around two hundred a bottle. So almost five grand there. Then the other two cases. Less than eight thousand stolen but the damages, significantly more.”

“Without damages, what he took is a class D felony and could be up to seven years in jail.”

Cal ran his hand through his hair. “Jesus. So stupid to ruin your life for this. So that’s the max he’s looking at?”

“Yes,” she said. “A lawyer can get jail time reduced if he has no priors, but we aren’t even talking about the damage done here, Cal.”

“I can’t think right now. I just need to clean this place up before my staff comes in.”

“Let me help,” Mia said. “I brought some more brooms and a bunch of garbage bags.”

“I want to tell you to go home, but you’re not going to listen, are you?” he asked.

“No. You shouldn’t be doing this alone. I’m not letting you. We’ll get this cleaned up and you’ll feel a tiny bit better. Not much, but at least you won’t have to look at it and have the reminder.”

“Thanks, Mia. I appreciate you being here with me.”

“You’re welcome. I was coming regardless,” she said.

“Stubbornness,” he said. “Can I add that to your list of faults?”

“You can, but in this case it’s a good thing. Just like the good you do for people. You always said you were the Scrooge, but I think deep down you’ve

given more than you've ever taken."

"Doesn't seem like it did me much good this time," he said, sighing.

"One person's actions shouldn't change who you are or what you do for people. Just remember that."

"Not like you'd let me forget. As I said. Stubborn."

DOWN AND OUT

“How is Cal doing?” Brian asked her on Monday morning.

“Hanging in there,” she said. “Or as good as could be expected. We got the place cleaned up before they opened on Saturday. Then he ordered everything he could. I think a lot is being delivered today or tomorrow. He didn’t seem too worried about not having anything to sell.”

“That would be the least of it for him,” Brian said. “I’m sure it has more to do with the fact that he has to press charges against someone.”

“They committed a crime,” she said. “Eight thousand stolen and over forty thousand in damages between products and equipment, cleanup and repairs.”

“That’s what insurance is for,” Brian said.

“I know. It’s more the peace of mind that is gone now. How did you find out? Did he call you?”

She’d gone home yesterday afternoon. By the time the store was open with the staff on Saturday morning, Cal and she had gone home and taken a nap, then he went back out to take care of things.

She stayed at his house and got some work done and had dinner on the table waiting for him when he returned.

It bothered her to see him so down and out over what happened. Not the guy who was always happy and cheerful.

“He did,” Brian said.

“I don’t know him as well as you. Or as long. He’s not even angry. I figured that is how he’d feel.”

“No,” Brian said. “He feels guilty.”

“For what?” she asked, shocked. “He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I’m not sure what goes through his head at times. He was rambling a bit. I think he wondered if he’d pressed charges months ago if maybe that would have straightened Tyler out.”

“Or it could have made matters worse,” she said.

“I told him that too. He wants to talk to Tyler, but he hasn’t yet. They picked him up last night and he’s still in jail as far as I know.”

She wanted to be hurt that Cal didn’t share that with her. “When did he find out?”

“He called me around eight last night. I’m assuming he found out not long before that. You didn’t know?”

“No,” she said. “I left around four.”

She wanted to stay longer, but it was best for both of them if she left.

“He’ll be fine,” Brian said.

“I’m sure. It seems nothing bothers him.”

Brian laughed at her dry tone. “I’m not so sure about that. He just keeps a lot in for a guy that never shuts up.”

“I’m starting to realize that all this talking is a front.”

“You figured that out well.”

“Can I ask you something?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I don’t want you to betray Cal or anything. Not your friendship either. So tell me if that would happen and I’ll understand.”

“You want to know how he was when his mother died?” Brian asked.

“Yeah. He was in high school. You guys were friends. I just can’t imagine. I’m trying to understand him better.”

“Most don’t think Cal is complicated, but he is. I think everyone in school was just rocked to the bone. We all felt as if that could have been our mother. She’s out Christmas shopping. A fight breaks out and she is just trying to defuse it and gets shot by mistake. She wasn’t the only one hurt that day.”

“Others were hurt at the store?” she asked.

“Yes. When the shot went off people ran and many were trampled. Lynn was the only fatality.”

“I did some searching and saw the article that the guy was sent to prison.”

“Yes,” Brian said. “For second degree murder. He was sentenced to twenty years. He’s been up for parole once already for good behavior. Cal and I went to the hearing. He was denied. He’s appealing it.”

She wished she'd known this. "When is the appeal?"

"These things take time. Whether he gets out early or not doesn't mean he's not getting out at all. Cal is going to have to come to terms with that."

"You don't think he can, do you?"

"I think he can do anything he puts his mind to. The guy that killed his father, he died a few years ago in prison."

It hadn't come up and she hadn't wanted to ask those kinds of questions.

"How was he when he found out about that?"

"Fine," Brian said.

"He always acts like he's fine when I don't think he really is."

"You're right. Those are conversations you need to have with him. But you asked more about when his mother died and I'll tell you. His father stepped up. Not that anyone expected anything different. But you could see there was just this hole in Cal after."

"I think there still is one," she said sadly.

"Could be. He wouldn't tell anyone if there was. But the guy that shot Lynn was strung out on drugs. He'd had a lot of charges against him already. When Tyler was picked up last night, it was the same. Strung out on drugs. Says he doesn't remember doing any of it."

"Shit," she said. "Is that his defense?"

"Seems it. It doesn't matter. He's on video."

"Do you think he's trying to get Cal to feel sorry for him?"

"No. There are a few things in this life that Cal will never feel sorry for and that is someone doing drugs. He gives people a chance. More chances than he should if you ask me. That is one thing he draws the line at. So when he says he wishes he pressed charges before, it's because somewhere in his mind, it's the thought maybe Tyler would have turned his life around or gone to rehab. Maybe gotten clean in jail for a month or so."

"No one knows that," she argued.

"That's right, they don't."

"Thanks," she said. "I appreciate you telling me what you did. I won't let him know anything. I'd like him to tell me, but I'm not sure he will. Right now I just want to get through the next week."

"As horrible as this sounds, he's more focused on that than that next week is Christmas."

"Thank God for small favors," she said drily.

She went to her office to get some work done and hoped that Cal reached

out to her at some point.

The week before Christmas and a lot of trials and cases had been pushed off. Many were on vacation or found ways for postponements. It should be somewhat of a quiet week.

By late afternoon, Cal texted to see if she was around.

She called him back. "Hi. How are you doing?"

"Hanging in there," he said. "I've got everything delivered or to be delivered tomorrow and Wednesday. Business won't be affected."

"I don't think anyone is too worried about that," she said. "How are you? Any updates?"

"Come on now," he said. "You know as well as I do, that Brian would have told you Tyler was picked up last night."

At least he was being honest about it. "How come you didn't tell me?"

Cal sighed on the other end. "It's been a long weekend. I didn't want to bother you more. I knew you'd have a lot of questions and I wasn't sure I'd have the answers."

"Did you go down and talk to him?"

"I did."

She wasn't surprised.

"What did he say?" she asked. "You know, maybe you should have had your lawyer with you."

He laughed. Not a funny sound either. "I asked why he did it."

"Was it revenge for being terminated?"

"Yeah," he said. "He claims not to remember doing it, but I don't believe it. He said that he'd been with friends before. They were drinking and getting high. He remembers feeling angry and couldn't pinpoint why. He left to drive home and ended up there."

"How did he get in?" she asked.

"He had a key. I'd never given him a key and I asked how he got it. He confessed to swiping it from my grandfather and making a copy one day and returning it without anyone knowing."

"I'm sorry, Cal. You're not telling your grandfather that, are you?"

"No way. He'd feel worse than me right now."

"The fact he had the key just proves his intent," she said.

"It was pointed out. I expect my attorneys to say that too. Everything he said was recorded. You'll get a copy of it. I just wanted to let you know."

"So this was a professional call and not a personal one?"

“I know that tone,” he said.

“What tone is that?”

“One of hurt that you’re trying to cover up. Please don’t take it that way. I can’t have something else on my shoulders right now.”

She felt about an inch tall when she heard that. “I’m sorry. I’m glad you called and let me know. But I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I’m angry more than anything else.”

“You don’t show it,” she said.

“What good would it do?” he asked. “What would it change?”

“Sometimes we can’t let it all build up inside of us either,” she said.

“It works for some and not others. I need to go,” he said. “I’ve got a call coming in. I’ll talk to you tonight.”

“Bye,” she said, hanging up the phone.

She looked up when Brian was standing there. Their offices were close. “I overheard. What’s going on?”

She filled her boss in. It was a professional matter at this point.

“He said he’s angry and when I called him out on not showing it, he said that it wouldn’t do any good. He actually believes it wouldn’t change anything.”

“It wouldn’t change the outcome, Mia,” Brian said. “But there is something else you should know. You didn’t hear it from me.”

She felt her heart sink. “What?”

“Jack Perkins had been put on administrative leave six months after Lynn’s death. It was a short period of time and not talked about often. They kept it under wraps, but I knew. Cal told me.”

“What happened?”

“Jack was drinking. A lot. To kill the pain maybe. The guilt he felt that he wasn’t with Lynn that day. So many things and no one knows other than Jack. Everyone knew he was drinking, but it was during his off time.”

“Until it wasn’t?” she asked.

“Yes. He went in hungover a few times but not drunk. But one day, he got called in and he’d been drinking. Because he was called in and not technically on shift, it was easy for them to send him home. They drove his ass back home and then made him sober up and take a good look at what was going on around him.”

“He stopped drinking after that, didn’t he?” she asked.

“For the most part. He’d have the occasional beer but nothing like he’d

been doing. He didn't want Cal to see how low he'd fallen."

"There is something about the Perkins boys that want to make others proud, isn't there?"

"Yes," he said. "I know Cal has said it before. That what he does is so that his parents would be proud of him. The businesses he owns, you know why."

"He told me," she said and felt her eyes well up with tears.

"His father let his anger build inside of him. He was losing control and if someone over Jack didn't step in and force him to take that week off and look at his life, who knows what could have happened."

"I get it now," she said. "I'm always trying to control everything and you just can't. What happened to Lynn and Jack was beyond their control."

"Yes. Cal knows that deep down. I don't think it's the holidays that he hates. It's just the reminder of the time of year."

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe with Jack but not Lynn. Think about it. She was out buying him a Christmas gift."

"That's right," Brian said. "It could have easily been a birthday gift and then he'd hate his birthday. It's a reminder of the time of year more than anything else."

"I suppose you're right. One week left and then it's behind him."

At least she was telling herself that, but the truth was, she didn't think that would ever be the case.

NO SECRETS

“I ’m starting to feel like this is high school all over again,” Brian said two days later. “It’s like the time Scott Manning had a crush on Melody Richards and couldn’t work up the courage to even text her.”

“He wanted us to be talking about it knowing when Melody could overhear during gym,” Cal said.

“That’s right,” Brian said. “And you were all for doing it.”

“We had to help Scott out,” he said. “Poor bastard got all red in the face when it came to talking to girls. Almost as bad as Troy.”

“Troy was never that bad even though he was quiet. He needed some prodding but always got there.”

“Got your sister,” he said.

“Yes, he did,” Brian said.

“So how is Mia doing?” Cal asked. They were meeting for lunch. He’d asked Brian if he had time this week. He was sure Mia would be livid, but he wanted to make sure she was okay.

“She’s fine,” Brian said. “More worried about you. We know you keep it in.”

“Hardly that,” he said.

“Come on now,” Brian said. “The important things you do.”

“Has she asked about my mother or father?” he asked.

Brian picked up his water and took a sip. “I don’t want to get in the middle of this. You should talk to her about it.”

“Which means she did,” he said.

“Again, not high school.”

“Tell me what you told her,” he coaxed. “She’s your employee, but I’ve known you longer. I know things about you that your wife doesn’t.”

Brian laughed. “Unfortunately true. In summary, she said you don’t show anger and she couldn’t understand. She just wanted to know how you were after your mom died. She’d be so angry at the world.”

“I was,” he said.

“But you didn’t tell anyone,” Brian said. “Those that knew you just understood.”

“Look at what good it did with my father,” he said.

He remembered his father getting drunk many nights. Jack Perkins didn’t want anyone to know, but it was hard to hide it from someone you lived with, even if Cal wasn’t home much.

The empty liquor bottles told the story more times than not.

He should have talked to his father more about it but didn’t know what to say.

Just like now.

For a guy that felt he never shut the hell up, when it mattered his lips were glued tight.

“You’re not your father,” Brian said. “Do you think you will do that?”

“Never,” he said.

“Nothing bad happened with it,” Brian said. “He got a week with pay off and it scared him enough to get his shit together.”

He remembered his father pulling him aside and telling him what happened.

Most men might not want to admit what happened, but not his father. He’d sworn to always be honest and upfront.

No secrets between them. They were in it together.

Maybe it was watching the man he looked up to so much in his life feeling as if he failed his son, for failing his wife and not being there to protect her, was what made him want to always do the right thing.

“Yeah,” he said. “He sat me down and told me everything. The only other time I’ve seen my father cry was at the hospital when he found out my mother died and then at the funeral.”

“Just because your father held it all in doesn’t mean you have to.”

“I know. Mia is walking on eggshells around me. I don’t like that.”

“Tell her that,” Brian said. “Don’t say it to me.”

“I tell her all the time,” he argued. He told Brian about the sardines too.

“Dude, that’s gross. And leave it to you to make a joke about it.”

“I just wanted her to know that it’s fine.”

“That’s the problem though. You joke about it and aren’t serious and she doesn’t believe it.”

“I told her it’s just the time of year, not the holiday itself.”

“Prove it to her then,” Brian said. “The anniversary of your parents’ deaths has passed.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And she never brought it up.”

“Because you are closed off about it,” Brian said. “You spent it with your grandfather, didn’t you?”

“Both nights, yes.”

He’d gone to his grandfather’s house both times. They’d had a shot of scotch in honor of his father. Tequila for his mother.

His mother wasn’t one to drink, but he’d never forget a story his father told him about his mother when they first met.

“Share it with Mia.”

“And sound like a wuss?” he asked.

“That’s your problem. Don’t you know that women like it when men show their soft sides?”

He laughed at the way Brian said that. “I’ll think about it.”

Brian changed the subject and then they went about their days.

He sent a text to Mia to see if she could come to dinner tonight. Maybe stay the night.

It took an hour for her to reply. He figured she was busy, but she said she’d be over after work. No word on if she was staying the night or not.

When five thirty rolled around, he heard the garage door open. He’d given her the remote for it. Why not?

“Hi,” she said. “I smell dinner.”

“Spaghetti and meatballs,” he said.

Her jaw dropped when she walked into the kitchen. “You’re cooking it?”

“Not quite. I picked up sauce and meatballs at the restaurant, but I’m going to cook the pasta myself. Kind of fresh. I mean it’s better than a jar at the store and frozen meatballs.”

“Yes, it is,” she said. “What is the occasion?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh boy. What did you do?”

He grinned at her. She was laughing. “Talked to Brian. We had lunch

today.”

Her smile dropped. “He told you I asked about some things in your life?”
He didn’t want her to feel bad about that.

“Not until after I asked him how you were doing.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked.

“Because maybe I’m insecure about messing up things with you and am too much of a wimp to actually ask you myself?”

“Really?” she asked.

“Brian told me to talk to you and tell you some things. I wanted to do that.”

“Did he tell you what he told me?” she asked.

“After some arm twisting. Don’t be mad at him. It was more that he hated being put in the middle. Said that it was like high school again.”

“I guess you’ve got a point. I’m sorry I did that.”

“Don’t be. We did the same thing. I just want you to know that I’m not good at telling my feelings to people.”

“So I gathered.”

“And you are,” he said. “I know it was hard for you to open up to me about your feelings of failure. But you see, my father felt that way for not being with my mother. And it caused him to drink.”

She nodded her head. “But he stopped.”

“He did when he had no choice.”

“He had a choice, Cal. You know that.”

“I do,” he said. The water was boiling, so he dumped the pasta in and turned to her. “And I want to do him proud.”

“Which is why everything you do in your life is for them. I know that. I called you out on it early on.”

“You did. I’ve been pretty open about those things in my life. Most just shrug and find it sentimental.”

“Because they don’t understand you as well as I do,” she said.

“No,” he said.

It reminded him about all the women he’d dated. “In the past, if I opened up, most brushed it off. Or they thought I was joking or it was just a sweet thing to do. A lot of women didn’t want to talk about it.”

“And it made you self-conscious to even bring it up to anyone?”

“Yes. I mean, let’s be honest. How many people have you told you feel like a failure?”

“No men,” she said. “Very few women. Just family.”

“Because you know how hard it is to open up like that.”

“I do. I’m glad you are to me.”

“I know you really like Christmas and haven’t said anything about the holiday on Monday.”

“I wasn’t sure what your plans were. You know we are having it at Morgan’s house. That my parents are coming this weekend.”

“Yes, and you haven’t asked me.”

Her jaw dropped. “I haven’t?”

“No. You just said what was going on and then never asked if I wanted to go too. Or if we were spending the night together or not.”

“You’re right. I just assumed. Maybe I was afraid to ask.”

“Because I might say no. I get it. I wouldn’t. I’d like to spend the night with you on Christmas Eve. Wake up with you. You know, I might have said I was Scrooge, but I got you a gift.”

She smiled. “I got you one too.”

“Then we’ll stay at your place so we can wake up and open gifts under your tree,” he said.

“We can,” she said.

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

“No. I didn’t think so. But you didn’t talk at all to me about the anniversary of your parents’ deaths. I would have been there for you, but you just went about your day like it was nothing.”

“I spent it with my grandfather,” he said. “Doesn’t mean you couldn’t have too. But he cooks me the same dinner for both nights each year and we throw back shots that they each liked. We don’t even talk about it.”

It was too painful still. He wondered if his grandfather wanted to talk and wouldn’t and would have to figure that out in time too.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked. “What do you eat or drink?”

“Simple questions. My grandfather makes tacos for my mother’s dinner. We do shots of tequila each.”

She laughed. “That’s cute.”

“There is a story behind it. It’s not like I’ve ever seen my mother do a shot, but the first anniversary of her death, my father cooked that and we did a shot.”

“You were a teen,” she said.

“Get the shocked look off your face,” he said.

“Sorry. I drank before I was twenty-one too, but not doing shots at eighteen with my parents.”

“I bet you were doing them with your sister at parties,” he said.

“You’d be right,” she said. “So why did your father pick that dinner?”

“Because he met my mother at a bar one night when he was out with friends. She was eating tacos and doing shots with her best friend and they were hating on men. My mother’s best friend had just split with her boyfriend. My mother ended up drunk and puking outside on the sidewalk. My father brought her out napkins and water.”

“Okay, that’s grossly sweet,” she said.

“Yep. My mother said any man that saw her at her worst deserved a chance to see her at her best.”

He still loved that story. Maybe that was why he felt something with Mia so early.

She opened up and showed a vulnerable side early on and was embarrassed about it.

He told her there was no reason to be that way.

“So what is your father’s meal and shot?”

“Burgers and scotch,” he said.

“Sounds manly. Any reason for that?” she asked.

“On the first anniversary, my grandfather asked what I wanted and I said my father loved burgers. It’s the first thing I could think of. It stuck. He loved scotch too. That one is more a habit than the story behind my mother’s.”

“It only has to mean something to you,” she said.

“Which it does. And that is what I did on those nights.”

“And you should do it every year if it brings you comfort.”

The water was boiling over and she moved to the stove. Figures he could mess up even something simple like this.

She drained the pasta. “Thanks,” he said. “I guess I need you, huh?”

“Just remember that,” she said. “I’ll always be here. When you’re ready to tell me more, you can. I don’t think you are and this was a good step.”

“Someday,” he said. “But yes, it felt good to say what I had.”

“Then we’ll leave it at that for now.”

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek and had a quick image of his father doing that to his mother too.

Maybe he could find what they’d had after all.

ANOTHER DAY

Cal opened his eyes on Christmas morning. He rolled over and saw Mia sound asleep, then quietly got out of bed.

It was still dark in her room so he had no clue of the time and didn't want to look at his phone and have it light up and wake her.

He grabbed it on his way out of the room and went to the bathroom in the hall, shutting the bedroom door behind him.

Thankfully he hadn't put his clothes away and just snatched his bag by the door too.

He noticed it was a little after five when he was in the bathroom, but there was no way he was going back to sleep.

He showered, brushed his teeth, then made his way to the kitchen for a cup of coffee, passing the tree lit up on the way.

His heart wasn't racing.

His knees didn't feel weak.

His hands weren't sweaty.

He was feeling oddly...normal.

Like another day in his life even if this was the first time he'd woken up to a tree in the house since he'd moved out of his grandfather's house. He'd hated celebrating those first few years after his mother died and then his father, but he did it for them.

Just like he was doing it for Mia.

Only it didn't feel so much like he was doing it for her now.

He was reading the news on his phone and sipping his second cup of coffee when he heard the bathroom door shut, then noted that it was a little

after six.

He might as well start breakfast for the two of them.

When Mia came out twenty minutes later smelling sweet like her lotion, she walked over and took the coffee he'd prepared out of his hands. "Merry Christmas," she said.

"You too," he said back.

She winked at him and sipped her coffee. "Thank you for doing this. When did you wake up?"

"About an hour ago," he said. "Once I open my eyes it's hard for me to go back to sleep."

"Not me," she said. "If I'm tired enough I've got no problem with it."

"That means you need it."

He finished with the eggs and the toast popped, so Mia went over to butter it and the two of them sat down to eat.

"What time are we going to your grandfather's?" she asked.

"I told him around nine. He's an early riser."

"What is he doing today?" she asked. "I hope he's not alone?"

"Nope," he said. "The same as he did at Thanksgiving. He's a social butterfly and likes to spend time with his friends. I always felt like he gave it up so I wasn't alone, but I could have cared less for most holidays."

To him, holidays were another day. He'd work if he had to so others could spend it with family. His family that he would have liked to be with was long gone.

The last thing he wanted was for his grandfather to give up something he enjoyed.

"We'll go to Morgan's right after then if you don't mind. I think they are doing an early lunch type thing. Nothing heavy. By the end of the day I think everyone just wants to relax. My parents are leaving tomorrow and we all have to work tomorrow too."

"Except Cooper," he said.

"That's right. He's got one more week before he's back, then Leah is with the nanny."

"Sounds like it's all working out well," he said.

He knew the nanny started at Caden's a few weeks ago and then they'd be rotating houses each month after with both babies.

If his mind was wandering and hoping maybe he and Mia could join that at some point, he wasn't bringing it up. That was a long way down the line

and not anything he wanted to scare her by saying.

They cleaned up their breakfast and Mia said, "Do you want to open gifts? Not that there is much to open, but they are sitting there staring at us."

He laughed and they moved over to the tree. "Why don't you go first," he said.

"No, we can do it together," she said.

She handed him one of the three boxes she'd had for him. He had three too. They'd put a limit on boxes. She said the price too. He found it funny but understood that. Not that he listened when it came to the price, but he did the boxes.

He opened his and pulled out a nice button-down shirt. He didn't have many of them and made a comment he should.

She opened up a silk scarf.

They went back and forth a few times and he gave her the small box last.

"I know you went over," she said, squinting her eyes at him.

"So?" he said. "Three boxes."

Mia laughed and opened the last box and pulled out a gemstone bracelet. "Cal!"

"You need some color in your life. I noticed you like to wear bracelets. That will go with just about anything." He took it out of her hand and put it on her wrist. "Perfect fit."

"It's beautiful," she said. "Thank you."

At nine they were walking in his grandfather's front door. "Hey, Grandpa."

"Merry Christmas," his grandfather said to him and Mia.

"Merry Christmas," Mia said back. Cal didn't say it to anyone. He had a feeling that Mia noticed too, but he didn't think it was that big of a deal.

"Did you two eat anything? Can I get you some coffee or food?"

"Cal cooked breakfast for me," she said.

"He's a good boy. Glad I taught him something."

"Oh, I'm sure you taught him a lot," she said.

They stayed for about two hours visiting, listening to his grandfather tell Mia stories about his life as a child and what was going on in the community he lived in, then they drove to Morgan's house.

"Looks as if we might be the last ones," he said.

"Caden and Sarah had breakfast with Sarah's parents at Harris's house. They kind of all move around some," she said.

He never did that as a kid. He didn't have enough family. His mother wasn't from the area and the little family she had, he hadn't seen in years.

"A busy day for all," he said.

They grabbed the gifts out of the back seat of his truck and then went into Morgan's.

The place was cheerful and happy. Something he hadn't had in years on this day.

It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. He supposed in the scheme of it, he was a pro at blocking it out.

After a few hours, everyone was ready to call it a day. He brought Mia back home and grabbed his stuff.

"I'm sorry if today was a long painful day for you," she said, going into his arms.

"It wasn't," he said. "And that is surprising if you want to know the truth."

"I'm glad. And now it's over with."

"Just another day," he said, forcing a smile.

"You know that's not true, but if it helps you get through, that is all that matters."

She said it with a grin. He was glad that she felt comfortable enough calling him out on it.

It told him she wasn't walking on eggshells at this point even if he didn't want to hear the words.

"As you said, it's over with now. I'm assuming you're staying here?" he asked. As much as he wanted her in his bed every night it was way too early to ask that. Just like she'd pointed out weeks ago. Almost as if she knew how he was feeling or what he was thinking.

"Yes," she said. "I'm not too busy this week but still need to get some things done."

"Then I'll let you go," he said. It was close to four at this point and for someone who didn't mind people, he was looking for some quiet.

Only when he got home he realized that the quiet came with loneliness again.

HARD TO NAVIGATE

The next morning, Mia stopped at Morgan's. Her sister wasn't going in until later, as she wanted to see her parents off. Brian was off today too and there wasn't much happening in the office. She'd said she'd be a little later too but hadn't told Cal that.

"Cal seemed to be fine yesterday," her mother said when she was in the kitchen with Morgan. Leah was napping in the playpen and her father and Cooper were watching the news.

"Better than I thought he'd be. I honestly expected him to say he wanted to be alone. I hadn't realized I didn't ask him to be with me."

"You didn't?" Morgan asked.

"No. I'd brought it up a few times on what my plans were and then he pointed out I never asked."

"That's wrong," her mother said.

"It's been hard to navigate around this," she said. "I'm trying."

"Seems as if it's working," Morgan said.

"I guess. He is the one who pointed out that I hadn't asked and he seemed fine with it. We had a nice heart to heart a few days ago. I've been nervous about bringing the holiday up to him and realized that I can't stop living my life or things I like just because maybe he doesn't."

"That's right," her mother said. "I understand it was traumatic for him, but the rest of the world isn't stopping. He can't avoid it. It's not just one day, it's months of seeing signs of Christmas. His businesses have to run specials and probably prepare and decorate for it too."

"They do," she said. "It doesn't seem to faze him much. I told myself that

I should look at it as if he didn't celebrate because of religion more than PTSD. Or something like that. The rest of the world does and it's his business."

"That's a good way to think of it," Morgan said. "Did you tell him that?"

"No," she said, laughing. "It's just what I've got in my head and it's working. But then yesterday morning he got up before me and had breakfast made. We opened gifts."

"The scarf is lovely. The bracelet too," her mother said.

"Both from Cal. He says I don't have enough color in my work wardrobe."

The scarf was emerald green and went with the emeralds in her bracelet. "That was sweet of him. I always said the same thing," Morgan said.

"You're one to talk. You wear scrubs."

"Because fancy shirts and heels don't go well with the dog and cat bodily fluids," Morgan said.

"You make a good point. I always wore plain colors because it's easier to have clothing to mix and match. Besides, I've never wanted to stand out with my clients before."

"I can understand that," her mother said. "I'm the same way. I deal with a lot of low income clients and you can't reach them if they think you are trying to show them up or act as if you're better."

"Exactly," she said.

"But that isn't your career anymore," Morgan pointed out. "What's that old saying of dressing for success? Maybe Cal is gently telling you that."

Mia started to laugh. "I doubt it. We are talking about a guy that wears jeans and boots or sneakers daily."

"That doesn't mean much," her mother said. "He's a guy. But maybe you should brighten your wardrobe up. Even just some colorful shirts."

"Which is why you bought me some, right?" she asked her mother. "You too, Morgan?"

They both shrugged. "They were pretty. Admit it."

"They were," she said. "I'll make sure to use the gift cards for some nicer things too."

She never thought much of her work clothing before. She was professional, and that wasn't an issue, but maybe if she dressed more for work like she did in her personal life she'd get some of that confidence back.

Funny how she never thought of those things before.

But she had to admit she was feeling confident...and pretty today...with her scarf on. Guess Cal knew her better than she knew herself at times.

“So Cal was fine after yesterday?” her mother asked. “It wasn’t too much for him?”

“You’re both asking a lot of questions. Why?”

“Because we know you,” Morgan said. “You always loved going all out when you were a kid.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. And he stayed at my house Christmas Eve because I’ve got a tree and he doesn’t. I wanted gifts under a tree and he had no problem with it. So it’s not as bad as I thought it was.”

“You never used to do that before either,” her mother said.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Make assumptions or let your mind run away with things without all the facts.”

She sighed. “I know. I’d like to think I’m getting better with it all.”

“Seems you are,” Morgan said.

She gave her mother a hug and kiss, then walked over and did the same with her father. Told them to drive safely on the trip home and then went to the office.

She was only an hour later than normal, but it was quiet inside.

“How was your holiday?” Sally asked her.

“It was great,” she said. “How about yours?”

“Wonderful,” Sally said. “It’s quiet in here today. So far just you and me.”

“Oh,” she said. Sally was one of the paralegals and had an office off the main entrance. “I know Brian is off, but didn’t realize everyone else was too.”

“Beth is off, Carol called in sick. Guess the whole family came down with the stomach bug yesterday.”

“Urgh,” she said. “That has to stink. I can’t imagine.”

“I know,” Sally said. “Talk about ruining your holiday. They were all in bed or in the bathroom by the sounds of it. Carol said she felt horrible that they barely got through the kids opening gifts before she was running to the bathroom. Everyone fended for themselves all day.”

“That’s horrible,” she said, shuddering. “I can’t imagine.”

“Did you spend it with Cal?” Sally asked. Mia didn’t talk too much about her personal life, but it was obvious everyone knew she was dating Cal. He

was at dinner with them the week before. But she was positive that no one in the office knew too much history of Cal other than professionally.

“Yes, I did. My parents were in town too so we went to Cal’s grandfather’s first in the morning and then my sister’s in the afternoon. It was nice to get home and relax though. I’m glad it’s all over with.”

“Me too,” Sally said. “All this work for one day. It’s worse than a wedding if you ask me. A wedding is once, maybe twice with some people.” She was laughing. “But all this planning for months and running around and in like twenty minutes gifts are opened and the air is out of the balloon and you have to start to pick up. I’m dreading putting all the decorations away.”

She never really thought of it that way before.

“I suppose you’re right. I had that thought last night too. That now I’ve got to find the time to put it away. I used to like to look at it for a week or so after because, like you said, all that work to set it up, and then you want to enjoy it as long as you can.”

“I think it’s better when you’ve got kids,” Sally said. “Mine are older and not into it as much. They open their stuff and then go off and start talking to their friends.”

“You’re right. It was nice this year having Leah and Eli. Though they didn’t know what was going on, it was fun for us. I guess all that matters is if the adults enjoyed it since they did all the work, don’t you think?”

She’d spoiled her niece and nephew just like everyone else did. But the truth was, the kids were clueless. They wouldn’t understand it all for another year easily.

“I think you’re right.” The phone rang and Sally reached for it. “Back to the grind. By the way, that scarf is stunning on you. You should wear more colors like that.”

Mia laughed and shook her head. “I’m being told that a lot lately. Guess I should take that advice.”

She went to her office and started to get to work. Her phone went off and she reached to see a text from Cal saying that he had a great few days and thanked her.

Her eyes started to fill with tears. He’d have no idea how much that meant to see that. Whether he was just saying it or not, it was what she needed to hear.

FEEL GUILTY

At the end of January, Mia was upstairs at Cal's working out. For the past month, she'd been staying at his house more and more. Probably close to half the time.

She found she was comfortable there and wished it were her place but wouldn't even consider moving in full time though there were times she wondered if Cal wanted to ask her.

The person who thought things to death was trying not to do that, but that still didn't mean she was going to jump fast either.

When the treadmill stopped, she got off and wiped the sweat off her brow. She had missed working out for years and was glad to find the time to get back into it. Mainly when she was staying with Cal.

She was getting ready to go back downstairs to shower when she heard a noise.

She stopped to listen again but didn't hear anything. Then when she went to walk downstairs, heard it again.

She hoped it wasn't a mouse. She should wait until Cal returned and tell him about it but found herself walking into the bathroom up there and flipping on the light. She didn't see or hear anything else.

It must be her imagination. When she walked out, she heard it again and went into that spare bedroom up there. There wasn't a bed in there. Not anything at all other than a few boxes of things.

She flipped that light off and took a step when she heard it again and then walked over to the closet and opened the door.

She could see more boxes in there too after she turned that light on and

she just started to move them around to see if she could see any evidence of anything.

One was open and she noticed on the top there was an old school jersey.

She pulled it out and smiled, thinking these were boxes of things from his house as a kid. Funny how it never occurred to her about those things. She had stuff at her parents' house too. She was positive her parents would give them to her when she had her own house.

She hoped Cal didn't mind, but she started to pull a few more things out and laughed. She found his yearbook and flipped through some pages until she found pictures of him and Brian. It was a good thing that Cal was out at the liquor store. She was almost starting to feel guilty.

She went to put everything back and noticed another item on the bottom. It looked to be a video game system, not opened and there was a sticker on it, the handwriting faded. It was for Cal signed by Mom and Dad.

Oh my God. How had he been able to keep that? It must be his mother had bought it before everything happened. It had to be unless Jack went back and got it.

Not that it mattered, but it was here and never opened.

Mia sat on the floor and started to cry. He couldn't open it, but he couldn't get rid of it either and she realized just how conflicted he had to be.

After a few minutes, she got up and wiped her face. She had to pull it together. As much as she wanted to tell Cal what she found, she wouldn't.

It seemed to her she'd pushed him enough.

She went downstairs after everything was put away as she'd found it and took a shower.

When she was walking out of Cal's bathroom, she almost jumped out of her skin to see him standing there.

He started to laugh at her. "What's so funny?"

"You. You're not normally that skittish. Sorry."

"It's fine," she said. "I went up to work out. I heard this noise up there. I looked around in the bathroom and bedroom thinking it might be a mouse or something, but I didn't see anything. I figured I'd better tell you."

She wouldn't keep that part from him just because she got sidetracked by a walk down memory lane.

"Was it a clicking sound?" he asked. "You know, like you picking at your thumbnail with your teeth?"

"Very funny," she said, looking at the grin on his face. "But yes, it was."

“It’s the pipes up there. I have the thermostat set lower up there since I only use that space to work out and don’t want it hot anyway. But it’s colder than a bitch out today so I’m sure it was that. I’ll go check.”

She felt like an idiot. “No. That’s it. Now that you say that I do remember walking past hot air leaving the room.”

“There you go,” he said. He moved closer to her. “Are you afraid of mice?”

“I’m afraid of most critters. I think that is completely normal.”

He picked her up by the waist and kissed her on the lips. “I’d save you from that nasty little beady-eyed thing.”

“You’re damn right you would,” she said. Rather than putting her back on the ground, he lifted her higher and she found herself hanging upside down on his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Taking care of you,” he said, his hand coming down on her ass. “You’re the one that said I’m boring.”

She started to laugh. “I don’t know that I said that exactly.”

“Close enough,” he said.

He moved out of his room. “Where are we going?”

“The hot tub,” he said.

“What?” she asked. “You’ve got a hot tub? Why am I just hearing this now?”

“Because you haven’t been downstairs since the first time you were here or in my backyard. It’s not that I use it often.”

He was moving down the stairs to the basement. When he flipped the lights on she still didn’t see it on the patio off the room down there.

“Why have it if you don’t use it much and where is it?”

“Off to the side,” he said. “Unless you went out there you wouldn’t see it. And I got it a few years ago when I pulled a muscle in my back. It was great.”

She hadn’t known that about him either.

He put her on her feet and started to reach for her clothing. “You just said it’s colder than a bitch out there.”

“So,” he said, pulling her shirt over her head. “That’s why you rush to get in the tub and then when you get out you rush to get in the house.”

She wanted to protest some more but decided this would be fun. And after her crying jag she needed this to take her mind off of what she’d found earlier.

“There are no towels down here,” she said.

He stopped from undoing his jeans and walked over behind the bar, opened a drawer and then pulled out two towels.

“Got us covered,” he said.

“Guess we are getting naked in the middle of the winter and going outside,” she said.

Mia stripped as fast as he did, then he opened the door and quickly lifted the cover.

“Don’t judge me if I’m not at my fullest.”

She looked at his cock and saw it still standing firm and started to giggle. “I’m not too worried,” she said.

She jumped in fast before the cover was even taken off completely and she screeched at the heat that hit her.

“It should feel good,” he said.

“But it’s so hot.”

“Well,” he said. “Get out to cool off. Let me see those nipples of yours that I know are rock hard.”

She sunk lower. It felt indecent to be naked in his backyard knowing his neighbors weren’t that far away. There were curtains on two sides and he undid another and let it fall into place so that they were completely covered with the hot tub against the house.

“You’ll have to come get them,” she said.

He turned the jets on more and she felt it hit her in the back and then moved to the side closer to him and he laughed. Like he knew that would happen.

Another button turned lights on in the water.

He sat on a bench next to her and then pulled her onto his lap.

She spread her knees around his hips but didn’t sink on top of him. Not yet.

“Lift up some,” he said.

“Then the cold air hits me,” she complained.

“I can’t get my mouth on you unless I go underwater. I don’t want to drown. Then I’ll be of no use to you.”

He had a point.

She lifted some, felt the cold air on her shoulders, but once his mouth latched on and started to suck, she didn’t feel anything else other than him.

He moved from side to side, making sure he gave them both the same

amount of attention.

She was starting to squirm and wanted to feel more than what he was giving her.

She lined herself up and sank on top of him, his mouth moving away from her nipples or he'd go underwater.

But he crushed his mouth to hers this time while she started to ride him, trying to stay under the water as much as possible.

It was slow and intense.

It was everything she always wanted when she was with a man and realized she'd been lacking it in her life for years.

"That's it," he said. "Keep it up. Get yourself there."

His hand moved down between her legs, found her swollen bud and then started to flick at it.

Her head went back and she moaned loudly.

"Shhhh," he said. "My neighbors might hear."

She didn't care. In the far distance of her brain, she heard the laughter in his voice and knew he was only teasing her. The sounds of the jets were loud anyway.

He was moving faster with his thumb, rubbing circles around her nub now, him just sitting there and letting her do all the work.

When she felt her body getting close she decided to sit right down, getting him as deep as he could go and then wait for the orgasm to hit with him just manipulating her body.

Her head went back, her hair floating in the water around them, her body tensing and then relaxing as all the muscles between her legs started to throb and twitch.

She felt him bucking up into her, making it go on for what seemed like forever, but all she did was hang on.

Her head fell to his shoulder, his hands rubbing up and down her back.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "But I was fine before."

"Were you?" he asked.

Could he have known she was looking through his things?

Did he have cameras hidden in his house that she didn't know of?

Nah.

"Yes, why did you ask that?"

"You've been busy at work. Distracted even. Jumpy since you all but

blew my eardrums out when you came out of my bathroom. Everything okay? You haven't said anything."

"Oh," she said. "Yeah. Work is great. It's busy and wonderfully fulfilling even when it's frustrating."

He laughed in her ear. "I'll take that as it's a good thing though it doesn't sound it completely."

"It is," she said earnestly. "I'm feeling so good about everything now."

"I'm glad," he said. "I'm hoping that I'm part of that everything that you're feeling good about?"

"Absolutely," she said. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"Just checking," he said quietly.

"What aren't you telling *me*?" she asked when she leaned back.

She looked at his face. There were tea lights on around them even though they were closed in during the day.

"Nothing," he said.

"Cal, don't lie to me. Or try to protect me."

He sighed. "It isn't anything. Things are going well with the brewery. Production is going to be speeding up and I've made a lot of contacts. Contracts will be signed soon."

"I know," she said. "I see those things. Remember, I'm your lawyer."

He kissed her on the lips. "You are."

Everything was moving forward with Harris too. She'd seen those documents.

"Does this have to do with Tyler?" she asked.

He'd made bail and had an appearance in court soon. She knew. She was keeping tabs on things though Brian was the one dealing with this.

She'd been frustrated but was told both by Brian and Cal that she was too emotionally involved and it was better.

She wanted to be annoyed over that, but Brian was her boss and it's not like she had much choice.

"A little," he said. "I'd like this to be over with, but I know things don't always move that fast. They are trying to get a plea deal. Saying that he'll go into rehab."

"Do you believe it?" she asked.

"Not my choice to believe it. But he should pay for his crime."

Which reminded her of the guy that killed Cal's mother. He'd be out in five years if not less, though she was positive Cal would fight tooth and nail

to make sure that didn't happen earlier.

"He should," she said. "I'm sure he will. With his past record, I see him doing time. It's just a matter of how much."

"I've got employees that are skittish," he said. "It bothers me."

"Oh," she said. This was the first she was hearing this.

"Yeah. My grandfather has no issues going in to open alone, but I've been there before him when it's his shift. Two people on every night."

"It's always been that way," she said. "Right? Other than you opening with your grandfather?"

"Yes. It's just, I know it's hard for them, wondering if it will happen again."

"You're doing all the right things," she said. "You've got security systems. You've got silent alarms if someone tried to rob the place while you were open. It's not like you're in a bad section of town for either of your stores."

"I know," he said. "But it's hard to get things out of people's heads even when they want it to happen."

It was the way he said it. The way he was staring into her eyes.

They were talking about him.

"It is, but when someone wants it bad enough, they ask for help," she said.

He only nodded and kissed her on the forehead. "When they are ready," he said.

She supposed that was the best she could get, but it was better than nothing.

A LOT GOING ON

Almost two weeks later, Cal walked into the liquor store in Albany.

“Hey, Cal,” Mike said to him. A younger guy that another employee had recommended. Mike had needed a second job when he’d hired him three years ago. He had a girlfriend and a kid coming at just twenty-two.

Weekends and one night a week, Mike still came in faithfully for his shifts.

“What’s up?” Cal asked. “Looks busy in here.”

Mike looked around the store. It was four on a Friday. “Seems it,” Mike said. “I got here about thirty minutes ago.” Mike’s full-time job ended at three, so he came from there to here when he worked during the week. “Anyway, I know you’re always buying houses and stuff. Looking for rental properties.”

“At times,” he said. He didn’t think he was always doing it. He had about ten rental properties that he’d bought over an eight-year period of time.

And since he closed on one a few months ago, it’s not like he’d had his eyes open lately.

He’d paid cash for that house. He always did now. The money he invested in the brewery, some was cash in his account, some from stocks he cashed in, the rest from a line of credit. He didn’t always like to pull money from one pot if he could avoid it.

Would he touch the rest of the Apple stock his father had? Probably not, but he had plenty of others he bought and sold over the years too.

“Well, my brother has a two-family house. His wife’s father left it to

them and they lived there for a bit and are moving now. They didn't want to list it because they know it needs some work and they don't have the money for that. Plus they'd like to sell fast. I told him I'd bring it up to you. It might be something you're interested in."

He wasn't but wouldn't be mean either. "Where is it located?" he asked. "Altamont," Mike said.

Which was a good school district.

"I'm not really in the market right now," he said. "Lots going on lately."

"I know," Mike said, smiling. "I told him that, but I said it was worth a shot." Mike grabbed a piece of paper and wrote on it. "Here is the address if you think it's something you want to look at. They are cleaning it up some now anyway in case they do have to show it."

Cal nodded his head and went to the back to check over the stock and talk with Tricia, his store manager.

"How's everything going?" he asked Tricia.

"Great," Tricia said. "Going to be a nasty storm on Sunday. Starting tomorrow afternoon. People are coming in to stock up on liquor. I'm filling some orders to be delivered. Crazy how many we've got this afternoon."

It was a service he started a few years ago. He'd been shocked at how popular it became. He had one staff scheduled to be out delivering now between both of his stores since they were only fifteen minutes apart. Technology was a wonderful thing and orders in one half of the area delivered were filled at this store, the other half in his Latham store.

"Good to know. We'll try to get them out before the storm hits. I'm going to email the office and tell them to mark off no deliveries for Sunday if the weather is bad."

Tricia smiled at him. "I'm sure the staff will appreciate it."

"I don't want any accidents that day."

He pulled his phone out and sent the text out and knew it'd be taken care of.

"Everyone doing well at the other store?" Tricia asked.

He sighed. "They seem to be. I know a few were skittish. We've got the security beefed up there and here."

"We've never had any problems," Tricia said. "We're good."

"I never did there either."

"Sometimes you can't control those things," Tricia said.

"You're telling me. I'm glad we are all getting back into a rhythm now."

He finished up the few things he had to do and then went to the store in Latham.

He was surprised to see his grandfather behind the counter. “Cal,” his grandfather said. “You’re out late.”

He looked at his watch and saw it was close to six. “Just finishing up a few things. Why are you working?”

His grandfather worked mornings, not nights. Not that he knew every shift his grandfather was here exactly.

“I switched with Steve. I’m done soon. Just waiting for Tom to get here.”

“Why don’t you head out,” he said. “I’ve got it.”

“No,” his grandfather said. “Tom will be here in about fifteen minutes. You’re here because you’ve got work to do, so do it and then get home to Mia. I’m assuming you’re spending time with her. At least I hope you are or I’m going to think I haven’t been doing a good job parenting you in the past few years.”

He laughed. His grandfather always put that on his shoulders.

“You’ve done a great job.”

He went to check on the few things he planned quickly so that he could leave when his grandfather did.

It was almost as if his grandfather knew and came to the back office ten minutes later. “Tom just showed up. I’m sure you are trying to rush to walk out with me. No reason to, but I’ll sit back here while you finish up. It’s not like I’ve got a hot date.”

“Maybe you should get a hot date,” Cal said. “No young filly catching your eye in the community room?”

His grandfather laughed at him. “Not since Roxanne decided Charles was a better match for her. I’m not into sharing.”

“I don’t need to know those things, Grandpa.” He hoped he didn’t give an involuntary shiver.

“You brought it up,” his grandfather said.

“I did. I will know not to again.”

He was quiet while he worked and his grandfather asked, “What’s wrong?”

He looked up. “Nothing. Why?”

“You normally are chatting nonstop even when you work. You’ve got the ability to do that when others can’t.”

“I thought you found it annoying?” he asked with a big grin.

“I do, but it never stopped you before. Everything okay?”

He figured he could mention this to his grandfather. “Yeah. Mike at the Albany store stopped to talk to me. Said he knew of a two-family house for sale.”

“That’s good,” his grandfather said. “You going to look at it?”

“Probably not,” he said, leaning back in his chair.

“How come?”

“I’m not looking at getting another property right now. I just put tenants in the two empty apartments I had last month once the work was done. It took longer than I thought with the holidays and all.”

“Not to get the tenant,” his grandfather said, waving his hand. “You said you’ve got a list of people.”

“That was the easy part. It was the work getting done. Setting up and following up. I’ve got a lot going on right now, money on the line and not a lot of time.”

His grandfather lifted his eyebrow at him and snorted. “That’s never stopped you before from checking something out. More so when someone comes to you that you like.”

“I know and like Mike. I don’t know his brother-in-law,” he argued.

“What’s going on?” his grandfather asked. “Does this have to do with Tyler?”

He should have figured his grandfather would go there right away.

“It’s exactly what I said,” he said. “Just a lot going on.”

“If you say so,” his grandfather said.

Two hours later he should have kept his mouth closed when Mia asked him how his day was and he brought up what happened.

He expected her to agree with him.

She didn’t.

“Why aren’t you even looking at it?” she asked. “From what I know of you, it’s something you do all the time.”

“Not all the time,” he said. “I’m not out there to save the world and everyone in it.”

“No one said that,” she said.

“But people think it,” he said. “All the time.”

“If this has to do with Tyler you’re letting him win,” she said. “Just because he turned out to be a jerk and a loser doesn’t mean everyone else is trying to take advantage of you.”

“No one takes advantage of me,” he said, grinning. He wanted to snap those words but didn’t. No reason to take it out on his girlfriend.

“I never said they did. I think most people know you for exactly what and who you are. But it’s your decision, not mine. Your money and time.”

“That’s right,” he said. “And maybe the time is what I’ve got less of. I’d like to spend more time with you.”

Though it wouldn’t take much to check it out, make a decision and then push work off to his staff. That was what he paid them for.

Mia moved over to sit next to him on the couch. “So you’re saying no because of me?” she asked.

“I didn’t say no to anyone. I’m just not interested, but that doesn’t mean I won’t change my mind in a day or so.”

She leaned over and kissed him. “Go with your gut.”

“I always do,” he said and picked up the remote to find something on TV. It’s just he wondered if his gut wasn’t always right.

PERFECT COMPANION

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Mia said, walking into Cal’s house the following week. “I hope you’re hungry. I stopped at the store and got steak and some big potatoes. I’m going to make twice baked ones for you. Lots of bacon and cheese. Always a favorite.”

“Sounds great,” he said. “I’ve got something for you too.”

“I’m sure you do,” she said.

She just hoped he didn’t go all out.

She’d never been with a man that had before. He did more for her at Christmas than she wanted, but she wore her bracelet daily.

Mia walked into the kitchen and set the grocery bags down, then started to take the food out.

“Want to open it now or go change?”

She eyed the bag on the counter. A small one.

Curiosity got the best of her.

“I’ll open it now,” she said, putting her hand out.

He pushed the red bag with white hearts on it toward her. She reached her hand in to pull out the tissue paper, then felt around for the jewelry box.

When it was in her hand, it was small.

No way it was a ring. Not this early and it’s not like she even expected it.

She flipped the lid and saw diamond hoop earrings.

“Cal!”

“What?” he asked. “They called to me. You like to wear hoops in your ears. Almost daily. I just got you another pair.”

“An expensive pair,” she argued.

She never wore expensive jewelry to work before for the same reason she didn't wear fancy and flashy clothes.

Though she was slowly changing her wardrobe.

"You need to look the part of a successful attorney," he said.

"I know," she said, sighing. "Or I heard it enough in law school. But I'm doing it my way."

"You love them and you know it," he said. "Just like I love you and wanted to get you something nice. Why can't I do that?"

"When you put it that way," she said.

"Maybe I should have started with that," he said.

"Maybe." She removed the hoops she had in her ears and swapped them out for the ones Cal bought her. "How do they look?"

"Beautiful," he said. "Just like the woman wearing them."

"Thank you," she said, putting her arms around his neck and kissing him. "I feel bad that all I did was buy food for dinner and make you cookies last night."

She was smirking at him. Hoping he didn't think she was lying.

"You made me cookies?" he asked. He was looking around the kitchen.

"They are in my car with my clothes. I came in carrying this stuff first." And she got sidetracked thinking there was a diamond ring in the bag.

"I'll go get them," he said.

Which was exactly what she wanted him to do. She hoped to hell she didn't make a big mistake with her gift for him. She wasn't sure how she got talked into it, but there was something in her heart that said he needed this in his life.

"Please do," she said.

She stayed in the kitchen and pulled the rest of the food out that she'd bought, then waited for Cal's return.

She expected it by now, but when he didn't come in, she immediately regretted the impulse to do what she had and went out to the garage.

Her car door was open and he was sitting in the passenger seat, a bundle of black and brown fur in his arms licking his face.

"What did you do, Mia?"

"Happy Valentine's Day," she said, plastering a big smile on her face.

"Shit," he said. "Are you serious?"

"Are you mad? Cooper said I can bring him back. Everything. The dog, the crate and bed and food and leashes. I mean I can return that stuff to the

store. The dog can go back to the shelter. It's just when Morgan sent me the picture of him last week, I thought he'd be a perfect companion for you."

The brindle Boxer looked to be purebred and about ten weeks old, Cooper had said.

"You know damn well you can't return him now."

"I know," she said. "Isn't he just a doll? He's so happy and excited. Kind of like you. And listen to him. It's like he's talking."

The puppy was making all sorts of comical noises.

"Let's get him in the house," he said. "He probably needs to go out."

"I let him out right before I came over. He was at Morgan's. She brought him home for me today and I had the rest of the stuff in my car already."

"Then you get the dog and I'll get the stuff you bought. This is a great gift," he said.

"Really? You're not just saying that to make me not feel bad?"

"No," he said. "I told you I've thought of it for years."

"Cooper said they are great dogs. Very protective. Very easily trained. Love riding in the car. He'll be your buddy with you. I'm sure the girls in the office would watch him at times if you can't bring him somewhere, or it's good for him to learn to stay in his crate. You could try doggie daycare, but I think he'd be a great shotgun rider for you."

"Yeah," he said softly, holding onto the new pup. "I just need to think of a name."

She reached for the puppy that decided he didn't want to leave his new owner's arms.

"Guess I'll be unloading the car. Take him in the house if you want."

Mia grabbed the dog bed and bag of food, bowls and treats, whatever else Morgan told her she needed.

When she walked into the kitchen the puppy was looking a little scared.

"I'm not sure what to do," he said. "I think he's upset."

"He'll be fine," she said. "Morgan and Cooper said we can call them or come over if we need to. I'll stay with him if you want to get his crate."

Cal went to the garage to get the rest of the things and Mia brought the puppy into his room with her while she undressed.

When she came out, the puppy was following along. "He's got a blanket in that bag. The one he was sleeping with at the shelter. It will be familiar for him if you want to put it on his bed."

She started to get dinner ready while Cal moved the puppy's bed to the

family room and laid his blanket on it, then pulled out a few of the chew toys she'd gotten.

The puppy immediately went to his blanket with a toy and started to play with it.

"Does he need to eat?"

"Yes," she said. "Three times a day for now. Morgan said he had lunch at the shelter and she gave me the food that he's been eating for us to continue with that for now. She wrote everything down for you. How much to feed him, et cetera."

She pulled the paper out and laid it on the counter.

She started to get dinner ready and noticed Cal reading the paper, then getting the food. The minute it hit the bowl the puppy came running toward it and all but tripped over his own feet, his face landing in the bowl as if he'd planned it that way.

"That was funny," he said.

"You're really okay with this?" she asked.

After last week when he'd talked to her about his employee mentioning a house for sale, she started to wonder what was going through Cal's mind.

From what she knew of him, he would have jumped all over that opportunity. At least check it out to see if it was a good deal or not.

It's like he wasn't interested and was making excuses that didn't make sense to her.

He didn't seem like the carefree guy she'd met months ago. He still showed it to the outside world, but she noticed it was dimmer than normal.

She knew he was lonely at night when she wasn't here. He wouldn't come out and say the words, but he'd alluded to it before. That he had acquaintances but came home to an empty house.

She wasn't ready to move in. She didn't think they were at that point in their relationship yet. But wouldn't it be nice if he did have someone with him all the time?

Someone to call his own. A bond that he had with his parents that he'd lost.

Maybe he could regain that in another way.

That was her hope at least.

"Yeah," he said. "It might have been the push I've needed to do this. I've never been afraid to pull the trigger on something before, but this was hard."

"The unknown," she said. "Cal. You take on other people's problems."

You take care of them and it's a responsibility on your shoulders that you carry well."

"Not always as well as you think," he said. His eyes were on the puppy and she knew she'd made the right decision. She also knew it took a lot for him to admit that to her.

"You don't hide things as well as you think you do," she said. "But this time, you get some enjoyment out of the responsibility. That is what pets are. At least I hope so. If not, you can blame my sister. It's her fault."

He moved over to her. "No one's fault. Thank you. Are you going to help me name him?"

"It's your dog," she said, laughing.

"Come on now," he said. "It's *our* dog. At least be honest with me if you're not with yourself."

"Fine," she said, rolling her eyes. "Our dog that lives with you."

"For now," he said.

She didn't ask what he meant by that. He'd said it so softly that she could have imagined it anyway.

REALLY MISSING

Three weeks later, Cal pulled into his Latham liquor store. It'd be opening in twenty minutes and he'd beat his grandfather here.

"Come on, Harley, out you go."

His puppy was growing faster than he wished, and at just over thirteen weeks, was pushing thirty pounds. They'd said he was at the higher size end and he was wondering if he should have named his dog Moose instead.

Harley let out a bark and wanted to jump down, but no way Cal was letting him. It was still too high up and he didn't want to worry about broken puppy bones.

He picked Harley up and set him on the ground. Most of the snow was gone for early March. Didn't mean they couldn't still get a storm or two yet, but by now it wouldn't last long.

Harley started to tug on his leash to get to the door. They still had a lot of training to do, but accidents in the house were less and less. Not bad considering Harley was with him in the truck and on the road most days. They had no set routine. If it was cold or miserable out, his pup stayed with the girls in the office while he ran around.

It seemed to be working so much better than he ever thought it would and couldn't believe it'd taken so long for him to get a dog.

More like for Mia to see what he was missing in his life without knowing fully.

He unlocked the back door, punched in the security code and then went to his office. He didn't have much to do but wanted to talk to his grandfather before he went to Clifton Park and met with Neil.

“You’re here early,” his grandfather said five minutes later. “I’m starting to think you come here just so I’m not alone. You know I’m fine. Everyone is.”

“I know you are,” he said. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh,” his grandfather said. “Everything okay? Come here, Harley. I told your daddy I was going to start keeping treats here and I am.”

Cal grinned when his grandfather opened a drawer in the desk and pulled out a bag of dog treats, handing one off to the puppy.

“He’s still learning manners,” Cal said when Harley started to jump up and down.

“You’ve got time yet to teach them to him. I’m glad this is the only Harley you own. I worried there for a bit.”

“It was a phase,” he said. Yeah, he’d wanted a motorcycle. Maybe he always said he did because his father talked about it too.

But his father never bought one. He remembered those conversations between his parents. When it came time to decide, he started to realize that it was a game his parents had with each other.

His father would bring it up only to have his mother tell him no. He was sure his father never intended on getting one. Cal realized that deep down he didn’t want one either.

And that he couldn’t do everything his parents did in hopes of bringing them back.

“One that most men have, I believe. Harley sure is turning into a good-looking dog.”

“He is,” he said. “I’ll be happy when he’s sleeping through the night.”

His grandfather laughed. “One day you’ll have children and realize that having the dog just get up once was a walk in the park. Or maybe Harley is preparing you for kids?”

He looked at his grandfather’s raised eyebrows. “Not yet,” he said.

“But you want them?”

“I’ve never said otherwise,” he said. “It was finding the right person.”

“I think you’ve found her.”

“It’s been about five months or so,” he said. “Not sure it’s time to say that.”

“Come on now, Cal,” his grandfather said. “You’ve dated over the years. I think the longest relationship I can remember was a year. I can’t even remember her name at this point because she wasn’t around much. You were

young yet. In college.”

“Maria,” he said. “Yeah, it was nothing serious.”

“That’s right. I feel as if it’s been nothing serious with a lot of women and then all of a sudden that isn’t the case. I’ve known you to take women out to dinner, get them nice gifts for holidays but nothing over the top. No fancy vacations or anything. Yet you’ve bought two pieces of jewelry for Mia.”

“Buying someone jewelry means nothing,” he said.

“My point is, you’ve done things differently with Mia. Almost from the start.”

“I have,” he said. No use denying it. “I love her. We love each other. I judged her early on and shouldn’t have.”

“And who told you that?” his grandfather asked, puffing his chest out.

“You did,” he said.

“That’s right, I did. And it looks as if you’ve got something on your mind. What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just killing time before I meet with Neil.”

“How are things going with the brewery?” his grandfather asked.

“Great. Production is up and running. We’ve got product shipping out to distributors and more on the way. It’s set up to sell in local pubs and restaurants right now too.”

It’d been a lot of legwork on his part but so worth it in the end.

“Did you ever check that house Mike told you about?”

“No,” he said. He had driven by. He was out in that area. It wasn’t a horrible location and he could easily rent it out, but it’d need work.

“Why not?” his grandfather asked. “You’re always one for helping someone out if you can.”

Mike hadn’t brought it up again and he’d expected that he would. He supposed he was glad about that so he didn’t have to make up some excuse as to why he wasn’t looking into it more when he normally would.

There was part of him that was burned right now with what Tyler did.

He did a lot for the kid and what he got in return wasn’t just petty but it was evil. There was no call for it either.

“Just a lot going on,” he said. “I don’t know. I think maybe people expect it from me at times.”

“What?” his grandfather asked. “That you’re more Santa than Scrooge?”

He snorted when his grandfather said that.

He supposed the fact he got through Christmas this year happier than he'd been in the past said he might have put some of his hatred for the holiday behind him.

"Maybe," he said. "Though no one has ever said that to me before."

No one other than Mia.

His grandfather just laughed. "Maybe not to your face but definitely behind your back."

"Huh?"

His grandfather waved his hand to dismiss the conversation like he had so much when he didn't want to throw people under the bus. "I'd ask how things are going with Mia, but since she got you a puppy and all and it's your new best friend, I'd say things are good?"

"They are," he said. "She's at the house a lot."

"But not as much as you'd like?"

His grandfather could always see through him.

"No," he said. He looked at his watch and knew he should let his grandfather open up and started to help him get ready. "I think she found what I had in the closet upstairs."

"What's that?" his grandfather asked, turning to look at him.

Last week he'd been upstairs working out, he'd heard the clicking that she must have that one time and decided to just go check it out too. She was right, it did sound like a mouse.

He moved around the room, then into the closet and noticed the boxes had been moved. Not too obvious other than he kept things fairly organized.

When he looked at them closer, he knew which ones she was in. He didn't think she was the type to go through his things but then noticed that only one on the bottom wasn't sealed. She might have just seen it open and peeked.

"Some boxes from home."

"Home meaning your parents' home or my old house?"

"Mom and Dad's," he said. Though those boxes had been moved to his grandfather's until he moved out.

"What did she find?" his grandfather asked. "I didn't think there was much in there but things from school."

"That was the box that was open," he said.

"Does it bother you that she might have been snooping? I don't picture her as the type."

He explained what happened. "I don't think she would have done it. She heard what she thought was a mouse and just kind of moved things out of the way to see if boxes had holes in them."

"That sounds more like it. So what is the problem?"

"The video game system was in there," he said.

"Oh," his grandfather said. "I'm not sure why Jack was hell bent on getting that for you that year."

He let out a sigh. "I think he just wanted to get me something that I asked for. Or finish something Mom had begun. But nothing was going to make that a happy Christmas."

He'd been devastated when he opened the game and wished he could have held it back when his father got upset. That night, his father got drunk and he blamed himself for that too.

Maybe if he'd shown how happy he was to get it, his father wouldn't have felt the need to hide in his room and drink himself to sleep. He often wondered if that was what started his father's drinking spree.

"No," his grandfather said. "People do things in grief without thought. Or they don't think it through enough. It's nothing more than that. I guess the bigger question is, why did you keep it? Why not give it away?"

"I don't know," he said. "To this day I'm not sure why I've got it in the house."

"Because it's a memory you can't bear to get rid of. Even a bad one. The same reason you've made every decision in your life. You think of your parents and they drive your choices. When are you going to think of you and what you want?"

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"It means that everything you've done has been to make them proud. To do what they would have liked. To help out a friend of theirs."

"There isn't anything wrong with that," he argued. "Not everything I've done has been for their friends. They've been mine too. People my parents never knew."

"You're right," his grandfather said. "But they are still your driving force. I just wait for the day when you do something that was different than what they did or had."

"I've got a dog," he said.

His grandfather turned and looked at him. "And you didn't get it. Your girlfriend did. Maybe you should think about that some more."

“I think you’re reading way too much into this,” Cal said, laughing. Now he wished he hadn’t stopped here.

“I think you’re dismissing it all too easily too.”

“Then we can agree to disagree. Harley and I need to hit the road. Right, Harley?”

His puppy had lain down and was behaving while they got the register set and his grandfather was getting ready to unlock the door.

His grandfather sighed. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye, Grandpa.”

He had to leave. He had too much to do and a hell of a lot to think about.

FOR THE BEST

Two days later, Mia was upstairs working out. She'd gotten out of work earlier than Cal. He was running around with Harley and said he'd be home no later than seven.

She didn't mind; she had work to do after she got her exercise in.

Somehow in the months they'd been dating, she found herself getting cozy with Cal more than she had with any other man.

She wanted to be here more and she knew he wanted that too.

Yet neither of them was saying it.

Maybe it was for the best.

All she knew was that she was happier than she'd been in a long time and finally felt as if she'd gotten all her confidence back for the girl that wanted to conquer the world and save people when she was in law school.

She was just getting off the treadmill when she got a text from Cal that he was held up and might not get home until eight now, to go ahead and eat without him, he'd just heat it up after.

Mia shrugged and wiped her face. Not a big deal.

She flipped the lights off and was getting ready to walk downstairs when she heard glass breaking.

What the hell?

She waited a second to see if she imagined it. Nope, she didn't. There was more breaking glass as if someone was pushing it out of the way to get in.

Shit!

She remembered there was a baseball bat in the closet with all of Cal's things so she used her phone to help light the way for her to get there. It

wasn't that dark outside, but the upstairs had curtains on the windows and the lights were still off and she'd keep it that way.

She got the bat in her hands and decided maybe she should call for help.

The first thing she did was dial 9-1-1.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"I think someone is breaking into my house."

"What is your address?"

She lowered her voice and gave all the information. The operator asked her to stay on the line, but when she started to hear things being destroyed downstairs she got pissed.

"He's wrecking the house," she whispered.

She hadn't turned any lights on when she came home. It wasn't dark then and now she wondered if that was a mistake. Whoever this was thought the house was empty.

"Stay hidden away. Police have been dispatched."

Mia pulled the phone from her ear and started to text Morgan. Cooper wasn't that far away. Her sister would get more people in the area over here faster than the police, she was sure.

She wasn't talking to the operator, just staying on the line as she heard more and more damage being done to the house.

Her heart was racing, her hands were sweating, and tears began running down her face.

Morgan said Cooper was on the way and she texted for him not to come alone. To get help.

When she heard the footsteps coming up the stairs, she told the operator to be quiet and put her phone face down so the light couldn't be seen on it.

The closet door was still open and she hoped to get up and shut it and realized that might not happen or be wise. It could make a noise and the bedroom door was also open.

Mia wasn't sure what she was thinking, but she moved out of the closet and went to the side of the bedroom door with the bat in her hand.

If this person thought they were going to walk into this room, she was going to take him unaware.

The light wasn't flipped on in the loft where all the exercise equipment was, but she heard the sound of something spraying.

She popped her head out and saw paint being sprayed on the walls and squinted her eyes. She couldn't make out who this person was, but it was a

guy for sure.

He went to turn and she put her back against the wall, heard steps coming closer and got the bat ready.

The minute the guy stepped his foot in, she swung and got him under the chin and he was out cold.

Her hand went to her face. She was terrified she'd just killed him and felt for a pulse. She got one and ran to her phone.

"I knocked him out," she said to the operator. "He came into the room and I had a bat in my hand. Oh my God, he's out cold."

"The police should be on the scene any minute. I'll dispatch an ambulance. Get out of the house if you can."

She heard sirens coming and ran downstairs as fast as she could with the phone in her hand and out the front door. The damage she'd seen to the house broke her heart.

"He's upstairs and unconscious," she said to the officer as they pulled to a stop in front of the house. "He came into the room I was hiding in and I swung and got him with a bat."

"Stay here," the officer said. She saw Cooper pull up next, followed by Brian.

"Are you okay?" Cooper asked, running toward her.

"Yes. I got him with the bat. The police are in the house."

"Cal is on the way," Brian said. "I called him the minute Cooper texted me."

"He's breathing," she said. "I felt a pulse. What if I hurt him or killed him or caused him injury?"

"Relax," Brian said. "Self-defense. You called the police. Don't jump ahead to things."

"The house is trashed," she said, crying. "He was spraying things on the wall too. He walked into the room and I decided to take him unaware."

"Stop talking," Brian said. "Here comes Cal."

His truck was racing down the street and he slammed on the brakes. By now there were neighbors all outside trying to figure out what was going on.

"Mia," Cal said, running toward her. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Your bat might have seen better days."

Cal looked down at the bat in her hand. She'd had no idea it was still in her hands until his eyes dropped down. "Is that blood?"

"It's his. I knocked him out when he came into the room. I was upstairs

and hiding.”

“Shh,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “I should have been home with you. You shouldn’t have been alone.”

“Don’t take this on,” she said. “No one could know.”

They turned when the police came out and the guy was up and in cuffs.

“Son of a bitch!” Cal shouted.

“Do you know him?” she asked.

“It’s Tyler. Guess he didn’t learn his lesson trashing the liquor store, but he had to come to my house too.”

“You son of a bitch,” Tyler was yelling. “You ruined my life.”

“How the hell did I ruin your life?” Cal asked, marching over to him. “You broke into my store and now my house. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You fired me,” Tyler screamed. “You cost me my girlfriend. I needed the money and help, but you just pushed me away. You help everyone else, but not me. Everyone says what a nice guy you are, but I think you’re a piece of shit and I hope you rot in hell.”

“Let’s go,” the officer said, yanking him along. “Sorry about this, Cal. I hate to say you know the routine, but you might right now.”

“Do you know them?” she asked Cal.

“The second officer was on the scene for the liquor store break-in,” he said, sighing. He walked over to where the cops were talking. “Can I go in the house?”

“You might not want to. He did a lot of damage in a short period of time.”

When the ambulance pulled up, Cal said to Mia, “You need to get checked out.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “He didn’t touch me.”

“But you’re shaking,” he said.

“You are too,” she argued.

“Why don’t you come with me,” one of the officers said. “We’ll get you looked over and then we’ll take your statement.”

Mia nodded. “I’m fine, Cooper and Brian. You two don’t need to stay.”

“Yes, we do,” Brian said. “I’ll stay here with you while you give your statement.”

She forced a grin. “You know I know the law too.”

“Just as well,” Brian said.

“I’ll go in and see how Cal is doing,” Cooper said.

She let the EMTs pull her to the ambulance and get looked over. Once she was done she started to relive what she'd gone through in the past fifteen minutes at this point. Funny how it wasn't much time but yet felt like a year while she was living it.

She just wanted this over with and wanted to get in and talk to Cal. He was going to be devastated that this happened to him twice and now in his personal space.

But she'd be damned if she was going to let him withdraw like he had when Tyler broke into the liquor store.

Mia was damn proud of herself and she was going to make sure he knew it and that he didn't worry because she'd seen the look on his face...that he thought he wasn't there to protect her.

She protected herself just fine.

BECAUSE OF HIM

Cal wasn't sure that what he was feeling right now could be described as anything less than primal rage.

His formal living room in the front of the house didn't have much damage to it. Guess Tyler hadn't made it here yet.

The back of the house was a different matter.

The glass on his sliding door was busted, showing how Tyler entered the house.

His kitchen cabinets had all been flung open and the contents pulled out and on the floor. Spray paint all over his counters that wasn't going to come out. There was more on the walls and his furniture in the living room back here was turned over and had some knife cuts in it, the stuffing pulled out.

The thought of Mia in the house with a madman that had a knife made him want to vomit.

"Hey," she said. "I should have stayed outside. This is horrible."

He turned to see Mia standing there. "Why don't you go out? I left Harley in the truck too. I forgot about that."

"I'll get him," Cooper said.

He watched Mia's brother-in-law leave. "I'm sorry this happened," she said.

"You're sorry?" he said. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for you."

"Don't even go there, Cal. I see it on your face. I'm fine."

"I brought this trouble into your life," he argued. That might be the biggest pile of guilt on his shoulders right now. That she would have suffered this terror and have the memories of it because of him.

“No,” she said. “You didn’t. Tyler brought it into your life. I mean on the bright side, I guess not everyone does like you.”

He snorted, not sure how she could crack a joke at this time. “Not funny.”

“I know. I’m trying to figure out what to say to you.”

“There’s nothing to say,” he said. He pulled his phone out and just started to take pictures.

“Sure, there is,” she said. “I want you to know that I’m fine. I did the right thing. I got help here. And I took the guy down myself. Don’t lecture me about being stupid or irresponsible either.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it. He wanted to yell at her for doing what she had. “Why didn’t you just stay hidden?” he asked.

“Because he was going to find me,” she said. “He was making his way through the whole house. I wanted to catch him unaware rather than being face to face with him. I liked my chances better the way they were.”

Cal sighed. It made complete sense. She could have been overpowered if she didn’t take Tyler by surprise.

“It worked,” he said.

“That’s right. Remember that. You know, months ago, I might have stayed in the closet and cried and prayed he didn’t find me.”

“What changed?” he asked.

She moved into his arms. “You. I found the confidence I used to have. I didn’t have the self-doubt anymore. I mean I’ll have it for years at times because we all do. But when I realized what was happening, I just got so angry. I didn’t want to stay there and let it happen.”

“You were going to confront him?” he asked, pushing her back and looking in her eyes.

“No. I wouldn’t be stupid. I’m not crazy. I planned on doing what I did. I’ll admit I closed my eyes when I swung and it worked. Good thing you kept that baseball bat in there.”

“Among other things,” he said.

“Your childhood is in that closet,” she said. “The good and the bad.”

“Not much good,” he said.

“This bat sure was good and handy,” she said, running her hand down his face.

“You’ve got a point there.” He kissed her on the forehead. “You know what’s in the boxes, don’t you?”

“I wasn’t being nosy,” she said.

“I know. It’s not you. You don’t have to explain.”

“This is probably horrible timing, but why did you keep things that have such a traumatic memory for you?”

He knew she was talking about the video game system.

“A reminder,” he said.

“Of what?” she asked.

“What not to do? What to do. I’m not sure. So many things. My father gave me that the Christmas after my mother died. I think he thought he was helping and I got upset. It caused him to go to his room and get drunk that night. I guess knowing the video game system is in the house reminded me of things not to do to people. Not to assume anything.”

“Cal, you were a kid. You were both grieving. Maybe it should remind you to be gentle with yourself at times. Or how about just being you? Maybe getting rid of it all and not using props from your past to do things that maybe you wouldn’t if they didn’t exist.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“Cal. Everything you do, it’s for other people. Do you ever do anything for you?”

This felt a lot like the conversation he recently had with his grandfather. “I do a lot of things for me. I’m not sure how you can say that.”

“I know you do. But you’ve said it so many times that you want your parents to be proud of you. I’m positive they are. I’m betting they are angels above looking down daily at what you’ve done with your life. Maybe they are even wishing that you did things for *you* rather than worrying if it’d be what they’d want or would have done.”

“You just don’t know what it’s like,” he said. He heard the pain in his voice.

“No,” she said. “I don’t. I’m sorry that I don’t, but I want to understand. I think I do. I can’t imagine what you went through, but I want you to know that I’m here if you want to talk about it. Because I think you do.”

He shook his head. “Kind of like I made you talk so much about your past year?” he asked.

“Kind of like that,” she said. “What I see when I look at you is this guy that everyone loves and looks up to. They think you’ve got it all together. You’ve got everything in life. But you don’t. And you don’t want anyone to know that either.”

“That’s wrong,” he said. “Six months ago, I would have thought there

was this big hole in my life.”

“What changed?” she asked, grinning at him.

He found it odd they were talking about this right now in the destruction of his home. “You. You made me see everything I was missing.” He decided to tell her about his conversation with his grandfather. “My grandfather told me a lot of what you are now. He wanted to know what I’ve done in my life that was different from my parents.”

“Is there anything?” she asked.

“I said I had a dog,” he said.

“I got you Harley,” she pointed out.

“That’s right. Which means that you could see something in my life that I couldn’t see. That’s why my life is happier right now. And in the past few days, I realized that what Tyler had done to me made me doubt some of my decisions.”

“Don’t doubt anything,” she said. “You can do everything right in life and things still turn out wrong. Didn’t you try to tell me something like that once?”

He smiled. “I did. Sometimes I need to hear my own advice.”

“That’s right. I could tell something wasn’t right with you the past month or so. I was hoping that I could get you to talk to me about it. I didn’t think this would be the thing that would cause it.”

“No,” he said. “What gave it away?”

“The house with Mike,” she said. “I think that just told me right away that you changed and you were struggling with that too. That in the past you would have talked to Mike. You would have checked that house out. Even if it didn’t work out, you would have at least tried.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And the fact Mike hasn’t asked again has made me feel bad about it. I can’t be my father. I can’t let something bad that happened in my life cause me to be someone I’m not.”

She smiled. “That’s right, Cal. You’re not your father. You’re not your mother. They loved you. They love you now and are watching out for you.”

“Angels above,” he said. “Right?” He liked the sound of that.

“Yes,” she said. “And they’d be proud right now that you finally realized you can do things that *you* want to do. Maybe it’s what you would have done regardless, but you need to start to realize they are your decisions and not anyone else’s.”

“You mean like asking you to move in with me?” he asked. “Not that this

is a place we can stay right now.”

He was laughing and she shook her head. “How about we stay at my place while this is cleaned up?” she asked. “I’m sure since I’m renting from the Butlers, they will give us a pass on the dog, all things considered, until we can get back here.”

“I’m sure they will,” he said. “And then we will be back here together. Where I can watch out for you.”

She lifted an eyebrow up at him. “I can watch out for myself,” she said.

“You can. You’ve proven it well.”

They turned when they heard the commotion and saw Caden running in. “Mia, are you okay?” Caden asked. “Morgan just called me.”

“I’m fine, Caden. I don’t need my big brother to watch out for me. I’ve got my boyfriend to do it even if I’ve proven I can do it on my own.”

Cal smiled and kissed her on the head. “You do. But as you said, you didn’t need much help. Your sister is a slugger, did you know that?”

“What am I missing?” Caden asked.

“Let me fill you in,” Mia said. “Grab a broom and help us clean this mess up.”

“That’s my girl,” Cal said. “Stronger than you ever thought you were.”

“Just like you,” she said. “Remember that.”

“I will.”

EPILOGUE

Four Months Later

SATURDAY, the first of July, Mia walked into Cal's house after having gone shopping with her sister.

She hadn't felt like she needed anything, but her sister had asked and she wouldn't say no. If she found it odd that Morgan was adamant they go on a day when her sister was normally at the shelter with Cooper, she kept it to herself.

After the past few months she'd had, maybe some girl time with her sister was exactly what she needed.

They'd just moved back into Cal's house last month after all the damage was repaired. She'd been nervous about giving her apartment up, but this just felt so right to her.

Though it wasn't much more than cosmetic damage to the house, Cal had asked her opinion on redoing the kitchen. Stating that he didn't want there to be any bad reminders for her to not want to move in.

She'd laughed at it but understood where he was coming from.

Her hands were loaded with bags and Harley came running. Their pup—because it really was theirs and not just Cal's—came racing over with his tongue flapping out of one side of his mouth.

"Looks like you bought out the store with your sister," Cal said.

"I got a little carried away. I hope it doesn't go to my head. I'm not used

to getting big checks like I've gotten."

She'd had two more wins and received her share. Her confidence level was at an all-time high, but she was trying to not let it go to her head.

Even Cal had moved on. Tyler was in jail. The brewery was doing well, but she expected no differently with the way Cal seemed to have the golden touch with business ventures. Cal had even purchased the house that his employee Mike had told him about to help out a family member and that was making him money too.

"You need to splurge now and again," he said. "But those look like things for the house."

"They are," she said. "Some of them. New curtains and throw pillows. Sheets too."

She'd taken over the bedroom upstairs as her office, putting a desk in the corner. Cal had said he was going to clean everything out of the closet and she'd felt bad. But when they went together to donate most of his things to a group home for kids, she realized he was ready to move on.

Just like she was, wanting her office in the room that she knocked Tyler out in.

Cal hadn't donated the video game system. It was out of date anyway. He'd thrown it out, but he did buy new systems for the group home, saying in theory it was the same to him.

She was proud of him and how he was so easily able to let go last month when they'd set up her office. She'd like to think he saw how well she was doing and followed suit.

"I just want you to feel at home here," he said.

"I do," she said. "You know that."

She walked into their bedroom and dropped her bags.

"Come upstairs with me," he said. "I've got to show you something."

"Okay," she said. There was a playfulness to him again. Like the one she'd seen when they first met.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up the stairs and her jaw dropped. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm confused."

There was a Christmas tree in the corner of the loft fully decorated.

"Haven't you ever heard of Christmas in July? We've got the liquor stores all decorated for it."

Mia laughed. "Yeah, I've heard of it. But you don't decorate for

Christmas.”

“I didn’t before,” he said. “I will. Starting now. But you see, I couldn’t wait until December to do this. I’m lucky I could wait until now.”

“Wait for what?” she asked.

He pulled her closer to the tree. “There is a little stocking there with your name on it. Open it.”

She’d seen the three stockings. One for each of them and then for Harley.

She pulled it off the limb of the fake tree and pulled a ring box out. “Oh my,” she said.

He took it out of her hand, got down on one knee and then flipped the lid. “My grandfather told me months ago that I’ve never bought jewelry for a woman before. I guess I never realized it until I thought more about it. That the last woman before you I’d given jewelry to was a pair of earrings to my mother for her birthday before she died.”

Her eyes started to fill with tears. “Oh, Cal.”

“It’s a good memory,” he said. “I think subconsciously I knew I wouldn’t do it again until I could find a woman I loved as much as her. Deep down I think I always knew it’d be you. So I’m asking you in front of this Christmas tree in July, if you will be my wife. If this hasn’t proven to you how much I can move on with my life, I’m not sure what has. I want to move on with you.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I’ll be your wife.”

He stood up and put the ring on her finger. She’d been all but blinded when he flipped the lid but was paying more attention to him than the jewelry. Now she looked down at the oval ring surrounded by a cluster of more diamonds.

“Good,” he said. “I hope you want a fast wedding. You know, like your sister did. I’d like to get married in December. Full on Christmas theme.”

Mia burst out laughing. “No,” she said. “No red and green. Not for a wedding.”

He grinned and kissed her on the lips. “How about silver and blue? Does that work?”

“That works beautifully,” she said. “Just like we work beautifully together too.”

“That’s right,” he said. “We do. Don’t ever forget it!”

THE END!

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