



Executive Benefits

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: A silver fox restaurant owner.

A scandal-touched marketing consultant.

A Valentine's Day deadline.

An office romance that breaks all the rules . . .

I'm his last chance at saving his business.

My own reputation hangs by a thread.

When our eyes meet across his office, everything changes . . .

Late one night, he asks me to be his fake girlfriend.

To spite his ex-wife, he says.

But his heated kisses tell a different story.

His experienced hands make me forget why this is wrong.

Every dark corner of his restaurant becomes our playground.

This silver fox knows exactly how to make me beg . . .

We agree it's just business.

Just until Valentine's Day.

Just until the rebranding is complete . . .

But his touch becomes my addiction,

And his office desk our favorite meeting spot.

Each forbidden encounter leaves me craving more . . .

They say he's too old for me.

That I'm too young, too risky for him.

That mixing business with pleasure will destroy us both . . .

Now a vengeful ex threatens everything we've built,

And our fake romance feels all too real.

One scandalous secret could tear us apart forever . . .

I came to rebrand his restaurant.

I never meant to lose my heart in the process . .

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NICK

“Nick, things are going to get hard for you.” My lawyer wiped his forehead with his pocket square. Kendra tended to have that effect on people. “Do you know what you’re going to have to go through if you keep the restaurant? Do you know how much she drove everything into the ground?”

I grunted and rolled my eyes, not interested in what my lawyer had to say about my business ventures. “I don’t pay you to advise me on my investments. I pay you to defend what’s mine and what I deserve.”

Ted looked at me, hard. Before I decided to end my marriage, Ted and I hadn’t spent any time together. He was a good divorce lawyer despite the fact that Kendra had a shark of one also.

I always knew she was a manipulative shrew, but once I found out she was cheating, it was easy for me to end things. Not that she didn’t try and talk me out of it, but her charm had stopped working on me a long time ago and the only reason I stayed married was because marriage meant something to me.

I huffed thinking about how stupid I was about that. I rolled my eyes and didn’t say anything else to Ted. He thankfully knew to keep his mouth shut. This entire process had taken far too long, and the only reason it had was because I’d trusted the woman in business and in bed.

It wasn't a mistake I was planning to make again.

The good news is that the divorce and the process had made me see who my real friends were. Kendra had manipulated the situation for herself, and most of those people chose to believe her. Or they were too damn afraid of her to not take her side.

Either they were cowards or backstabbers, and I was better off without any of them.

"All I want is my restaurant," I growled at Ted as the courtroom door swung open and Kendra fluttered out of it in a red suit and hat because she didn't have enough attention going on around her.

She took her sunglasses away from her face and perked her manicured brow at me. "Seems like someone's letting their emotions get the better of them," she said, her red lips curving up at the edges.

"I don't have to be part of whatever game you're playing, Kendra." I stepped up to her and looked her square in the eye. "You're going to get what's coming to you, in spades, but I don't need to let you affect me anymore."

The sinister spark in her eye dulled for a few seconds when the slow realization that she had no power over me sank into her brain. I patted her on the shoulder and walked away. Ted hurried behind me.

"Fine. I'm your lawyer. You're going to get advice." I kept walking and tried to blow him off. He stepped in front of me, and I stopped, impressed with his tenacity. "Starting fresh might be the best thing for you. Building something of your own without the threat of..." He looked around me and held up his hand, waving it in Kendra's direction. "Whatever that is."

I huffed and didn't bother to look over my shoulder. But I liked Ted's humor.

“I hired a public and marketing agent. She’s going to help me rebrand.”

“Don’t you think you should know what, if any, business you’re getting?”

“Aren’t you supposed to have more confidence than that?”

“I’m a realist. I see things go in all sorts of ways, all the time.”

“Wonderful, a pragmatic realist. You’re probably the first lawyer I met like that.”

He smiled. “You haven’t known that many divorce lawyers, then.”

“True. I have only had one divorce.” I looked over my shoulder. “What do you think the verdict will be?” I looked back at Ted. “You know the judge. How does she usually side?”

“I think we made effective arguments about Kendra’s personality and her choices in business. I definitely showed her ill intent for running said businesses into the ground. But this judge doesn’t usually take personality into account. Just actions.” Ted shrugged. “All Kendra’s actions have been directed toward destroying you. You might walk away with something.”

“Grayson and Grayson?” the bailiff called down the hall.

I looked at Ted, who gave me a firm-lipped nod and walked into the courtroom with his last statement hanging over my head.

The courtroom had a stale air to it, but also a somber presence. Since our divorce wasn’t a public event, the room seemed hollow with only the five of us in it. When we stood at our tables, we waited for the judge to enter, then we sat after the judge sat first.

“In the case of Grayson versus Grayson, the court rules in favor of Nicholas Grayson whose request to keep the restaurant The Bridge has been accepted.”

Kendra scoffed and a loud, “What!” echoed across the room.

I looked at her, trying to understand if what I just heard was correct. I turned to Ted, whose firm-lined smile was now broken into a wide smile that showed too much of his teeth. But it was contagious.

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“Mr. Grayson.” The judge got my attention back to her before I could celebrate too long. “You will have the papers drawn up within thirty days, and the deed, all financial decisions, and the documents will transfer to your name.”

I didn’t listen to anything else the judge said. I probably should have, but the fact that I got a win against Kendra after being kicked in the balls so many times in the last few years was enough to burn any hard wiring away. Now, it actually looked like I got one thing I wanted. I turned to Ted and smiled with him.

I finally got to cut ties and move on. I don’t think I’d heard anything that good in longer than I could remember. I tipped my head to Kendra’s scoff, choosing to believe it was because I was still tuned into her mood, and flicked my eyes in her direction.

I couldn’t help but be happy, even as she slid her sunglasses on. I refrained from telling her it was winter because I was tired of poking the bear, but now I could look at her in a small, cathartic moment where I enjoyed how ridiculous she looked.

Kendra grabbed her coat and stepped over to my side of the courtroom. She pointed a finger at me and said, “Don’t think this is over, Nick,” before she whipped around in a whirlpool of fabric and stormed out of the courtroom.

“Don’t worry, she can’t appeal the process,” Ted said, standing.

I looked at my hands, settled on the table, and took a moment in. Then I let Kendra’s threat settle over my shoulders, guessing that she could only mean she’d try to turn the staff against me too.

That was one thing that surprised me.

The staff saw Kendra's true face, and they stayed with me throughout the process. But I hoped that they would still stick around.

I stood and looked at Ted whose smile was plastered to his face. "See, pragmatic realism worked." He patted my shoulder and held out his hand. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." I shook his hand back and dropped it quickly. "Appreciate it."

We turned and walked down the aisle and out into the hallway.

"When do you start rebranding the restaurant?"

I looked at my watch. "In about two hours."

"You were that positive you were going to get it?"

"No." I laughed. "But I had to hope for something."

We walked out of the building. "Thanks again, Ted. I shouldn't need your services for anything else." I chuckled. If I did, that meant I was getting divorced again, and I probably wasn't going to be in the market for marriage ever again.

The thought strangely relaxed me.

That, or I was so relieved that I got to keep my restaurant that I couldn't imagine anything or anyone else keeping me happy. "Take care of yourself, Ted."

For the first time in a long time, I finally calmed down.

I finally felt like things were going to turn around and I could live the life I always wanted to.

I got into my car and drove to my restaurant, and I couldn't wait to get started.

2

JULIA

"Alright, you're headed to your two o'clock, yes?" Mia asked me, not for the first time.

"Yup. Mmhmm." It was best to just let her ask her questions. Otherwise, her anxiety could get the better of her.

"Great," she said as I turned the wheel. I was early, but that's okay. I liked to be prepared and give myself a little time to calm myself down before walking into a big meeting.

"News on Buffalo," Mia started. My fingers white-knuckled the steering wheel hearing that we were going to have to talk about that mess.

"We can't talk about something good?" I hated the whine in my voice, but it was there and I wasn't going to shy away from it. I was still reeling from the experience.

"It is good. We're seeing that Jared may not have done as much damage as it looked like, but the bad news is that it isn't because he didn't try. People have short memories, and other scandals are happening as we speak."

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“I don’t know how you can sound so chipper about that.” I couldn’t stop my smile at her pixie-like voice. She was my best friend for a reason.

“I’m not, but having a manipulative bastard trash your reputation to the point that you had to move to a new town and start fresh isn’t a good way to keep things, Julia.”

“No, but that’s what you’re supposed to do, make things better so people will want to keep working with me.”

“They will. We just need to put out a really good press release about this upcoming client?—”

“I don’t have the job yet,” I reminded her. It stung, having to start over, but it really was... well, I didn’t know what it was, but I was trying to be more level-headed. If it hadn’t been for Jared messing things up after he decided to cheat on me, I would still be in Buffalo with clients reaching out to me.

Jared decided that he would trash my work reputation because I left him when I found out he was enjoying other ladies’ company besides mine. The problem was that he was a client, a big one, and unfortunately, that made me look a bit shady. As a second burn, he’d introduced her to a lot of clients in the year they were together, then promptly said the worst things about me—I was sleeping with him to get a leg up in the business world, that all of my ideas were childish, and a bunch of other things that were garbage but seemed to do the trick.

I left Buffalo for a fresh start, and I wasn’t excited by the reminder. But I squared my shoulders and gave a tight nod. “Okay, I will get this client and we’ll get a press

release and you can send it to everyone in Buffalo who had the nerve to badmouth me, and other people who might not know.”

“That’s more like it. We will. Get the client, and when the rebranding is a smashing success, we’ll send out so many press releases that Jared will start to choke on them.” She laughed.

I turned into the parking lot of The Bridge and chuckled with her. “Alright, I’m here and I’m going to go. Thank you for the good news and the image of Jared choking on press releases. That’ll keep me happy for a few hours, at least.”

“My fun imagery should last you for two days, maybe three.”

“I’ll get there. Let me land this client and we’ll see how long it lasts.”

“You’re going to kick ass!”

“Thanks, Mia. I love you.”

“Love you too!”

I hung up the phone with a smile on my face and looked at myself in the rearview mirror, fluffing my brown hair and tucking it behind my ears. I shifted my bangs to the side and made sure there was nothing in my teeth. After a good once-over, I reached into my bag and pulled out some light-pink lip gloss with a little bit of shine.

I dropped it back into my bag and took out the schematics of The Bridge.

I was meeting Nicholas—Nick—Grayson. Mia even pulled a picture, which was a great one. He had a head of thick hair that was longer and bright blue eyes. The dossier said he was in his forties and was the sole owner of The Bridge but would like

to rebrand as his business partner was no longer around.

“Well, Julia,” I said to myself, “let’s go land the client.”

I stepped into the stark white area that was decked out with white decorations, large white centerpieces, and different hues of white, silver, and shimmering blue Thanksgiving decor that was far different from what I would have thought I’d find in Hearts Creek.

Someone moved behind the bar, and I smiled. “Hello,” I said. They stopped and looked at me. A younger guy with a white vest smiled back.

“What can I help you with?” His nametag read John.

“Hi, John. I’m here to see Mr. Grayson. I’m Julia Day. I’m here to discuss the marketing for the restaurant.”

“I will get Nick for you,” John said. “Feel free to take a seat at the bar. Would you like anything to drink while you wait?”

“No, thank you.” John nodded in response and turned, walking through a door behind him. I assumed it was the kitchen.

I chewed on my cheek and looked around the restaurant. If I didn’t know he was trying to rebrand because of a missing partner, I wouldn’t have thought the restaurant would need anything done to it. It was decorated with crisp, clean lines in a modern aesthetic of fine dining.

It rivaled anything I’d seen in Manhattan for sure.

“What do you think?” I heard a voice from behind. I turned, and my heart leapt into

my throat as Nicholas Grayson smiled at me. Even in a chef's coat, I could see the tight lines of his physique under it. His blue eyes were the color of sapphires, and his thick hair was brushed back in thick salt and pepper hair. I looked him over feeling my smile widening. He was a very attractive man.

My cheeks heated with my thoughts.

I hoped that they weren't as red as they felt.

"Hello," I said, tucking my hair behind my ear. I held a hand out to greet him. He wiped his hands on the dishrag and walked closer to me. "I'm Julia Day," I said.

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“Hi, Julia. It’s great to meet you.” His hand was warm and invited a little too much heat to race up my arm. I pulled back and hoped that I wasn’t being rude by the reaction. He stepped up next to me and pointed at the restaurant. “Well? Is it salvageable?”

Although I really needed the job, I didn’t stop the “I’m not sure there’s anything I can do for you here. Everything looks amazing.” I turned away quickly, scrunching my nose up with my words, and I tried to scramble to recover. I didn’t want to talk myself out of a job.

With a quiet huff, I blew out the idea and turned back to him with a smile. “It is beautiful. Why were you thinking about rebranding, Mr. Grayson?” He was still holding my hand, and the heat from his skin to mine traveled up my arm, causing my cheeks to burn hotter.

“Call me Nick,” he said, his voice rippling down my spine.

Okay. Get a grip, Julia. Work. You are here for work. I cleared my throat and took my hand back.

I tucked my arms around my briefcase as Mr. Grayson—Nick—swept his hand to a table, and I gave him a soft smile, leading the way. I placed my bag down on one chair and Nick pulled the other chair out for me. “Thank you, Nick,” I said, surprised to have that kind of treatment. I don’t think any of the men my age knew that used to be considered polite.

I shook myself out of the next thought that came into my head and placed my chin on

my palm. He smiled as he sat down and got situated.

“Well, as of noon today, this restaurant is mine.” He swept his sapphire eyes around the restaurant and they filled with a wistful look. I instantly knew how he felt about the place from how his features shifted. He shook his head, catching himself, and delivered me a charming smile. “It’s all mine. I had a business partner who made all the decorative calls, and she was the mastermind behind the fine dining experience.”

His eyes found mine, and a different type of emotion sparked in them. “That’s not me.” He huffed. “I don’t know if it ever was, so I’m happy to be rid of that side of things.”

I reached for my bag and took out a notebook and pen. I flipped the notebook open to the next blank page. I wrote out his name, the date, and the project.

“I don’t see many people using notebooks anymore to take notes,” he said.

I lifted my eyes to meet his and smiled. “I hate to disappoint you, but this will all be put into my laptop when I get back to the office.” I placed the pen down and folded my fingers over each other. “Why don’t you tell me what you do like? Did you ever find a restaurant you stepped into and thought, ‘I want a restaurant like this one day’? Or do you have an aesthetic you’ve always been drawn to?”

He chuckled and looked at his hands for longer than I was comfortable for. I wanted to ask him if he didn’t like my question or if he needed me to prompt some ideas. I opened my mouth to ask him again when his sapphire eyes turned up to mine and my words were knocked right out of my mind. Instead, I perked my brows, waiting for him to continue. “My apologies, it’s the first time that anyone has asked me what I wanted in a long time. It’s refreshing, but I’m still a little new at this.”

Well there had to be more to that story, but I was still in a business meeting and that

seemed like a personal matter.

I cleared my throat. “Well, that is why you’re hiring me.” I didn’t point out to him that he hadn’t signed on the dotted line yet, but I had a good inclination that he would. Plus, I wanted to sound confident, and pretending I’d already landed the gig, even if I was nervous about what I said, showed moxie.

At least that’s what I told myself.

“I’d like to bring in a more homey and rustic feel. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do.” His warm smile spread wider, and any discomfort I had from presenting too bold of a statement extinguished.

“Okay,” he said. “Where do you want to start?”

“Since it seems as though you’re going for a more casual stance, I’d say the first thing to do is to change the menu, bring down the prices, and lose the all white-color scheme.”

I took a few other notes.

“I know you might think the price point should stay what it is?—”

“No, no. Actually, I fought with my ex—Er, my previous partner—about pricing for a few years,” he said, sitting up a little straighter. “I always thought if we lowered prices and gave out bigger portions, we’d entice a wider audience.”

He smiled, propping himself up on his elbows and folding his fingers over each other. “I guess I do get to make all the decisions now, huh?” His smile grew a little wider, and I found myself smiling with him.

“It is your restaurant now. You should probably make the decisions.”

I jumped when a plate of food was put in front of me. “This is a platter of all our appetizers for you to try,” a server said, giving a quick nod to me. His eyes flicked to Nick’s.

“Thanks, Michael,” Nick said and patted his hands on the tabletop. He pointed to the tray in front of him. “It’s really what we’re trying to get away from, but this is a sample of what we do,” he said.

“Thank you, Nick,” I said, looking at all the food. My mouth watered and I couldn’t wait to try it. I totally planned to. It would be good to know the product I was working with. “This all looks amazing. Can I see the menu?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said and slid out of the booth.

I checked over the cheese on the plate. It looked incredible and had a rustic appearance that made it look as though it were made in-house. I wrote a note down to make sure I asked him about it. He could also make money on it by selling to local grocery stores and artisan festivals.

I’d have to ask him about that. There were also a lot of ways to sell it in the restaurant besides as an appetizer.

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My eyes roamed over another item—a small, pink ball of what appeared to be watermelon and dragon fruit with some type of foam. It was a little too much for what this town probably wanted. Although beautiful, if he wanted to go with a small, hometown feel, it may scare away the crowd he was hoping to bring in.

I picked it up and tasted it, humming at the flavor. Dragon fruit and watermelon with some type of cream cheese and honey. My eyes rolled into the back of my head.

“I like to see people enjoying my food,” Nick said. My eyes snapped open, and I thought my cheeks would burn up from embarrassment.

“This is wonderful.” I pointed to the second one. “It might not fit with the food you’re going to be making, but it’s delicious, nevertheless.”

Nick handed me the menu. Good humor sparkled in his sapphire eyes, and I found myself smiling with him.

When I managed to break away from his gaze, I flipped the menu open to the first page, and there, with the appetizers, fruit and cream cheese was spelled out in French to make it fancier. It was also almost thirty dollars.

I lifted my pen and ran the end of it over the description just to make sure I wasn’t missing anything.

A thumb caressed my cheekbone. The skin on skin contact left a line of heat down to my jaw as Nick’s fingers tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. I didn’t hate it, but it was weird. My eyes flicked to meet his, and his hand was still in my hair.

I didn't know what to feel as embarrassment painted across his face.

"Sorry," he said, showing me a little fuzz ball. "I didn't mean to scare you. This was in your hair."

"Oh." I chuckled, happy it didn't come out as a giggle or high-pitched like my laughter could get when I got flustered by the opposite gender. I tended to get awkward personally. "Thank you, then," I said and turned back to the menu, wishing his hand were still on my neck or skin somehow.

He couldn't read my thoughts.

I was positive about that.

But he scooted over and sat close to me.

I wondered if I'd said anything out loud and I just hadn't realized it.

The heat from his body thrummed, and I had a hard time not scooting closer so our thighs were touching.

"Well, what do you think?" he said. He reached for the menu and looked at it with me.

"I could tell you what would be good for the restaurant, even if you weren't rebranding your restaurant," I said. My words came out breathier than I'd anticipated, and if I thought I couldn't be any more embarrassed, I would have been dead wrong.

Nick leaned back, placing a hand along the back of the booth.

I didn't really want to see if he was flirting with me, but I couldn't help myself. I sat

back and brought the menu with me. He didn't move his arm, and I almost fit into his body.

Surprise filtered through his eyes and he sat forward, just enough so his arm fell off the booth's cushion and wrapped around me to scoot closer.

"Well," I said, whispering now. I wanted to kick myself for how breathy I sounded, but it had been awhile since I was attracted to a man. And even though he was a client and I'd never go there again—I'd learned my lesson from Jared—it was nice to feel an attraction and flirt. Even if he was a bit older.

Flirting did feel harmless.

"The melon ball, cream cheese appetizer is good. It's probably one of the best things I've eaten all year."

"That seems like high praise," Nick said, his voice low also.

"It's pretty steeply priced," I said.

He studied my face, and for a moment, I thought I just lost the client, but a smile broke out on his face. "You've got the job."

3

NICK

"I have some great news, everyone," I said as my staff gathered in the dining area for our weekly meeting. The employees looked at me with perked brows and worry. I didn't blame them. I'd been a bear the last few months, and Kendra always found a way to mistreat them if they showed me favor over her. It was why our staff was so

small now, but hopefully, I could change it.

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John, my sous chef, Phoebe, my manager, and several other servers waited for me to get on with the good news. “We are rebranding The Bridge.” Shock and awe and something that looked like relief swept over their faces. “I have sole ownership now, and we are going to make some changes.”

I clapped my hands together and continued, “I’ve hired a marketing agent to help us change up the place. We’re going rustic, family-style, and casual.” I looked around to gauge their interest, and they seemed intrigued. But just the simple thought of Julia made my mind race with thoughts and ideas that weren’t suitable for work. I would have to look at that later. I was probably almost twice her age, even if I hadn’t been attracted to someone for a while. I didn’t know how appropriate it was to be lusting after someone I’d hired to work with me.

Phoebe and John already knew as much that we were shifting gears and going into a new lane, and when Phoebe stepped forward, she asked, “Do you have any questions before Chef continues?”

One younger server raised her hand. “Monica?” I asked.

“Will you be keeping the staff the same?”

“Absolutely. We’ll be doing things a little differently, but our managerial team will help train you in a new way. But just because we’re going casual doesn’t mean that we’re going to scrimp on service.”

The staff nodded at me, and I felt juiced with positivity. “We’ll be closing the restaurant down the last two weeks of January for construction and will be reopening

on Valentine's Day with an amazing launch to reintroduce ourselves to the community." I explained the premise, and although we hadn't talked in-depth, the items that Julia brought up were creating exciting new ideas in my mind.

Not just sexual ones.

The meeting went on for a little while longer, but then I let them loose on the pizza we had brought in for this evening.

"What do you think?" I asked Phoebe and John.

They looked at each other and shrugged. "Seems like a good change," John said. "I think it'll be a shake up that we need, but it's a big change. I hope you can handle it." John laughed.

"I'll be fine with it," I snipped. That was always a joke Kendra made at my expense. If I didn't go along with what she was suggesting at the first go, she'd tell me I just didn't like change and that she'd take over the "harder decisions" for me because I always took too long to decide anything.

While not completely inaccurate, I remembered the moment I just gave up and let her take over. We were arguing about canapes for an appetizer—I was the chef, after all, I'd reminded her. She'd thrown a huge shit fit, and at that moment, I was just too tired to argue anymore.

Instead of saying anything else, I closed my eyes, scrubbed my face with my hand, and said, "What type of canapes do you think will work best?"

That was about five years into our marriage. I was already unhappy, but I thought—at least some part of me believed the logic—that if I just gave her what she wanted, that thing would be better and somehow, we could find our happiness again. I didn't

realize it at the time, but Kendra was never going to be truly happy, and the only real time she was happy was when she was steamrolling over anyone who got in her way.

I shook out the unpleasant feeling and turned my attention back to the meeting and to John. I knew John wasn't trying to push a button, and I soothed my bristled edges down. "Sorry," I grunted, turning my eyes to Phoebe. "How do you think it'll go?"

"I think it'll be great. The PR rep must have really made an impression on you to trust her right away."

"Har, har, har, you two are hilarious," I said.

I couldn't admit to her how much truth was in her statement, but I always appreciated the idea that they gave me a hard time. It showed me that even though I was their boss, they also trusted me enough to be real.

The thought of Julia, though, excited me again, and a warm sensation dripped into my chest. I smiled, wondering what she'd have to offer at our next meeting. I kind of couldn't wait to see her again. Not just because she was beautiful and wore that sexy skirt and heels. Not even because I spent some of our meeting picturing myself learning what was beneath that skirt.

Because she was fucking brilliant too.

And she represented the idea of the future. Not just for my business, but the idea that I might be ready to date again.

I looked over at the servers and kitchen staff eating and gave anyone who turned their attention to me a smile. Then I checked with Phoebe and John. "I'm going to go into the office for a little bit of work. Close up when you're done." I nodded and left the rest of the staff to the festivities.

Phoebe's words rang truer than I wanted them to. Julia gave such an incredible presentation that it was hard for me not to just give her a wad of cash on the spot. I knew she'd just moved to Heart's Creek, and I hated to say it, but I was happy she did.

It was the first time, other than this afternoon when the judge handed down her ruling, that I started to feel hope. I walked back to my office, flicked the lights on, and closed my door.

I sat in my chair and rocked back in wooden comfort. The chair was my grandfather's and it had just always stuck around. No matter what restaurant our family had going at the time, the chair was always there. I placed my hands on the armrests, surprised at how the weight of my divorce and the unknown of what was happening with the restaurant was heavy on my shoulders.

I closed my eyes and let the peace of the moment settle itself over me.

"Do you know your staff is sitting in your dining room eating pizza?" David said as he opened the door and walked into my office.

"Yes, Phoebe thought it would stop them from pushing back because Kendra always buttered them up as long as they went with whatever she wanted."

"And you think pizza was the best way to butter them up?" He sat in the chair across from my desk. He reclined, crossing his ankle over his knee. "Heard the good news."

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“That’s because I texted you about it,” I said, rolling my eyes and placing my hand over my mouth to stop the dumbass from slipping out. The look in my best friend’s eye told me he was going to say something stupid.

“They’re still bitching about it, you know.” He picked a piece of lint off his suit.

“Who’s still bitching about what?” His statement could mean anything about anyone right now.

“The town. Your team. The split. They’re still reeling from it,” he said.

The words, even though it ended two years ago, flitted through my mind. I bit them back because we’d gone through this before.

“No, I didn’t know that. But I’m so happy you decided to tell me. Now I can get my feathers all ruffled about it because my staff doesn’t like a choice their boss made. Thanks, asshole.”

David held his hands in the air. “Sorry, just trying to process everything.”

“What is there for you to process?”

“She was my friend, Nick.”

“She was always playing the game, manipulating. You knew this. You pointed it out first,” I reminded him.

“Yes, but then she grew on me.”

“And then you always took her side.” Just like everyone else. Even after she cheated on me, the woman somehow got them all to put the pity on her.

“She said she wanted to go to marriage counseling.”

“I don’t know why I’m friends with you anymore.” I threw my hands up.

“Alright. Alright, I’ll get over that crap on my own. Don’t you think a casual eatery is beneath you? You’re an award-winning chef. Don’t you think by downgrading your restaurant, you’re downgrading your food and your self-respect? If anything, it shows me where you’re at in the ‘getting over things’ process, and it seems like you’re going to make a mistake you’ll regret.”

I leaned forward, folding my fingers together and placing them on my desktop. “Just because something is casual doesn’t mean that I’m going to downgrade my cooking. If anything, it gives me a chance to be creative. I can combine casual dining with an elevated food experience.”

“Is that what your marketing rep told you?”

My anger spiked. “No. Actually, it’s what I wanted.” I let my voice rise. “I haven’t ever had a choice with Kendra. She always did the picking, and I went along with it like a lovesick puppy because I was too damn young to know better, and then when I did start to figure things out, I stayed because of the ‘sanctity of marriage’, and the second I started pushing back, she made things miserable. You know that. You saw that. You?—”

“Fine.” David placed his hands on my desk, using a calming voice that irritated me even more. “Fine. It is what you want.” He looked at me like he was having a hard

time believing what I said. “As long as it’s not a change just for change's sake. This restaurant is your life’s work. They say doing anything drastic within the first year of any big life changes might not be as good as the person thinks they are.”

“We got divorced two years ago, and I’ve been battling for this restaurant for one of them, David. I am finally getting a chance to do what I want.”

“Alright.” He nodded. “I’m on board, then. Let’s go eat some of that terrible pizza and try to talk to your staff and reassure them that their thoughts are heard, all that garbage.” He stood and smiled at me, and I huffed.

“I’m really not sure why I’ve kept you around for so long.”

“Because I’m charming, charismatic, and smart. Very, very smart.”

“Or I just feel sorry for you.” I smiled. I looked around the office one more time, reminding myself that yes, it’s all mine, and we headed back out into the dining area.

When we got there, David whistled and stopped. “Who’s the brunette?”

“That’s Julia,” I said, watching her with the rest of the staff. She walked around, shaking everyone’s hand, and a smile crept up the corner of my lip. She looked good, and she was in a skirt again. My eyes flicked down to her feet. Heels.

I liked them.

“So that’s why you think you’re finally making a choice for yourself?” David scoffed. I whipped my head to him and my eyebrows raised.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I whispered, pulling him back and away from the group.

“She’s pretty. Young too. It’s easy to see why she would be able to sway—” My hand flew up to David’s arm, and I squeezed it enough for him to gasp.

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“Knock it off. Don’t make me quit speaking to you for real,” I said through clenched teeth. “That is an insult to me and to her. You don’t even know what she’s capable of and you’re already pegging her as something else. And you will not give that woman a hard time, do you understand me?”

“Yes.” I squeezed a little harder, and he gasped again. “Alright.” He pulled away. “Message received.”

“If you behave, I’ll get you a toy after, okay?” I respond, smiling as Julia comes over. “Be nice.”

“Hi, Nick,” Julia said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Your team is great.” She looked over her shoulder at Phoebe and John, who waved.

“Yeah, I like ’em,” I said, letting my smile grow. “This is my friend David. He’s always around, even when we don’t want him to be.” I patted him on the back and squeezed his shoulder, making sure that David knew I was serious.

He grunted and then smiled as I dropped my hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Julia. How long have you lived in Heart’s Creek?”

“Oh! Is it that obvious?” She laughed. It was a nice sound.

“We just don’t get many new people in town. So when someone moves in, the whole town kind of knows about it. Right, Nick?”

Julia turned her mahogany eyes on me, sending a little jumpstart to my heart I wasn’t

expecting. It had been a long time since something like that happened to me, and I was going to have to figure out what I wanted sooner rather than later because lusting after a twenty-something-year-old probably wasn't a good look for a forty-four-year-old divorcee with a wretch of a woman for an ex-wife. That could provide a lot of fodder I didn't think I was prepared for, and I definitely didn't want to bring Kendra's fire Julia's way.

"You just moved here too?" She asked, her brow wrinkled in a cute way.

I smiled. "No, no. But he's right about everyone knowing your business, even when you don't want them to. But it's a great place. I wouldn't want to leave."

"Really?" David said, brows perking. "Tell that to Nick nine months ago, won't ya?"

I shook my head at Julia. "Ignore my dick friend, please. Would you like something to drink? It looks like they left us a few slices of pizza."

David released a long wolf-grin. He was going to tell her everything if I let him. She didn't need a welcome like that. I pushed him out of the way and placed my hand at the small of her back, escorting her to the bar. "Come on, don't let him fill your head with nonsense. We'll get you a drink here and you can talk with the staff, Phoebe, and John to learn more about the restaurant industry and how your genius can be interwoven with it," I said, ignoring David's scoff coming from behind me.

"Thanks," she said and smiled as I held out her chair for her to sit down. She sat and smiled up at me again, sending more than just a spark to my chest. She gave my dick a jumpstart too.

Well, that was unexpected. I might have to examine that faster than I thought I would.

JULIA

Ichewed on my lip before I opened the door to the restaurant. Although I had a good first meeting with Nick, when I showed up the next night for the team meeting, some of his staff seemed less than pleased to hear my ideas.

Not that their opinions mattered in the grand scheme of things, but they did seem pretty tight-knit and I wondered if their opinions would sway Nick's idea.

I'd always been able to think on my feet and change direction when it was needed. It wasn't something that I'd always planned, but it was something I'd always prepared for.

"People just don't like change," Mia said to me before I walked in, calming my nerves slightly. "You're damn good at your job. Don't let your confidence in yourself fail you now."

I laughed. "What confidence?"

"Jules, you have confidence in what you're doing. If you didn't, you wouldn't have moved to keep your business and land a client before you even got here."

"Alright, fine. I am good at what I do." I laughed, still not feeling it completely. Doesn't matter, though. I'm going to do it anyway.

"Okay, see you in a few hours." True to her nature, she hung up before I could respond and a small part of me was comforted by it.

I released a sigh and reached for the door.

The restaurant was quiet and the lights were off when I entered, and even though the

door was unlocked, I worried that maybe no one was here yet. Then I heard a clanking from the kitchen. I looked around, seeing that no one really was in the dining room, and I headed toward the back.

Placing my bag on the bar, I gingerly knocked on the kitchen door and waited to hear something. Instead, I heard someone who sounded like Nick talking to himself. But I couldn't understand what he said.

I chanced pushing the door open a crack, sticking my head in. I saw his back facing toward the door and said, "Hello?"

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To my surprise, he didn't jump. Instead, he turned and smiled at me, which was a really great smile. Something I wasn't exactly happy about, although certain parts of my body seemed to disagree with that, but I wasn't really interested in jumping into something else with another client.

Not only was it unprofessional, but Jared taught me that lesson.

I remembered flirting with him on our first meeting.

That was fun.

Maybe I did deserve a little fun.

"Julia, hello! Come on in," Nick said, going back to whatever he was working on. I pushed the door forward and continued into the kitchen, looking around in a bit of awe.

"Wow, I've never been in a restaurant kitchen before." I laughed. "It's very clean."

Nick's smile grew as he turned and held a spoon with sauce on it for me to try. I could smell the garlic and other seasonings that made my mouth water. "Here, try this," he said. I didn't know if he was trying to feed me or if I should take the spoon, but as I stepped forward to take it, he tipped the spoon closer to my lips. Before he got close enough, I took the spoon and gave him a smile as our fingers brushed together.

While he didn't seem fazed, I tried to ignore the tingling sensation that sparked up my

hand. And the fact that my nipples hardened... I was grateful his eyes didn't leave mine because I was positive they were showing through my shirt now. Which brought another wave of heat washing over my cheeks.

He watched me and said, "Tell me what you think. Is it good enough for the new menu?"

I tasted the sauce and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. "Wow." It was delicious. I'd watched enough chef competitions to know what umami was, and the sauce was rich with it. "Wow," I said after enjoying the last bit of it. "This isn't on your menu already?"

"No. Kendra always thought red sauce would stain the white linens. She wasn't wrong, but I think that this sauce should have already been on the menu." He clapped his hands and gave the sauce in the large vat one more turn before stepping away. "I can meet you out in the dining room in one sec. I have to take my coat off and clean up. Then I'm excited to get started."

"Great," I said, shaking out the flicker that sparked, reminding me—like I'd forget—that I was attracted to him. It looked like I was going to be hardcore attracted also. My jaw tightened as I spun and walked out into the dining area.

I could be attracted to someone but not pursue it, right? There were a lot of people in the world. Just because I wasn't seeking out anything with a client, it didn't mean that I was blind.

It didn't really matter. One, I didn't think he was attracted to me. I was probably way too young for it to even strike his radar. Two, my body seemed to not care about what boundaries my mind was sticking to. I'd have to just train myself not to be enticed by it.

I picked my bag up and looked around for the lights. Without the spectacular lighting, the crisp, white look of the room made it look more like an abandoned medical center than a warming environment. That was something I could help change.

I really loved that thought.

Now that I saw it this way, I had no doubt why Nick wanted to upgrade. If his sauce was any indicator of how well the rebrand would go, I'd say it was going to be a hit.

I found the switches and turned them on. Once it was lit up, I couldn't unsee the sterile environment. My thoughts began to percolate. Now every white table was a blank canvas to decorate. Even with the centerpieces still in the middle of the tables.

I walked over to one of the semi-circle booths and reached for the tall vase in the center of the table. I picked it up, and it was heavier than it looked. My eyes skimmed the room for a blank spot to put it. When I realized the bar was the only empty spot, I walked over and placed it there. Then, I turned around and walked back to the table. When I got there, I took the tablecloth off and studied the spot as I folded the fabric, letting my hands move my thoughts forward.

The table under the cloth was a rich, walnut color with an amazing design on it. I placed the folded up material over the back of the booth and then looked under to see whether the table was stationary or could be moved. Happiness to see it was a table that could be moved flooded my system. Just the simple act of removing the stuff from on top of it, and the table already brought a warming appearance to the environment.

Plus, it was going to be cost effective.

I spun and went to a different table, taking the stuff off this one also. I picked a table closest to where I was, but it was still a table, thinking that if I separated myself from

Nick, at least I was putting restrictions on myself.

If we would've sat in a booth, we would have had to sit closer together. And although my body argued with the rational thought, I didn't budge on keeping space between us. Especially after how good it felt to flirt during our first meeting.

I patted myself on the back for creating the boundary, which helped me remember that I needed to stop focusing on Nick personally and get down to brass tacks.

By the time I was set up and seated, Nick came out with two glasses. "Here's some water for you. Just let me know when you're ready for lunch. I'll whip something up for the two of us."

"That's very sweet of you, but I'll be okay," I said, even though I would have loved to see what he was going to do with that sauce.

"It's my pleasure." He placed a hand over his heart. Now that he was in only his blue T-shirt, I could see that I was right about his physique, except it was better than I could imagine. The swell of his chest and biceps had me wondering where there was a gym in the area. Maybe I could ask him? I didn't know much about Hearts Creek yet, so asking him about that would only be good for my health—I said, trying to convince myself. I laughed internally and turned my attention back to the meeting.

"So, I know the sauce is incredible." I flipped open a notebook and picked up my pen. "Are you going to lean into the Italian food direction?"

"Yes." His sapphire eyes sparkled at my pen and paper routine, and I ignored it. "I think so. I had this great epiphany last night. Woodfired pizza and hand-rolled pasta. My family is from Northern Italy, so I can bring some of those traditions into the restaurant too," he said, his cheeks lifted with a smile, bringing out a fuller and brighter look on his face.

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“So,” I said, standing. He followed suit and came up behind me. His spicy and food scent enveloped me, and it was all I could do not to lean back against him and wait for his muscled arms to wrap around me.

That might be a little unprofessional.

I touched my forehead, trying to focus, then walked over to the table I’d stripped down of everything except the wood. “These tables are beautiful. Taking everything off them is a good and easy way to get the ambiance you’re looking for and be cost effective too.”

“I think that sounds incredible,” he said. Although he couldn’t see my face because he was still behind me, a pleased smile perked over it and I was happy he liked my idea.

I wrote down a few notes then pointed to the wall separating the kitchen from the dining room. I walked over, touching it. “What do you think about losing this and letting the people watch the cooking take place? I did some research, and modern, high-level restaurants have it. Even if it’s more upscale casual.”

He stood next to me and looked, rubbing his newly grown-in beard. He didn’t have it last time, but regardless of boundaries, it looked good on him. “That’s an amazing idea.” He looked down at me and smiled. “I wouldn’t put on a screaming, yelling show for diners like some other famous chefs, but that would be exciting.”

He stepped over to the wall.

“What would you suggest that I do with the space in between, then?”

“Brick.” I pointed to all the exterior walls too. “Right now, this is all drywalled. We can take it off and reveal the raw brick beneath, giving it the casual feel you’re going for and also saving you some money on paint or more sheetrock. We would have to add brick to a divider.” I walked over to him and put my hand up to about his hips. “Probably to about here, but there may even be someplace around where you can get old brick to reuse for free or a small fee, which can bring in the history of the town as well.”

“Wow.” He looked impressed. That made me happy, almost giddy because my mind was racing with ideas. “What else do you have?”

I dived in, explaining all the ideas I had brewing, and he seemed to eat them up. An hour later, I had several pages of notes and a firmer idea of what he wanted.

“I’ll have to crunch the numbers for the budget,” I said as I packed my things up. “But the list in the folder will give you a tentative number on what the total cost would be. I know we’re not doing everything on the list, but if you have any questions or would like a formal write up before the budget is set, just let me know.” I pulled the strap of my bag over my shoulder and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I can have my assistant send something over to you quickly.” I smiled and started to head toward the door.

“It’s amazing you found an assistant so quickly,” he said, holding the door open for me.

“Ha! Yes. I didn’t find her. She came from Buffalo with me.”

“Oh,” he said, and something flashed over his eyes. “Is she your partner?”

We got to my car and I tipped my head. “Business partner, no... Oh! No.” My smile widened, finally realizing what he meant. “No, we are not romantically involved. But we’ve known each other since we were kids, so best friends and all that.” I laughed and shifted my bag from one shoulder to the other. “I’m not in a relationship. The move was a big one, and I wanted to make sure I was settled.” Did I have to say that? No. But I liked the way his eyes lit up when he heard I was available.

I took my keys out and began to unlock my door when I felt his fingers on my shoulder. I froze for a second, trying to figure out what was happening, but when I looked at him, he had a kind smile. “Your bag strap was twisted.”

“Ah, thank you.” I unlocked my doors, placing my bag on the floor in the backseat, and gave him a tight nod. “First, you asked me about my romantic partner, then touched me.” I laughed. “I wasn’t sure what the signals were.” My cheeks blushed. I could not believe I just said that. I flung the driver’s side door open and hit his shoulder in the process. “Oops. Sorry!” I scrunched my face up.

I was acting like an ass.

I had to get out of here.

Nick stepped back as I closed the door, and I buckled in with humiliation and when I put my key into the ignition, I could still feel his eyes on me. I hid my blushing cheeks from him and started my car.

It made a terrible noise but did not turn on.

“Crap,” I said. I turned the key and pumped the brakes. Still nothing but a growling coming from my hood. I lifted my foot off the gas and went to try again when Nick

tapped on my window.

With a quick huff, I gave him a wary smile. I couldn't even roll my windows down since the car wouldn't start. "Need a hand?" he asked.

I opened the door a crack, and he backed away. "That would be great. Thank you."

I got out of my car again and stood next to him, crossing my arms to cover up the fact that my nipples had hardened again. It was a direct result of his kindness.

"Sounds like your battery just needs to be charged," he said and pointed over his shoulder. "I have jumper cables in my car and it's right over there." He reached over and squeezed my arm gently.

I stood straighter. I liked it when he touched me. I wondered if he was feeling something too?

I hoped not. I didn't want to make Nick think I was coming across as unprofessional or swoony. Or maybe he was just one of those people who showed affection to everyone.

Probably.

There was no way he was going to be interested in a twenty-eight-year-old.

Was there?

5

NICK

Julia waved before her car turned down the alley, and I wondered if there were any way she could have been flirting with me. It certainly seemed like it.

She couldn't be interested in me, could she?

She was a few years younger. Kendra always said that women looked at me, and she was never happy about it, but I hadn't really thought she was being serious. I thought she was just being insecure. I'd been married a bit too long to know what was flirting and what wasn't.

I tried to think back and remember the last time I was attracted to a woman. I'd seen other women who were attractive, even beautiful, but even though Kendra was a bit of a nightmare as a person, I was committed to her. And even though Kendra cheated, I'd never even thought about it, even when David said I should do it just to get even. I grunted at the memory. He really was a shit kind of friend. Or maybe not. I'd have to remind him of that if he ever brought up the fact that he liked Kendra and pay attention to his mood.

I took a step back. Now that I thought about it, I think he felt betrayed too.

Even though he never settled down with anyone, I think he really was rooting for me or to see that a relationship really could last a long time.

Hmm... It gave me a new perspective on David, and maybe I would have to talk to him about it some other time.

Now as I watched Julia's taillights disappear, another layer of freedom unfolded as I realized I could look at other women without feeling guilty. I could be with one in any way I wanted. The thought fizzled in my brain.

Although it was a very new idea, I had a feeling I was going to like my new perspective. While I might like to try things out with Julia, it didn't have to be her. She was a bit too young and probably wanted to keep things professional, but that wouldn't stop me from keeping the possibility open.

And she probably thought I was too old. But that didn't mean it couldn't be another woman.

A smile crooked over my lips as I walked back into the restaurant and saw that Phoebe and John were buzzing around the place getting it ready for another night of service. I walked over to them and stuck my head into the kitchen. "Since you guys are here, I'm going to go do some office work."

"Got it, Boss." John saluted. I rolled my eyes and left the kitchen. Paperwork was definitely not my favorite thing to do, but it was a nice break for my brain until I jumped back into the kitchen again.

When I got to the office, I flicked the light on and sat down, ready to check things over.

“Nick...” Phoebe rapped on the door. She pushed it open without waiting for me to say anything. One look at her face and my good mood dropped away.

“What’s wrong?” My mind instantly went to her toddler. “Is Brady alright?”

“He’s fine, thank you for that being the first concern you think about. It’s very sweet.” She shook her head. “But it does have to do with the restaurant.”

She placed an envelope in front of me with the stamp IRS at the top. Phoebe continued speaking as I lifted the letter up. “Kendra didn’t pay taxes.” She pointed to the paper in my hand. “That says for at least three years.”

My anger spiked. “Why the fuck am I just learning about this now?” I should've known. This information should have been in the paperwork with the settlement. I was just at court about this last week.

She swallowed. “I made a call to the IRS to ask.” She shrugged. “No one can give me a straight answer. I looked at the books—she’s the one who kept them—and she fudged the numbers somehow. It doesn’t look good, but we have a few options.” She sat down across from me as my fury reached new heights.

I muttered, “Mother fucker.”

And I was happy when Phoebe said, “Yeah. Pretty much.”

I threw the paper down on my desk and massaged the bridge of my nose. “What are they?”

“Well, the first option is to fight it. But that would keep everything up in litigation for maybe years. And the chances of winning the case, or making Kendra pay, or any of those options... it would mean closing The Bridge down indefinitely.”

“Awesome.” I dropped my hand and gave her an exhausted look. “Kendra just keeps on fucking me, doesn’t she?” I huffed, letting the bitter taste of Kendra’s actions rest over my tongue. It tasted like shit.

Phoebe gave me a sympathetic look. “You can pay it off, in full, and not get a lien put on the restaurant. Once the paperwork clears, we can file some kind of suit against Kendra and keep working with the IRS to get your money back”

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“Dammit,” I said. “I don’t want to keep going to court with that woman.” Three years of taxes were a lot. It would eat up most of my budget for the rebrand, too, unless I wanted to use my money. Or worse, apply for a loan that might not go through since business has slowed up. Another way Kendra fucked me.

“Alright. Let me try to call the IRS agent and see what I can do.” I might be able to get some kind of discount if I offered to pay the damn thing in full.

“Sounds good, Nick,” Phoebe said, patting the flat of her hand on top of the desk and standing. “I’ll keep moving forward with the new plans for the restaurant until you tell me not to.”

I gave her a curt nod and watched her leave the room. She closed the door and I leaned forward. “Fuck,” I said into the office.

The meeting with Julia had gone so well.

I was really looking forward to shifting gears. Remembering what she looked like when she tried my sauce... that was the kindof joy I wanted to deliver to people. And when the thoughtandmaybe even delivered her some joy privatelypopped into my mind, I was taken aback again.

The day couldn’t have been more mixed up.

I leaned back in my chair and rocked, placing my hands along the armrest. With a long sigh, I weighed my options. I wasn’t going to know anything until I talked to the IRS agent. Even if the letter said I owed over \$50,000 in back taxes, there had to be a

way to make things work that wouldn't put me in financial ruin or make me keep having to go round for round with Kendra.

It was exactly what she wanted.

I didn't think I realized just how twisted she really was.

But I should have.

I thought about Julia with her notebook. The thought brought a smile to my lips. I pulled out a legal pad and started a list of things that needed to be done versus what could be done.

When the phone rang and Phoebe let me know it was the IRS guy, I was relieved. Not because I had to pay the fucking money back—I'd have to do something about that too—but because then I could know where I really stood.

Then I'd worry about what I was going to do with The Bridge, Kendra, and Julia.

"Do you still like Kendra's idea of running a business now?" I asked David as he sat next to me at the bar later. I didn't bother to get him a drink because the woman still had a way of fucking me, and even though it was supposed to be a banner day and I was going to finally be able to get freedom and a new start at life, she'd left one last pile of shit on my doorstep.

"Alright..." David held up his hands and looked around the empty restaurant. "Alright, I am sorry. She screwed you, and not in a good way."

"She hasn't screwed me in a good way for a long time." I tossed my bourbon back and stood, walking behind the bar. "Now you deserve a free drink." I smiled.

“Oh, only when I agree with you do I get a free drink now?” He laughed.

“I don’t know why you’re surprised. You make me pay for my insurance.” He was in financial advising and supplemental healthcare. Being in the restaurant business usually meant no health insurance because it was expensive for small business owners. But he knew the way around a few things and got me—and the staff—what they needed. It was a nice benefit for the team because in normal restaurant settings, no one on staff, full-time or part, or chef, got insurance.

“You want me to pay for your health insurance instead of agreeing with you?” he asked. He shook his head, taking the whiskey-neat I placed in front of him. “Neither of those options sounds fair or right or even ethical. Besides, when was the last time you agreed with me?” he asked.

“1982,” I said, turning to put the bottle away. He burst out laughing, and I smiled at him. I rolled my head and rubbed my brow.

“Well, what are you going to do?” He placed the tumbler on the bar with a clunk and propped himself up on his elbows.

“About what?” I muttered, not in the mood to get into too much detail.

“Your restaurant. The money owed? The ‘rebranding’.” His mocking tone struck the last nerve I had at the moment.

“Fuck you,” I grunted and spun to look at him.

David held up his hands. “Fine. I still don’t think rebranding right now is the right thing to do. Shoot me. I think it has to do more with that pretty, young PR rep than it does the actual follow-through.”

“I’m about two minutes away from kicking your ass out of here,” I said, realizing that I really did want the rebrand.

“Nick, we were getting along so well a few minutes ago. I get it, you’re in a shit mood.” He took another drink from the tumbler.

“You’re not going to make the PR rep feel bad about doing business with me. I didn’t even know what she looked like when I hired her, so drop that crap right now. I won’t have anyone I’m working with be disrespected. She’s come up with a ton of ideas and I don’t have to just roll with them because she’s Kendra. I get to turn The Bridge into something I’ve always wanted it to be.”

A sense of excitement rushed through me. “I’m paying the IRS off and I am going through with the rebranding. I’ll sue Kendra after all is settled for some or all of the amount.”

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“How are you going to afford all of that?” David finished his drink.

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Well, let’s brainstorm.”

I growled and my jaw clenched and unclenched.

“Knock it off,” David said, waving his hand. “I’m being supportive. Plus, I am a financial advisor who is good at my job.”

“Fine. I’m thinking about getting a loan for the rebranding. Julia had an amazing number of ideas that weren’t ostentatious, nor were they expensive. Even though I won’t be able to do some of them right now, I think a lot of them are doable, easy, and well within a reasonable budget.”

“What are some things she suggested?” he asked while I poured us both another drink. I walked around the bar and sat next to him.

After taking a long chug, I placed my tumbler down and wiped my lips off. “She wants to take the sheetrock and drywall off the walls and expose the brick.”

David looked around the place, swinging one way on the rotating bar stool and another way, then he looked back at me. “That would also save on the amount of paint you’d have to do. It is pretty rustic.” He let out a long breath. “So, you’re really going to do it, huh?”

“I feel like you’re insinuating something else I’m not going to like,” I said. I finished the last drop of my bourbon and flipped the glass upside down and put it on the other side of the bar.

David placed his glass next to mine and clapped me on the shoulder. “You never like what I’m going to say, my friend.” His lopsided smile had me shaking my head and rolling my eyes. He wasn’t wrong.

“Fine. What do you think I’m going to do?”

“You’re about to change everything. No more fine dining, no more upscale cooking.”

“Dave, we’ve already been through this. Just because I go casual doesn’t mean I’m going to dumb my food down. It’s going to give me an option to be creative and test new things. I haven’t changed my menu in years.” I stood up and looked around. “Plus, we’re a small town. It’s going to fit the small town feel more.” I leaned over. “And still bring in more people from out of the area.”

David snorted. “Now you’re going to be in the tourist business?”

“No, but Julia told me we can get people from all over the state of New York to come here, get the restaurant reviewed, and bring in people to the town. She’s thinking bigger than just a fresh coat of paint and adding a few more white lights in the area.”

“Sounds interesting,” David said. I still didn’t like his tone. He looked around the place again. “Maybe a change will do all of us good.”

“Alright.” I looked around the living room and grimaced. I had too much stuff.

I bought the entire building before I moved here specifically because it was an office-apartment combo. But while the town of Heart’s Creek was quaint and I enjoyed the cozy feel of it, the apartment was... “Small,” I huffed out. It was too cramped with everything I brought with me.

Something I didn’t think about when I was trying to high-tail it out of Buffalo.

My hands touched the couch. My furniture was hand-me-down from my parents, and I didn’t hate it. The velvety feel of the worn leather helped remind me of home. But with books on the shelves, the nicknacks, sculptures, and picture frames decorating the small space only made it seem smaller.

I crossed an arm over my chest as my fingers played with my lips.

A sigh escaped my throat as I succumbed to the idea that I needed to get rid of about three-quarters of the stuff I had now.

The building did come with a basement, so I could keep some of the stuff down there and wouldn't have to worry about getting rid of anything until I was more settled.

I snorted and picked up an empty box I was happy to empty out only a few days ago. I walked around the small living room and picked up items I was pretty sure I was okay with not seeing anymore or things I hadn’t used in a while and I had to clean the dust from them before actually setting them out for display.

The more stuff I put back in the box, the more relief released the tension from between my shoulders. The space transformed from cramped to cozy in about a half hour.

The doorbell rang, catching my attention. I closed the lid on two boxes and went down to let Mia in. I walked down the stairs and unlocked the back door. A smile spread across my face. “Pizza?” I stepped back and let her into the building. “How did you know I was hungry?” I laughed.

She smiled and placed a six-pack of beer on top of the pizza box too. “I’m here to talk business, so this all came out of the business account.” I’m positive the look on my face was less than supportive as her cheeky smile popped over her lips.

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“I’m just joking. I only put the beer on the business tab.” She laughed and walked up the stairs in front of me.

“Oh, boy. Just what we need, more trouble, only this time, it’ll be with a branch of the government.”

“And it’s not even a good branch,” she said, stepping back and letting me open the door since her hands were full.

“There’s a good branch of government you want coming after you?” I walked into the room after her, closing my door. She stepped over to the dining area, which was really a small, two-person table that basically broke up the space between the living area and the kitchen. I was going to have to get a rectangular or a square one. The circular one took up way too much space.

“Yup. If I’m going to be investigated, I want the CIA or the FBI kind of excitement.”

I laughed and pulled out two plates, glasses, and grabbed some napkins. She was opening the box of pizza up and pulling a slice away with gooey cheese. “Well, this smells and looks delicious,” I said. “Hopefully, it’ll taste just as good as it smells.”

“The locals recommend this place up and down, so it should be good.”

I cracked open a beer and poured it into my glass. Mia laughed, shaking out her auburn hair. “What?” I tipped my head.

“Nothing. It’s good to see that even though our environment changed, your weird

habits are still the same.”

I perked my brow and brought the glass up to take a sip. “Thanks.” I scrunched my nose at her. “I don’t like drinking from a bottle or a can. You’re right, that isn’t going to change just because our location does.” I reached out and squeezed her hand. “Thanks so much for coming with me.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She closed the pizza box and shifted it to the counter so we’d have enough room to eat. When I took a bite, I was pleasantly surprised at how good it tasted.

“We might not need to ever leave the town of Heart’s Creek for good food,” I said, looking out the gorgeous bay window that displayed all of the town in front of us. The snow was falling, and I couldn’t think of a better place to be.

“Speaking of food, how did the meeting go with the new client?”

I paused as a long string of cheese pulled away from the pizza. “This is so good,” I said around the bread and sauce. With a swallow, I wiped the sauce off my chin. “It went really well. The contract isn’t signed yet because we have to go over the suggested changes now that I’ve seen the space.” My cheeks warmed, thinking about Nick and how hot he really was.

I shook out of that thought and ignored the suspicious look from Mia. “I’ll draw up a few plans, and I’ll be meeting with him in two days.” The thought of seeing him again sent a flicker of butterflies in my stomach. I looked down at my pizza. “I wonder if he would object to a pizza oven.”

My eyes swung up to meet Mia’s. “He let me try his sauce.” A smile grew wider on my face. “It was really good.” I took another bite of pizza and chased it with the beer. “Can you believe he said his ex-wife wouldn’t let him make red sauce because she

didn't want red stains on any of the white linen?"

"Seems like sound logic," Mia replied, taking a drink of her beer right out of the bottle. I shivered at both what she said and the bottle drinking.

"No, because why would you want to stifle creativity? That'd be like me telling a client they can't make sculptures out of clay."

"How?" Mia rolled her eyes at me.

"How what?"

"How do you already have a thing for this guy, especially after what happened with Jared?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said and took another drink of my beer. I shifted in my seat. She wasn't wrong about it, but I didn't quite think she was right about it, either.

She popped the last bit of crust into her mouth and chewed. When she was done, she leaned on the table and looked at me. "Fine. Fine. Let's just say you aren't falling for the idea of some guy... Wait. Isn't he a few years younger than your father?"

"Mia." I placed my pizza down and put my fingers along my brow, rubbing at my temples. I looked up at her. "First, don't be gross. Second, just because I stick up for a guy doesn't mean I'm flinging myself at him." I stood and got another slice of pizza.

I plopped back into the seat and thought before I said anything else. I was reacting, which meant she was hitting a nerve, but it wasn't anything I hadn't already thought of myself. Also, I didn't know how to talk about it without her making me feel bad,

and I didn't want to be reminded of my mistake. "Third, even if he wasn't hot, his sauce would still be amazing," I said, proud of myself for not snapping.

Mia's face wrinkled. "Hot? Seriously, I followed you here so we could start fresh. You're damn good at what you do. We have the opportunity to do something amazing. You need to make sure that you put focus on that," she said. I could tell she wanted to say more, but instead she blotted her lips, holding back her anger too. "I just don't want to see you hurt again," she said.

I released a long breath. "Thank you. I know you're looking out for me. But trust me. I don't have a thing for Nick." I batted away the little voice in my head that laughed and told me I was lying to myself and Mia shouldn't trust me on this topic.

I cleared my throat and looked outside at the snow. "I know my apartment's on the second floor so we couldn't, or probably shouldn't, put lights on the outside here, but what would you think about us decorating the outside with Christmas lights and a few other outside goodies? It would be just enough flair for the season to let the other businesses know we're around."

"I think that's a great idea. We should probably go shopping then!" She clapped her hands together, and I rolled my eyes.

"We can do that. What kind of decorations do you want to look for?"

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We talked for ages about Christmas decorations and a few more quips about my not falling in love with a silver fox, and Mia left with promises that we would go shopping over the weekend for Christmas decorations. I laughed at myself. For all the stuff I had, I didn't have time in Buffalo to decorate for any holiday.

While I was hoping to build a strong connection with the local businesses and still reach out to clients nationwide, I was also hoping the small-town vibe would rub off on me a little.

After my shower, I ran a brush through my hair and wiped the steam-covered mirror clean. Looking at my reflection, my hair was shorter than it had been before I moved to Heart's Creek. It wasn't an "on a whim" cut but something I'd always wanted to try, a short bob coming to my chin.

I did it right before we moved.

I didn't even tell Mia when I was doing it.

When I showed up with my brown hair in a sleek bob, she just about lost her shit. I smiled at the memory and pulled out a toothbrush.

My new hairstyle gave me a more mature look, the look of someone who wasn't running away from her problems but was instead building a new life from lessons learned.

My eyes dropped as I finished brushing my teeth.

I clicked the light out and walked into my bedroom.

Speaking of lessons learned... Mia's words bounced around my head. I wanted to make sure I wasn't doing the same thing I did in Buffalo. And as much as I hated to admit it, falling for, or even thinking about, a client romantically did seem too close for my total comfort.

Jared was only two years older than I was, so my flirty feelings about Nick and his age already made him completely different. Jared also wasn't getting out of a relationship.

I flinched at that thought. Nick did say his divorce was finalized yesterday. I chewed on my lip. I was overthinking everything.

Maybe overthinking pointed to the fact that I'd learned lessons from Jared and the big move. But if I wasn't going to come to a decision about Nick tonight—I did just meet the man—then there wasn't any use in dwelling on it tonight.

I wasn't dreaming of a happily ever after with anyone.

Mia was right, and I did want to build my company back into a successful business.

I was good at what I did.

I was grateful to have her as a friend and even more so about the reminder.

It'd be a step up when I could prove to myself, Nick and his restaurant, and to the town of Heart's Creek that I could do an amazing job.

I definitely needed that kind of win.

I definitely wanted to focus on my career.

And as my lids grew heavy and quiet settled in my brain, the last thought I had definitely wasn't of Nick and wondering how soft his lips were.

7

NICK

The crowd was a good size tonight. I looked out the window of the connecting door and nodded. Yes. Having the customers be able to see inside the kitchen was going to be an amazing opportunity.

Most of them were already used to me and the other staff.

I grew up with most of them too.

I wasn't sure why I didn't think about it before, but the more I thought about it, the more excited I got.

And the more excited I got...

The more I thought about Julia.

No matter how much I pushed the thought of her away, the idea of her, how beautiful she was and what she was wearing underneath those damn skirts only came back with a vengeance a few minutes later. So instead, I pushed my way through the door and smiled at my guests.

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I walked up to the mayor, his wife, and his four kids who all looked like they were having a nice time. “Hi, Bill,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Nick, it's great tonight!” He enthusiastically shook my hand back. He looked at his wife. He pointed to the bare tables now, and Julia was right, it already warmed up the place. It was a simple change, but it made me feel drastically different.

Bill patted me on the arm. “Rita was just saying how much she loved what you’ve done, but we hear that the place might be changing more?” he asked, his bushy brows perked.

I couldn't even be bothered to be annoyed that he knew. The town was small. I already let the staff know. There was no way they kept it a secret, even if it was accidental. Plus, if Kendra smelled something in the air, she'd definitely pounce.

“Yes! New year, new restaurant. We're going to be moving into a more casual, family atmosphere with elevated, rustic food. Think Italian-American with a twist.” I smiled. Rita's red lips widened in a smile matching mine.

“I think that sounds wonderful.” She placed a hand on her youngest son. “Your food is so delicious, we would eat anything you make, even the boys, but having something a little more casual with a rustic flair sounds much more like they, and we, would enjoy. You know we aren't fancy,” she said, dabbing the corners of her mouth.

My smile grew. They lived in a 5,000-square-foot home at the top of the hill even before Bill became mayor. Plus, I'd known both of them since high school. I knew what their idea of fancy was, but I wasn't going to argue with them. They were

saying they supported the change in public, and it made my decision sound even better now.

“That's great.” I looked up, seeing Julia come in. Just seeing her made me nervous and excited, and I gave Bill another handshake. “I'll let you guys get back to your dinner. Thank you for the support.”

As I walked over to a waiting Julia, I stopped and said hello to a few other regulars. “Julia, hello,” I said as she gave me a warm smile. “We can go into my office.” I pointed down the hall, and suddenly, the idea of telling her we had to cut the budget seemed like a crazy one.

I didn't want her to think I was an irresponsible business owner. I didn't want her to think I was bad at business. I stopped as we got to the door, and I shook out my nerves. She'd understand. I'd still be paying her. Businesses had to make budgetary changes all the time.

“Are you okay?” she asked, placing her hand on my arm. The heat that resonated from her touch abolished any rational thoughts as it charged to my dick, which started swelling. My eyes bounced over her face, and she must've had on some sort of perfume because she smelled like sunflowers in the summer.

I stepped closer and bunched my fingers into a fist to keep from kissing her. Especially kissing her in front of a bunch of people. That would definitely make her not want to work with me. And enough people knew about my private life as it was. I didn't want them to know everything.

Plus, I shouldn't even be thinking about it. She's younger and technically staff.

An eyelash lay on her cheek. Before I knew what I was doing, my finger caressed her skin, picking up the lash. “Now you can make a wish,” I said. I surprised myself. I'd

had this internal conversation already, but as my cock twitched and her perfume swirled around me, I had a difficult time not doing something I might regret later.

Julia's gaze seemed locked on mine, and a whisper of kindness dashed over her eyes. She broke our eye contact, and I suddenly missed it and couldn't wait for it to happen again. She placed her hand on mine and blew the eyelash away. My fingers closed around hers, and the air twisted around us.

I stepped closer and asked, "What did you wish for?"

Her cheeks turned red, splashing over her pale skin. She turned her gaze down and released a sigh. Then her mahogany eyes turned up to mine.

She blinked her full lashes at me, and I had to restrain myself from kissing her right here and now, reminding myself she was only here for business and probably thought I was too old. Both were a good splash of cold water I needed.

"I can't tell you that, but you haven't answered my question." Her brows knitted together. "Are you okay?"

A crash in the kitchen pulled my attention back to the present. I realized I was holding onto her hand and we were a literal inch apart. So much for being professional.

I dropped her hand and took a step back. Clearing my throat, I gave her a tight nod and opened the office door for her and let her walk in first. Since the light was out, I flicked it on and watched her as she sat in the chair across from me.

I eased into my chair and leaned forward. "I am okay, but I got some interesting news." I winced at the word choice as I struggled to keep my temper and tone even. "I won't be able to go full out for the first stage of the renovation and rebranding like

I initially thought.”

I stopped. I supposed she didn’t have to know why. I scratched the back of my neck and huffed as she smiled at me. It was warm and kind, and she didn’t ask any questions I would have gotten with?—

A sharp rap came on the door, and Kendra barged in with some dude on her arm. “Nick, I heard you were in here.” She gave Julia a hungry snake look, and my defenses shot up. I stood.

“You are not welcome in this office anymore. Get out.”

Instead of listening, she cuddled up next to the man on her arm and purred. I don’t even bother to stop my eyes from rolling. “Winston and I are just here to pick up my personal effects.”

“Everything that’s yours is in a box in the storage room.” I tipped my chin out of my office. “If I find anything else that’s yours, I’ll mail it to you.”

Kendra didn’t take her eyes off Julia the entire time, and I shook my head and moved around my desk. “Julia, it’s probably best that you go for now.” I turned my gaze to Kendra, then stepped between them, putting my back to Kendra and the guy.

“Let’s reschedule for tomorrow, okay? I’ll call you later. You don’t need to be part of this.” Confusion rode through her eyes, and she seemed to understand what I was asking—not to mention, she was in front of Kendra. When she gave me a tight nod, relief flooded my system and I turned, placing my hand along her back. I ushered her out, sweeping my arm forward and leading her out.

She turned to look at me before she left the office and touched my arm. “See you later,” she said.

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Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

When I inhaled, her sunflower scent overtook me, and I lingered a little longer than I probably should have for professional purposes.

Julia stepped back with questions in her eyes. I was grateful to her that she didn't ask them right now, and I hoped that I didn't just blow my chance at working with her. "We'll talk later," she said, and I saw kindness in her eyes as well as a maturity I didn't expect to see. My heart stalled, and the idea of asking her on a date seemed more plausible than ever now.

The worst she could do was say no.

At best, she would say yes and I'd get the nagging sensation to ask her out off my chest so I wasn't driving myself bonkers on top of everything else.

"Thank you," I whispered in her ear, my lips almost brushing her lobe. She touched my hand and looked up at me. When our eyes met, she gave me a knowing look, turned, and walked down the hall.

I hated the reminder that Kendra was still behind me.

I scrunched my eyes up and shook out the embarrassment I had, watching Julia disappear down the hall. After she was gone, I shored myself up and turned. I snapped back into myself, not sure what I was doing, but the daggers Kendra threw at my back left me with a sick sense of satisfaction.

Kendra didn't bother to hide her rage, but I was okay with that. I pointed out the door. "Let's go. I'll get you the box, but you don't own this restaurant anymore. You're not welcome in the office or anywhere else that isn't the dining room. And frankly, you're not welcome there either. But if you want to spend your money here, I'm not going to stop you."

Winston stood looking between the two of us. I didn't know what he saw in my face, but he leaned over and said, "Come on, babe, let's get your stuff. I'll take you somewhere nice afterward."

I didn't even care if it was a dig at the restaurant. If he could get her out of here, I would name a drink after him once they were gone. Kendra looked at me. I smiled and perked a brow, something that always drove her into a bigger rage. Satisfaction rode over me, and in the moment, I felt vindicated.

After Kendra and the guy she was with left my office, I followed them out, locking the door behind me. I didn't trust Kendra not to pull any other stupid shit.

We got out to the hostess stand, and I pointed at a spot on the floor. "Wait here." I didn't wait for her to respond and instead walked to the back of the room toward the kitchen.

I spotted Julia sitting at the bar, and I was surprised to see her but also happy I didn't chase her away.

I got everything out of the storage room that Kendra left, tossed it into a box, and brought it back out. Shock that Kendra was still waiting where I told her to be rode through my system. She must have known something about the IRS payments and was probably waiting for me to bring it up.

I wasn't going to give her that satisfaction today.

But I wasn't going to sit on it, either.

"Here." I pushed the box into Winston's hands, knowing she wouldn't hold it herself. She couldn't be bothered to get her fingers dirty.

Kendra scoffed and spun on her heel without another word. Winston looked at me with something I couldn't peg, but I bet what Kendra told him would happen and the stark reality of what did happen were sinking in right now.

A small part of me was happy with the way I reacted. Proud, even.

I didn't let her rattle me. It was what she wanted.

I didn't know why she was clinging to the idea that she was going to get the better of me. But I didn't think she was going to anymore.

And an even bigger part of me was thrilled with the fact that this might be his and Kendra's last date because she'd wildly exaggerated. Another part of me ate that satisfaction because I knew I'd pissed her off. Even though I might have cut one head off the beast, I suspected two more were going to grow in its place.

I tipped my head at him, and when I could no longer see either of them through the window, I hurried back over to Julia. "I am so sorry," I said just as she was taking a drink.

My hand hit her shoulder and caused her to jerk, and she coughed after she swallowed her bourbon. "Shit," I said, reaching over the bar and grabbing a napkin. "Double apology, I guess."

She took the napkin and wiped up the extra liquor on her chin, giving me the warm smile that filled my heart up probably a little more than it should. "It's fine. I just

don't drink hard liquor often, but your mixologist was so convincing, I thought I'd try it." She lifted her tumbler in the air. "Takes a minute to get used to."

"Who's a mixologist? Frank?" I pointed to the bartender leaning against the back counter. Frank waved at me and I shot him a look.

"Yep." She took another sip, this time smaller than the first, and did her best not to wince. I didn't let the chuckle slip out that I wanted to because she looked damn cute.

"He's a part-time bartender with another job at a Kinkos."

"Ah, yes, but see, calling him a mixologist elevates his title to sound more important." She tipped her glass to me. "Rebranding." She laughed.

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“Well, since I know Frank and understand that the ‘rebranding’ might just go to his head?—”

“Hey! I resent that remark,” he said with a grin. I waved him off.

“Your rebranding is very clever. Do you mind if we go talk now?” I had to make it up to her, but I wasn’t going to talk about everything in the dining room.

“Sure,” she said. “As long as you don’t mind the fact that I’ve already had a drink.” She leaned into me, and a sharp spark shot to my dick. Now, I was pretty sure she was flirting with me. “I was off the clock, you know.”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “Do you want another?”

“No.” She shook her head, moving off the stool. I grabbed her laptop bag before she could and didn’t let her take it. “I’d like a mildly straight mind when I work. Although I could have some water.” She turned to Frank and asked for some.

After she got it, I led her back to the office so we could get to work.

8

JULIA

“I know you said you didn’t want anything, but we’ve been here for hours and everyone’s gone home,” Nick said, standing up and going into one of his filing cabinets. He pulled out a pretty crystal snifter filled with a dark, malt-colored liquid.

“Would you like to try? It’s aged about seventy years and I think we both need a break.”

The warm glimmer in his sapphire eyes had me saying, “Sure, why the hell not?” before I could even think about it.

We’d already gone over the new budget, but there were still a few things I wanted to talk to him about, and honestly, I was enjoying his company. I’d found out that he’d been a chef in Manhattan working under some of the best chefs in the world and the only reason he moved home was to help take care of his sick mother.

His father was heartsick when Nick’s mom passed away, and Nick’s dad died a few weeks later. By then, Nick was heavily involved with Kendra and they decided that being a big fish in a small pond was more lucrative.

Plus, Nick’s parents left everything to him since he was an only child.

While he and Kendra didn’t live in his parents’ old house, they kept it as a rental, and once he and Kendra separated, Nick moved back into his old house. Sadly, his parents' deaths left him without parents anymore, but they also left enough money and the house to where Nick didn’t have loans.

It sounded like a bittersweet kind of story.

“Excellent.” He pulled out two crystal tumblers that matched the snifter and poured.

“Do I want to know why you have glasses and alcohol in your filing cabinet?” I asked as he placed a glass in front of me. I looked into the glass and could already smell the oak and cherry that had a deeper sweetness than just the bourbon I’d had earlier in the evening.

I checked my phone out to see the time.

I placed the glass to my lips and took a sip.

It was almost midnight.

Oops.

I placed the glass back on the desk and gave Nick my attention.

“Well...” He released a long sigh. “Kendra, the woman who barged into my office, is my ex-wife. She was only a fan of alcohol as long as she was drinking it.” He huffed and shook his head. “But you don’t want to know about that.”

“That’s why you asked me to leave? Acted like we were in a relationship?” I asked. I didn’t want to get too far into that subject, but I did need to understand why he kissed my cheek and lingered close to me. It threw me off at first, but I could sense something was up and I didn’t want to call him out on it when the look in his eyes was so desperate.

Not that I was complaining, I definitely didn’t hate his being so close, especially when he smelled of food and spice. I picked up the glass and took a sip of the warm liquid while picturing myself burying my lips into his neck while my fingers ran through his thick salt-and-pepper hair.

The bourbon didn’t burn going down, at least not in a cheap alcohol way. It was a smooth cinnamon caramel flavor that made me want more. I took another sip as he sat down. “I’m sorry about that. It was unprofessional of me.”

He took a drink and placed the glass down. “We’ve been separated for about two years, but everything got finalized over the last six months. We were going back and

forth about the business. I only wanted my restaurant, and the day we had our first court meeting was the day I won it.” He rocked back in his chair proudly, crossing his ankle over his knee and raking his hands through his hair.

I wondered what it felt like and took another drink.

I sat back and crossed my legs too, watching as his gaze carved its way around my legs. I shifted again, trying to see if he really was checking me out or if the alcohol was affecting me.

He was, and it was.

I took another sip, settling into the heady feeling of flirting and the soft buzz of the drink.

“I wasn’t trying to make Kendra jealous, if that’s what you’re asking. She’s a bit of a hornet, and if she sensed anything about you, that we’re working on changing the restaurant, she would have tried to sabotage it, and you, to boot.”

A little charge of fear sliced through my chest. I’d already been sabotaged in business. I didn’t know Kendra, and I was confident in my work, but the thought of having to put up another battle like the one I was still fighting with Jared twisted in my stomach. “Well, that’s sweet of you, then,” I said, trying to come up with some other reason to get up and leave and then turn the job down despite the money.

I snapped my eyes closed. I wasn’t going to be run off by anyone. I was better than that. When I opened my eyes, he was looking right at me. There was sadness in his smile when he said, “Not a problem.” He held up his glass. “Now I just have to try to keep her off my tail for the holidays.”

My brow perked. I took another drink. “Why’s that?”

“We were together for thirteen years. We have had the same friends even before that. None of them know how to handle the breakup and are still trying to understand it even after this long. They still invite both of us over, and both of us are too stubborn not to go.” He played with the rim of his glass.

“But really, our friends are good, and I don’t have any family alive anymore, and I like spending the holidays with them. So, it should be interesting to watch what happens.” He finished his glass and poured another. “Would you like some more?”

I nodded. It tasted amazing. I stood, walking around his desk. I placed my glass in front of him and sat on the edge of his desk. He leaned forward and poured another, and his fingers brushed against my leg. The electricity shot straight to my core, and a lowthrob pulsed between my thighs. I hoped that he’d done it on purpose.

“Would it help you if I were your plus-one for the holiday season?” I didn’t know where the thought came from, but it seemed like the right thing to say to help. Or was it?

I picked up my glass and took another drink. It was probably just me trying to be kind. Right?

Even that seemed like a flimsy excuse. I released a sigh and shook my hair out. I’d examine it another time. Right then, I was in the company of a very nice man who seemed to have a problem, and I was a problem solver by trade, so I could definitely get behind that logic.

I decided it was best not to think about it anymore.

Nick sat back, pensive. He steepled his fingers together and searched my face. “Why would you do that?” he asked. I shrugged and took another drink, trying to figure out why I would say that.

After I swallowed, I said, “You seem like a really nice guy who’s just trying to start over. If I can help you do that, I’m happy to.” That almost sounded rational.

I wanted to kick my overthinking brain.

“Even though I’m pretty old?” he said with a teasing glint in his eye.

“I think you know you’re not old,” I said, standing to go back to my chair. I tripped on my heel and almost toppled to my side. Somehow, I didn’t. When I looked up, I realized Nick had moved lightning fast and his muscled arm caught me around my waist. “Pretty nimble too,” I teased, but not really, now painfully aware of how close we were.

The air surrounding us wrenched tighter, and I shifted just a little, letting my body line up with his. Placing a hand on his shoulder, my other arm draped over his arm, and I got to feel how tight his muscles really were. There was a warning flashing in my mind, but despite that, I moved closer as his hand tightened over my ribs.

“You okay?” his voice rumbled down my spine, spreading throughout my hips and settling between my legs. My fingers tightened on his shoulder, bunching up the fabric of his T-shirt.

I forced my eyes to meet his, and the connection mixed with his spicy scent and before I knew it, I pushed myself up and our lips met.

His lips were as soft as I hoped, and his strength supported me enough where I no longer had to be tiptoed. He held me to himself and leaned into the kiss. His hand threaded through my hair and he spun me, pressing me into the desk.

A burst of excitement popped in my chest as he took control and leaned over me as he laid me on the desk, pushing away some of the trinkets so I wouldn’t land on them.

The realization that I was kissing my client broke through, and I severed the kiss with heavy breath, instantly missing the feeling of his lips on mine.

“Is that your way of telling me you're okay? Cuz if it is, I liked it.”

I smiled as he lowered his lips to mine again, this time opening my mouth and letting his tongue tease my bottom lip.

I lifted myself up, moving with the kiss when he backed away. His eyes were stuck on mine, lips painfully close. A whimper threatened to slip over my lips because he was no longer touching them.

“You’re sure about this?”

I nodded. The draw of him was too big, too overwhelming. I wanted to give this to myself because it was time, because I deserved it, because I never jumped the gun, because I'd always planned everything out, even the relationship with Jared.

And that blew up in my face.

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I shifted off the desk, and he let me, backing away slightly.

I turned, holding his fingers as I walked around the desk to my briefcase. I shoved my hand in the tiny pocket and pulled out a little foil wrapper. I held it between two fingers and wagged it under his nose.

He yanked me to himself, and I tossed the condom onto the desk, giving myself over to the kiss. The hard line of his cock dug into my stomach, and a moan slipped out of my mouth. I needed to touch it.

My hands traced over the line of his defined muscles down to his belt, and I tore it away from his waist, which seemed to excite him more. He bit the bottom of my lip, sending a charge of pleasure to my core, and he grunted as he pushed me back onto the desk.

I fumbled with the button and zipper on his pants for what felt like too long. I pulled away from the kiss as he leaned me back, and when I got his pants unzipped, I pushed everything down, releasing his thick cock to the room for me to look at in awe. I reached out to stroke it. He growled, and my hand jerked faster as he pushed my legs open.

His hand rode up my skirt, and he tore my panties away and down, past my knees, and over my ankles, leaving my heels firmly in place.

He groaned as I squeezed his dick harder, and his large hands pressed me to the top of the desk. He pressed himself between my legs, and I spasmed feeling his rock-hard erection rub over the most sensitive part of me.

He ground down into me, and I cried out, the tender throb of want saturating my thighs.

“Is this what you want?” He ground into me harder, letting the friction pump need into my body, making me putty for whatever pleasure he would bring me.

“Yes,” I whispered through a hushed breath. “Please.”

“Ooh. I like to hear you beg.” He rubbed the head of his cock over my clit, and I trembled at the sensation, each stroke of his dick over the bundle of nerves, toying with me, and I liked it.

I closed my eyes and arched my back, moaning, biting my lip as his other hand pushed up my skirt and grabbed my ass with just enough pressure to bring a little pleasure with the pain. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could wait for him, but I’d play the game he wanted.

My eyes snapped open and with another stroke of his dick against my clit, my eyes locked on his. “Please,” I said, scooting back on the desk and opening my legs up to him fully. The hunger in his eyes was enough of a reward as he shoved two fingers deep inside me, and my scream echoed through the room as he pushed and pulled and pumped. “This is what you want?” he hissed, and my hips ground down on his finger as I whimpered for him.

I ripped my shirt open, not wanting any fabric between us. His fingers pumped harder as he bent over, pushed the lace down, and sucked at my nipple hard.

Pleasure overtook me. My hums and moans and calls out for him to fuck me grew louder and more desperate the closer he brought me to climax.

“You’re so goddamned wet, Julia.” His sapphire eyes linked with mine. “Just the way

I wanted you to be when I first saw you.”

His words practically had me coming all over his finger, but he pulled away, lifted his shirt off, and grabbed the condom. I took my bra off, wanting nothing more than to feel his skin against my own. My body yearned to feel it.

His chest was well-defined, and I did my best not to tell him to hurry up, even though the words were right at the tip of my tongue. I watched him slide the condom on, anticipation swelling the walls at my center, filling me up with pleasure before he even got close to me.

Once he was done, he brought both hands on either side of me. “How do you want it?” he asked, his voice low, twisting the sensation deep inside me. I looked at him, unsure of what to say as he waited for me to answer, his cock painfully close to my pussy.

“I just want you to fuck me,” I said through heated breath. He pulled me to himself and cupped the back of my head.

The teasingly slow way he played at my entrance had me squirming. “Nick,” I moaned, my eyes rolling back into my head as he circled slowly then slammed into me without warning.

My scream of passion ripped from my throat as he thrust into me. The louder I went, the harder he pumped, and soon, my hips were pumping over his cock too. He filled me up and pushed me into the desk. His mouth came to my nipple as my legs wrapped around his hips, holding on for dear life as he delivered me pleasure from his dick, his mouth, his finger.

I couldn’t believe I was fighting this.

I couldn't believe it'd been so long since I'd had sex.

I couldn't believe I'd ever enjoyed sex with Jared after spending three minutes with Nick inside me.

Soon, the twisting and tightening in my core sparked, igniting the flame in my system, and exploded through me, rocketing at the highest level of pleasure that I ever experienced.

My scream rode out my climax as Nick fucked me through it. With a few more pumps, his body went rigid and he tensed, growling and grunting as he spilled into the condom. His gaze met mine, and he jerked me up toward himself, and I kissed him through the rest of his climax.

As his hips slowed, he pulled out of me, and he leaned deeper into the kiss, supporting the back of my head as his tongue lapped over mine as if he couldn't get enough of me.

He moved his head to my neck, kissing at the base of my throat, licking up the line of my neck, sending another shiver down my spine.

As the heady sensation faded and we started to clean ourselves up, the very first thought I had was, Mia's going to kill me.

9

NICK

Julia buttoned up her shirt, collecting her panties and her bra, shoving them into her briefcase. She wouldn't look me in the eye. She said a quick goodbye and tried to rush out, but I snagged her arm. "Hey," I said, cupping her jaw and forcing her eyes to meet mine.

A wisp of hair fell over her face. I tucked it behind her ear and brought my lips to her lobe. "We didn't do anything wrong," I whispered. She shivered as my breath hit her skin and a line of goosebumps rippled down her neck. I smiled against her lobe but pulled away just slightly. I wanted to make sure she really wasn't sorry for what we did. I wasn't, but I wasn't in the business of having sex with someone who didn't want me.

Her mahogany eyes met mine, and a blush dashed over her face.

"I..." She bit her lip, seeming to struggle with the words she wanted to say. Her gaze turned the heat up in my chest, and I couldn't tell if it was the bourbon, the buzz wearing off, or if it was something else growing for her. It was the first time I'd been with a woman since Kendra. But from what Julia showed me so far from her personality, and how great our sex was, I could see myself starting something with her.

I flinched.

That was jumping the gun a bit too quickly.

Wasn't it?

I didn't know if I wanted to be a serial monogamist. Plus, Julia was in her twenties. I dropped her bicep and sat back on my desk. "Okay," I said, rubbing my hand over my beard. "We can chalk it up to a little bit of stress relief on both our ends. I know you just moved here, and that can be a stressful experience. My ex-wife is still in my life when I don't want her to be. That can also add up. So, what do you say? We're both grown adults. We both consented. Is there really a reason to regret it?" I leaned closer to her and smiled. "I enjoyed it very much."

Julia smiled at the last part. She rolled her eyes and placed a hand on my shoulder. I ignored the heat racing down my arm from her touch because she clearly didn't want that type of relationship with me, and I clearly needed to sober up and think straight.

Plus, I needed her to help me with this rebrand. After hearing her ideas for the night, I wouldn't trust anyone else with it. There would be too much to sort out.

Her shoulders lowered as she said, "I enjoyed it too. But you're right. It was probably just a stress relief type of thing. I—I am kinda getting over a bad breakup." She looked to the side and stepped a little closer. "It ended a few months ago, but you're the first guy I've been with since. So, I'm glad to hear you enjoyed it too."

Her gaze bounced back and forth over my face, and for the first time in I didn't know how long, I was at a loss for words. A huge sense of wanting to beat up the fucker who hurt her washed through me, and I shook my head, trying to rattle out of the sensation.

I brought my fingers up to my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose, breaking eye contact. It helped scrub away any feelings I had, and suddenly, I was much more tired

than I originally thought. When I opened my eyes, I looked her over. “I guess it’s the trend.” I smiled. I couldn’t help it. I liked looking at her. “I haven’t been with anyone since before I was married, so it’s a new experience for me too.”

“Good.” She slipped her purse strap onto her shoulder. “I’m glad to have helped. And it’s nice we could get each other over the hurdle. You’re right, we are consenting adults. I just don’t want it to affect our working relationship.” She said the last part lower, and my hands instantly flew up to her shoulders.

“No. No way. No one else could do the job as well as you’re already doing it.”

“Good. Then, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” She turned to walk out the door but stopped just short of the threshold. She turned back to me. “Let me know if you have any place you’d need me to go with you. I won’t back out of that promise, either.”

I nodded and waved. “Thanks for that. See you tomorrow.”

As she turned to leave, I realized I really wanted to take her to bed instead.

“These are the colors Ms. Day wanted us to show you,” Joyce, an old friend and the town’s interior designer, held out a variety of colors. “Since the brick is going to be raw and we don’t know what it looks like yet, I suggest we take part of the wall off before any other of the demo is done. We need to see what condition it’s in and if we need to get it pressure washed or sealed so it’s up to code.” She moved to her bag. As she dug through it, I heard someone else come through the front door.

“Nick.” Ed waved at me.

“Excuse me, Julia—I mean Joyce.” I shook my head, trying to hide my embarrassment at calling Joyce Julia. I guess what we did a few nights ago made a bigger impression on me than I thought.

And it was an understatement. There was very little time in the last few days that Julia hadn't been circling my thoughts. It had been very hard to concentrate, and I'd even found a few reasons to text her when there were questions that could've waited until we were together.

She was kind and responded to anything I threw her way, but I was starting to feel bad for taking up her time. Although she didn't seem to mind it when I sent her pictures of my food asking her what she thought of the plating.

It was a shitty excuse to text her, but I hadn't done the dating thing for a long time and I knew it was an excuse for an excuse, and I was learning to live with the idea that maybe I was a sap.

"You'll probably want to talk to Ed, right?"

He was the contractor, and another old friend. Joyce looked up and waved, not bothering to say anything. I walked over to Ed and shook his hand. "We're going to measure today, then we'll meet up with Joyce and discuss her plans."

"Good, she's going to need a bit of the sheetrock brought down before we do almost anything else because she needs to see the condition of the walls."

I started to walk him over to her when John called me from the kitchen. "Nick, there's someone on the phone for you." I could tell by the look in his eyes that it was a serious call. Probably from the IRS.

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“I’ll take it in my office.” I walked toward him, waving at him to come out of the kitchen, which he hated doing. “Just answer any questions they have about the restaurant. They need help with a few things, and I don’t know how long I’ll be on the call.”

“Fine,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re lucky I like you.”

“You’re lucky I had enough equity to keep this place running,” I joked, not wanting to give in to the anxiety popping in my chest. Instead, I hurried to the office and picked up the phone. “Nicholas Grayson here.”

“Nicholas, hello. This is Mike Lassary, your IRS agent. I’m set to be your agent for the foreseeable future. Thank you for not dodging my calls. It makes the process so much easier.” He laughed at his joke, and I plopped into my chair not feeling quite as jovial as my IRS agent was.

“I’m not really interested in playing any games or jumping on a merry-go-round,” I said, holding back the thought that I’d already been on a merry-go-round with my ex-wife for far too long. But I think he would have at least pretended he’d been there, even if he hadn’t.

I leaned back, rocking in the chair, and rubbed the spot between my eyebrows. “The gist is that my ex-wife didn’t pay the taxes. I don’t know why, but it’s probably to screw me over one last time,” I said and balked at how much aggression came out of my mouth with the words. But I surprised myself. At least it didn’t come out yelling, kicking, screaming, punching like I thought it would.

I rocked forward and placed my hand on the desk. Mike started talking, but I didn't pay attention to any of it, remembering what happened, what I did with Julia only two nights ago.

How good it felt.

How good she smelled.

What her ass felt like as I squeezed it.

What her breasts looked like bouncing over her chest as I thrust into her.

“Mr. Grayson?” Mike’s voice cut through my daydream.

I shifted, realizing that my cock was pushing against my pants, and I tried to come down from the fuzz my brain was caught in while I was thinking about Julia.

I cleared my throat and said, “Yes?”

“Is everything alright? Are you still with me?” Mike asked. I was starting to think he was being an asshole, after all.

“Yes,” I grumbled. “Someone came into my office.” I cleared my throat again as my mind tried to go back into the sex daydream about Julia. “I’m sorry I was distracted for a minute. What were you asking?”

“How do you intend to pay the taxes off, Mr. Grayson? There are several payment plans we can get you on, if you’d like to go over them.”

“Nick,” I said. “Call me Nick. No, no. I’m not going to do a payment plan.”

Those had a shitty interest rate, and it would only bury me in more debt. “I’ll be paying for it in one lump sum.” I grimaced because I had to take out equity on my home for the loan, but because I knew the bank officer, they finagled the lowest-price interest they could. It was the best offer.

“Then, Nick, our relationship will be a short one.” I could hear the disbelief in his voice, but I didn’t care. My eyes snagged on something shiny on the tiled floor. I leaned down and picked it up.

“That’s great.” I smiled when I saw that it was one of Julia’s earrings. I picked it up from the floor and looked at the small teardrop shape. It was the color of a ruby. I wondered if it was real. I wondered if that was her favorite stone. I held it in the light and thought it looked real, but then I didn’t know much about gemstones.

It would give me a great excuse to text her and send her a picture. And maybe remind her of what we did on my desk. And then, I could ask her to the holiday parade with me, even if it was under the guise of a fake date.

There would be a lot of the town there, including my friends, including Kendra and whomever she decided to cling to for the night.

But the idea of spending more time with Julia far outweighed the discomfort of having Kendra unleash her poison on me.

I got the rest of the details from Mike as we talked about how to get the cashier’s check to him or his office. And he said he’d be emailing me some forms I’d have to fill out.

He sent them to me while we were on the phone, and we did a preliminary run-through in case I had any questions. Thankfully, and surprisingly, everything was pretty straightforward and I thought I could do it quickly. That took some of the

pressure off the situation.

“Make sure to get in touch with me with any questions you might have, Nick,” Mike said. “You’ve made this a very easy day for me. I don’t know if that means I should enjoy it or if something else is going to wreak havoc elsewhere.” He chuckled.

“Well, I hope that it just means the rest of your day will go well and that you have nothing else chaotic happen for you,” I replied and meant it. I decided that I wanted to hear Julia’s voice instead of sending her a text message with the picture. Although I might do that too.

We shared a few more pleasantries, then I told Mike goodbye and hung up before he had a chance to say anything else. As soon as the phone hit the cradle, I picked my cell up and dialed Julia’s number.

I was disappointed that she didn’t pick up and realized I might have to get to know her a little better before she told me about her ex. I let the idea settle in my chest that I might really like her.

And I might really be okay with that.

10

JULIA

“I can’t believe you’re going on a date with a client, Julia,” Mia said, adding the last string of lights to my tree. Tomorrow, we were set to do hers. It was a fun tradition we picked up doing when we first met each other, and even though I wasn’t excited about our conversation, I wouldn’t miss putting our trees up together for anything.

“It’s a fake date,” I reminded her, kneeling down and plugging the lights in to make sure they worked. My apartment glowed in the way only Christmas lights could light up a room, warm and magical, just like my insides right now. Especially when I thought about Nick.

I pushed my hair from my face. “It’s just to help him out so his ex-wife doesn’t get caught up on the idea that he’s doing a rebranding.” Although a small part of me wished it were more as the memory of us going at it on his desk rode through my mind. I huffed out the heat that crested over my body, wanting to feel Nick’s callused hands on my skin, and his fingers pinching my nipples, and his dick?—

“Julia!” Mia clapped her hands in front of my face.

Crap.

“This isn’t a daydream. This is your livelihood. If you’re really going to do this ‘fake

dating' thing, then don't try to fool yourself. I can see you're already connected to him way more than you should be," she scoffed as I handed over her scarf. I gave her an innocent smile and batted my lashes at her. "You're—hell, we're—just getting settled here. Don't you think it's a bit insane that a man in his forties has to have a woman who's twenty-eight pretend to be his girlfriend so his 'mean' ex-wife doesn't rain on his parade?" I snorted at the pun. Mia wasn't amused.

"Okay, you're right, Mom. I'm listening." I chewed on the inside of my lip. I hated that she was right. Even if the experience with Nick was nothing like Jared, there was no way I was going to talk Mia away from it now. "Besides, I did learn my lesson. I don't have feelings for him. It was just a tipsy night where two people were breaking free from bad relationships."

That sounded right. Really right, actually.

Maybe that was what had happened?

Neither of us had been with another person since our exes.

It was plausible.

A little voice in the back of my mind tried to argue with my rationality, because that small piece of me did want to get to know Nick better.

"Julia," Mia huffed. "I love you like a sister I always wanted?—"

"You have a sister," I muttered, flicking my eyes to hers. When I saw the spark of humor in them, I relaxed and wrapped my arm around her shoulder. "I love you too." I walked her to the door. "Let me get through this job, and you'll see it'll all be fine."

Mia opened the door and walked through. She turned and looked at me. "I know

you're just saying that to convince yourself..."

I slammed the door in her face for fun and heard her loud groan through the door. "Goodnight, you jerk!" she called.

"Night, Mia! Be safe on your way home."

I didn't need to see her to know she was flipping me off through the door, and when I heard her footsteps go down the stairs, I turned and got ready for my fake date with Nick.

At least, that's what I tried to tell the butterflies in my stomach. It was fake.

And I totally believed that.

And maybe, for a few seconds, I actually did.

Forty minutes later, I was dressed and downtown with Nick. We admired the Christmas lights and got cozy really quickly.

"The town is so pretty," I said, snuggling up to Nick as he put an arm around my waist. I hated that I liked it. But I liked that I liked it even more. Even though Mia's warnings fluttered around my mind, I tucked myself in closer to Nick. Not only would it look like we were together, but also, I really liked the way he smelled.

"Yeah, I like it." He smiled down at me, and I fought the urge to kiss him again. "Want to go to the Christmas Shop after? They have great hot chocolate."

"I'd love some hot chocolate. It's actually my favorite drink after red wine." I laughed. He dropped his hand, and his fingers wrapped around mine. I only wished now that I wasn't wearing gloves because I wanted to feel that zip of our skin

together.

“Well, I guess you’re lucky I’m so intuitive.” A sparkle popped into his sapphire eyes, and I leaned into it.

“I think you’re lucky that you can make an educated guess.”

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His laughter rang through the air, and as the last parade float slowly rode away, he led me to a charming cafe that was stuffed to the gills with holiday paraphernalia. “This is the Christmas Shop?” I asked, pointing.

Nick tugged on my fingers, and I stepped in close. “That’s what the owner and town call it for the holidays because the owner and her family love them so much. They transform their cafe into the Christmas Shop every year since I was in high school.” His eyes looked up, and I followed his gaze. “Huh, look at that. Mistletoe.”

Excitement whispered over my chilled breath, and as he gazed at me, I knew I wasn’t going to back away. His lips came to mine, and memories of the other night flipped through my mind as my fingers dug into his coat.

His tongue lapped over mine with a slow precision meant to soak my panties and made me wonder what he would do with his tongue if his head were between my legs. A moan slid from my mouth with the thought as his fingers knotted in my hair.

He kissed me faster, making me forget we were in public, and a thousand other things I wanted him to do to me beat into my head as our kiss went up to the next level, raising my blood pressure as my heart beat against my ribs.

My hands slid into his jacket, and I felt around for the hem of his shirt, sliding my fingers up it, feeling his abs as soon as they found it. I tried to remember that I couldn’t take his shirt off in public. That would be a bad look for both of us. Plus, it was thirty degrees.

A sharp buzz twittered over my lips and trickled down my neck and low into my

belly. I nipped at his lip, and he held me tighter. My fingers ran behind his back, still touching his skin but encircling his waist with both arms.

His hand cupped my jaw, and he rounded out the kiss, pulling back just enough for his foggy breath to caress my face as our eyes met again. “I don’t think—” he started.

“That was a disgusting display.” A woman’s voice shattered the moment between Nick and me, and I remembered I was in public, and that meant people were around. My cheeks warmed, and I couldn’t believe I lost myself like that. But I could.

I liked it.

A lot.

I wanted to walk away from the woman who I knew was Kendra and invite Nick to come back to my place so we could finish our kiss. Instead, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, worried that I really did make an ass out of myself and afraid to look to see who was saying it, because I was sure it was...

“Kendra, I don’t think you need to comment on anything I do or don’t do,” Nick said, rubbing my shoulder, trying to comfort me. I dropped my hands from around his waist and turned to look at Kendra, running my hand over Nick’s back to hold onto his waist. His arm dropped over my shoulders. “Don’t you know when you say shit like that, it doesn’t make me look bad? It makes you look bad.”

He took my hand, and we started to talk away from the group of women when Kendra shouted, “It’s great to see you found someone so young. No other woman your age would have you.”

I turned my head to defend our situation. I desperately wanted to say something back, but Nick held my hand tighter. “Don’t give her a reaction. It’s what she wants, and

she doesn't need to get anything else, okay?" he said.

Kendra's voice resonated in my head. Was our age difference really too much? Did that say something about Nick? We rounded the corner, and I pulled away from him. "Well, you weren't lying about how angry she was." I hated hearing the quaver in my voice. She was a bit scary, and I was kind of worried about what would happen next.

"Um, next time, I'll be a little more prepared." I patted Nick on the shoulder and took a few steps back. I needed to think about some things.

"Julia, I'm sorry that happened. I didn't... I mean..." The sorrow about what happened was genuine, but I needed to be alone. I had some stuff to sort out.

"Don't worry, Nick." I waved and turned. "Next time, I'll be more prepared." I tossed the words over my shoulder and hurried away, ignoring the pool of emotions swimming on the edge of my nerves.

There was a lot to unpack.

I'd never really had to deal with ex-wife drama, although my ex, Jared, had a sexual harassment suit brought up against him when we were together. It was one of the reasons I left him. I'd always seen him flirting but knew he wouldn't cheat on me—at least that's what I told myself—but I continued to talk myself out of leaving him.

We'd been together for a year and I was starting to outgrow the relationship, but I'd been stubborn, trying to tell myself that he had been "The One" when I first met him and I didn't want to be wrong in thinking that because what would it have said about me?

Thankfully, the lawsuit shook me out of my ego and I got to step away from the relationship, learning it was okay for me to make mistakes as long as I learned from

them.

Then of course, after I dumped Jared, moved out of our apartment, and started to get into a good routine for myself, clients started bailing on me. I learned through one loyal client that Jared had approached her and tried to tell her how shitty of a job I did for them and that he wanted to “warn” her away from having her business ruined.

Even though we were in a city with millions of people, he'd managed to do enough damage that Mia decided to talk me into leaving the city. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but it was a big transition. We had to find a town that wasn't too far away from other places. Heart's Creek was about two hours away from Buffalo and was a stone's throw away from Pennsylvania. We could get to Manhattan in less than an eight-hour drive too.

Not that we needed to travel much, at least at first.

But eventually. It was a goal.

By the time I was two blocks away, I slowed. My apartment was right around the corner, and I began to calm down when myphone dinged. I smiled, knowing Mia needed to give me a hard time, but she was right. I wasn't ready to dive into that shark tank with Nick, and it would be better if I just steered clear of anything more than fake dating.

No matter how good of a kisser he was.

I went to text Mia back only to see that it wasn't Mia who texted me. It was Jared. The text demanded that I call himright now.

11

NICK

“Alright, Clint. Thanks so much.” I hung the phone up and leaned back in my chair. The loan came through. I would be able to pay the IRS off in less than a week, right before Christmas. The weight I’d been carrying since I got the news about the IRS lightened a little, and I rocked forward, placing my head into my hand.

If I could feel this relaxed with just a small bit of news to perk me up, did I even really want to make Kendra pay me back for it? Wouldn’t that just bring more tension and stress that I wanted to be clear of? That was why I divorced her. That was why I wanted to have the restaurant and I gave her everything else.

For the last two years, all I’d wanted to do was to be free from her lies, manipulations, and the pain that came with it all because I was a damn fool for letting it go on for so long. That was something I was going to have to look into. I wouldn’t make that decision quickly.

Fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money. But wasn’t my happiness and clarity worth more than that?

My cell rang. It was Kendra.

That twisted up the knot between my shoulders right back to where it was only a few minutes ago.

Of course, she knew I was thinking about trying to get rid of her.

I answered the phone reluctantly. “This is going to be one of the last times I answer a phone call from you. I hope you know that.” I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of knowing how fucking pissed I was that she screwed me. She already knew she’d screwed me, and starting a fight with her was exactly what she wanted.

“Nick...” I could hear the hiss on the edge of her words. She was up to something. Yay.

I released a long sigh. “What do you have to tell me now?” Seeing Julia’s kindness and concern for others was making me see the world in a bit of a different light. I really just wanted to be done with Kendra. Although I hadn’t forgotten how she treated Julia the other day, either.

“I just got off the phone with the high school. They’ve decided to go with someone else for their staff luncheon this year. I just wanted to let you know.”

Anger shot through my veins. My teeth ground into each other, and my fingers clenched the cell phone so tightly I thought I was going to crack it in half.

“Fucking hell, Kendra. Your games don’t affect me anymore. You are not the end all, be all of the information from the school. Don’t contact me again.”

“Don’t you want to know where they’re going?” she purred.

“No. I’m not interested in any lies you have to say or any information you may or may not have to give. You should probably move on with your life. We’re no longer legally obligated to each other. Go find someone else to fuck with.” I punched the call button and hung up before she could say another word. “Fuck!” I pounded onto my desk and stood. Shit like this would just keep happening as long as I let her get to

me. She'd been doing it for months now, waving her nasty little power trip in my face. I needed to get out of here.

"John," I called as I rushed out into the kitchen. "Take the lead. I need a break."

"Heard," he shouted, and I slammed the door on my way out the back. My blood was boiling. The loss of that business would hit us really hard. Why would Kendra do something like that? I knew she was behind it.

I got into my car and huffed.

There was no sense in calling the school, even though Kendra was a liar. She and the principal had been friends for longer than I'd known either of them. I just wanted her to stop fucking with me. I knew she pulled strings to make this happen.

I started the car, having no idea where I was going, but I knew I had to drive.

Driving always made me feel better. There was something about the way the tires rolled over the road that calmed me. Aside from throwing her something shiny in the opposite direction from where I was, I had no idea how to get her off my back. When we were married, she'd pulled shit all the time on me.

And I'd react.

It was our cycle.

But once I stepped off the hamster wheel, I thought I'd be out of it.

As I weaved in and out of town, driving down one street through the next, I stopped at a stoplight and looked over.

The light for Julia's office was on. I didn't see her through the store front, but I wish I could've.

Things didn't end well the last time I saw her, but there was something calming about her when she was around. She was very much the antithesis of Kendra. She had very much the opposite effect on me.

I pulled the car over to the curb and saw that her Openlight was still on. I didn't want to sit here like a creeper, and when I looked through the bay window more closely, I saw that she was, in fact, sitting at a desk with a black-haired woman.

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I took the keys out of the ignition and dropped them in my pocket. I got out the door and locked it. When I walked up to the storefront, I could see both women turn their heads toward me.

A slight smile perked over my lips as Julia's smile widened.

I opened the door and waved and saw the black-haired woman glare.

I knew Julia said her best friend was also her assistant in her business, so it was nice to see that she was also protective of Julia. "Hello," I said, holding out my hand to the dark-haired woman. "You must be Mia."

She looked at my hand as though she were unsure where it had been and reluctantly took it. "Nick," she said. I gave her a firm nod and didn't let her colder demeanor bother me. I understood what she was doing.

"It's really nice of you to protect your friend." I patted the back of her hand as a warm sense of excitement settled over me. If Mia was protecting Julia, that meant she'd talked to Mia about me. That was something nice to know. I wondered what she shared.

Mia gave me the side eye and dropped my hand. She spun around and sat at her desk, crossing one leg over another and pulling out a nail file. She started filing her nails and gave me a heated look.

"Ah, I didn't mean to interrupt..." I turned my attention to Julia, whose smile seemed to have grown wider. It was accentuated today by ruby lipstick, and I wondered what

her mouth would look like wrapped around my dick.

I snapped my eyes shut and laughed the image away, trying not to make too big of an ass out of myself.

“You weren’t interrupting,” Julia said. “This is a business and you are a client, after all.” She emphasized the words, rolling her gaze to Mia.

Mia cleared her throat, and I bit back laughter as Julia rolled her eyes. “Mia was just leaving for lunch,” she said.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“You said you’re going to the deli, that you needed to get out and wanted to walk through the snowy air.”

“I changed my mind.” Mia’s deadpan seemed to upset Julia, but I restrained my smirk.

“It’s okay, I just wanted to stop and say hi. Obviously, I did interrupt something,” I started and took a few steps back. “I didn’t need anything else work-related.”

Mia groaned and rolled her eyes. “No, fine. I’ll go.”

“There’s no reason for you to be so excited about it.” Julia crossed her arms, highlighting her cleavage as it lifted. My cock twitched. I rubbed my eye, trying to focus on what Julia and Mia were saying, trying to stop the images of our saucy encounter in my office from beating into my mind. The excitement that we’d get a chance to spend a little time alone started to rise in my chest.

Mia grabbed her coat and gave me a dirty “don’t you hurt her” look that I appreciated

more than I could say. When the tiny bell went off along with the sound of a door closing, I chuckled. “She’s lively,” I said, taking my gloves off.

Julia sat behind her desk and smiled. “That’s one word for it.”

“Nah,” I said and walked to the chair across from her. “She’s just being a good friend, that’s all.” I sat and leaned back. “I kind of liked it that you told her about me, though.”

Julia’s blush went from her cheeks down to her neck, and my eyes landed on her cleavage again. I dragged my gaze back up because I didn’t come here for sex. “Everything okay?” she asked.

“I should be asking you that question.” I stuffed my gloves into my pocket and propped my chin on my fingers.

“Why me?” she asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Well, the last time we saw each other...” Her cheeks brightened, and I let my sentence die away, unsure which direction I should go. Maybe I was reading more into it. I was probably out of my depth for any relationship and was still reeling from my call with Kendra. “I’m sorry about my ex-wife.”

Julia stood. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about. You can’t control the actions of someone else, especially someone who’s so angry.” She took a few steps around the desk, and I stood up too.

It took all I had not to yank her to me and kiss her. My gaze cast a long glance on the desk, remembering what we did on mine. I cleared my throat. Suddenly, I felt awkward about just showing up here with no good excuse. I felt like a foolish teenager with a crush. “Ah, you said it was lunchtime. I guess I should get going.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “Are you hungry? You can come up to my apartment.”

I wasn’t hungry, but I wasn’t going to miss a chance to be alone with her longer. “Sure, that sounds good.” Julia grinned and waved at me to follow her, and I watched her ass sway with each step as she led me through the office toward a narrow white door. My God, my dick was swelling and I was going to be alone with her. A bad combination after what happened the other night.

But I wasn't saying no, and I wasn't backing away. I was following her lead and hoping it went somewhere better than my stressful office, an IRS agent, and an encounter with Kendra.

JULIA

Excitement fluttered under my rib cage as Nick followed me up the stairs.

“You bought the entire building?” he asked from behind me. The thought that he had a view of my ass had my embarrassment rising even higher than it had been when I thought he was checking me out a few minutes ago. When we got to the landing, I took a step back so my ass wasn’t in his face anymore, although I wasn’t sure he minded it. Maybe I didn’t mind it either.

But I told the wetness soaking my thighs at the thought that I’d already decided that it wasn’t going any further.

Why did you invite him up to your apartment, then?

Stupid small voice. I shook it off and followed him through my front door. When I closed it behind me, I answered, “Yes. It was such a good deal, and I could live here and work, so commuting isn’t an issue. Things in Buffalo were a lot more expensive. I have the loan, but it’s nothing my work doesn’t cover, so I’m good there too.”

He smiled and took his jacket off. I stepped over and reached for it. “Here, I can hang it up.” I tilted my head. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” I hung his jacket up and turned. He had taken a few steps closer, and I could smell his spice scent. My belly warmed, and goosebumps rippled over my arms.

I brushed them away and forced myself to remember that this wasn’t a good idea. Jared, Jared, Jared, I told myself. But Nick wasn’t Jared. Not even close.

“Are you cold?” Nick stepped closer, right next to me now. He took his hands and rubbed them over my shoulders and arms. I shook my head, unable to say anything when he was so close. I was positive my voice would crack or sound like a breathy bird. I wasn’t sure which was worse, but I wasn’t in the mood to find out. His hand rode up my neck and cupped my cheek.

“I needed a break.” His sapphire eyes connected to mine, and the air around us crackled.

As if I couldn’t be any more embarrassing, my cheeks flamed. I placed a hand over his hand and took it away from my face. Our fingers laced together, and my nerves skittered in my chest. “Yes, I should be at work,” he said, stepping closer. I wanted to close my eyes and kiss him again, but Mia’s warning and my fear began to make a lot more sense.

I took a step backward and dropped his hand. “So, do you want anything to eat?” I walked over to my refrigerator, and opened the door. “I have bologna, American cheese, and white bread.” I pulled out the items and grabbed some mustard, and it struck me that I was offering him cold meat when his restaurant served gourmet. It only made my cheeks hotter.

His thick brows rose. “That’s what you eat for lunch?”

“Well, no,” I responded. “But I haven’t had a chance to get out to the store this week yet.”

“I’m appalled that you have bologna and American cheese at all.” I remembered he made his own cheese, or the restaurant did, so the thought of American cheese probably did appall him. He came over and took the bread from one hand and the mustard from the other.

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” I smiled and closed the refrigerator. “If we had Ruffles chips, it would make it even better, but alas, I’m out.” I laughed. He looked at me like I was crazy. But even that look was sexy.

“Fine, please, make me a bologna sandwich.” He looked around the room and asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Um, nothing.” I pulled down two plates and set to making the sandwiches.

“Your tree is great,” he said. I turned to see him walking up to the small tree on an end table. He looked at me over his shoulder and went to touch an ornament.

“Wait!” I dropped the bread and rushed over. “These are very old. Very special,” I said, taking the ornament out of his fingers.

“Oh, sorry.”

“No...” I shook my head. “Lots of sentimental value here. I made these with my mom when I was a little girl. Before she died.”

Awe swept over his features and softened to a sentimental expression. “Wow. That’s incredible.” He touched the ornament gingerly. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Thank you.” I pursed my lips together and watched a wistful look ride into his eyes. His hand came back to mine again, and he tucked his fingers around it. Sadness followed the wistfulness, and I stepped back, pointing to the couch.

He followed and we sat down. “I always wanted kids, but Kendra... Well...” He waved his hand through the air. “You know I don’t have any.”

“It’s not too late. You can still have kids.”

He laughed. "I'm too old, plus... damaged goods here."

I perked a brow. "I already know that you know you're not too old. And calling yourself 'damaged goods' isn't being fair to yourself. Each relationship comes with its problems, and not everything about your marriage was your fault. Maybe you're a bit... shaken up by it, but that's far from damaged."

"You just need more space between what happened in the last few weeks and today. Soon, you won't even be bothered by whatever she does. You have lots of time to do the things you want to and lots to offer. Don't give up hope. You're a great man, and anyone would be lucky to have you. You'll definitely find someone to love again." I did my best trying not to scrunch my face up at the last line because I got a little carried away.

My heart stopped as he stared at me. There was so much emotion filling his eyes that my throat swelled. My breath slowed when he said, "Someone like you?" and squeezed my hand.

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I studied his face, unsure what to say. Shock wiped my mind clean of any kind of rational thought, and when he looked up to my ceiling, my gaze followed his. “Too bad there isn’t mistletoe right now,” he whispered.

My eyes connected with his when he looked back down, and I didn’t stop the kiss from happening. He leaned in slowly, and I sat there like a buffoon ignoring the giant red flags waving in the air around me. Mia was going to be pissed.

His lips brushed against mine softly, almost hesitantly. Like butterflies dancing across my skin. His smell had me drunk, and my head spun.

I leaned into the kiss. Pulsing bursts of electricity thrummed from my lips down to my neck, rocketing low into my belly. I hummed against his lips as my mouth opened, inviting his tongue to caress mine.

He moved, sliding me into his lap. I straddled his thighs, feeling his cock between my legs. I ground down, rubbing between my thighs, letting the heated ache of want fill me up.

“My dick gets so hard for you any time I think about you.”

My excitement grew upon hearing him talk, seeing him rip his shirt up and over his head. He raked his hand through my hair and pulled me to himself. Our lips crashed together as his other hand rode up my skirt. His fingers dug into my thigh, and he moved again, swinging me onto the couch, pushing the material up my thighs, hooking his thumbs on my panties, and yanking them off and down past my ankles. It was happening so fast, I didn't know how to even protest, but then, I didn't want to. I

wanted this, which was probably why I'd invited him up here to begin with. I was horrible.

"I love that you wear a skirt everywhere," he said, tugging my shirt out of my skirt and pulling it over my head. "I sit back and think about everything I can do to you under that skirt." His fingers caressed my inner thigh, and I rocked my hips forward, waiting for him to touch some part of my wet and swollen pussy. I whimpered as he teased me.

"Oh, yeah?" I breathed. "What have you thought about?"

"I think about sticking my head between your legs, bending you over, and letting it ride up as I drill you from behind." His fingers teased the edges of my swollen lips. The ache between my legs throbbed.

Each position he described had me growing wetter.

His fingertips tickled the other thigh, running painfully close to where I wanted him to be. A gasp slipped past my lips and Nick smiled.

"I think you like that, don't you?" He leaned forward and brushed my clit with the tops of his knuckles.

I moaned for him and rubbed my hips along his skin, needing to feel the friction. His thumb circled around the silky, wet skin. He wiggled his finger under the slick hood, and I arched my back.

"I think you need to touch your nipples for me," he said to me, his finger rubbing at my center. The heat that was building between my thighs made it impossible to think about anything other than feeling his mouth on my clit.

My fingers snapped up to my breasts, and I plucked my nipples, twisting them, closing my eyes under the sensation of what Nick was doing and what he wanted me to do for myself.

He stroked the area softer, and the sharp burst of pleasure sliced through me, and he shifted to his knees and brought his lips to mine. “I love hearing you scream for me. But what sound do you want to make when you pinch your nipples for me?”

I answered by pinching the skin, letting it peak between my thumb and forefinger, and moaning with the pleasure that burst from the motion. My hips rocked onto his finger, urging him to go faster.

He slid his finger into me, and I quivered as he pumped it inside me. “You’re taking my finger so well, Julia,” he whispered. His breath tightened my nipples, and his eyes fell on them. “You take my instructions well too. You look fucking hot when you do what I tell you to do.”

He shoved a second finger inside me, and my legs opened wider for him as he leaned over and took one of my nipples into his mouth. I called out as his fingers thrust and curled inside me.

“Nick, stop messing around and fuck me,” I hissed, grinding into his hand more. His tongue flicked my nipple, and I jerked forward, only to drop and arch my back. He sucked at my nipple a little harder and curled his finger inside me, brushing against the smooth, sensitive skin. I tipped my head back as he rubbed over the most sensitive spot, and my moan rode through the air, bouncing off the walls as he moved to my other nipple and squeezed the first one with his hand. He placed his mouth over my nipple and sucked at it while thrusting. I was close to coming undone.

“Do you like it when I tell you what to do?” he grunted as I ran my hand down the thick line of his pants. I blinked up at him, batting my lashes, and cupped his crotch.

He growled, and I moved my fingers to the zipper, opening it and shoved my hands in.

I massaged his cock as he tried to get his pants down faster.

“I do like it,” I said, rubbing the head of his dick. He shuddered, closing his eyes, and I unbuttoned his pants and helped him shimmy out of his jeans. “Holy shit,” slipped from my mouth as I realized I’d never seen him fully naked. He was toned and tanned. The definition in his muscles was that of a twenty-something, not a middle-aged man. God, he was so attractive.

His fingers combed through my hair and he yanked me to himself. His lips crashed into mine and he crushed me against his chest. Skin on skin, my breasts rubbing over his chest hair, our tongues tangled together, and small noises of delight fell from my throat.

My arm draped over his shoulder as he held me to himself, hard enough for me to feel supported but not suffocated. He broke the kiss and looked into my eyes. Something flashed through them, but before I could ask, his large hand engulfed my breast and his fingers twirled around my nipple.

A shudder shook down my spine, and he walked me back to the couch.

“Turn around,” he said, taking the lead. He placed his hands on my hips and spun me. He ground his cock against my ass, and I lifted my arms over my head, locking them around his neck as he bent his head down to whisper, “Hold onto the back of the couch,” in my ear.

Excitement sparked in my chest as I bent over. I looked at him over my shoulder. He was pulling a condom out of his jeans. “We were thinking the same thing,” I said, voice low.

He smiled as he pulled the condom on. “It’s the first I’ve bought them in a long time.”

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“So you did come over here for a nooner, then.” The thought got me even more excited. I went to spin to say something else to him, but he grabbed me, pulling my back to his front, and grabbed onto my breast. “Fuck me,” I gasped.

“I like how impatient you are.” His lips came to my throat as he played with my nipple, plucking it awake.

“Next time, don’t worry about the condom,” I breathed, unsure of why I assumed there was going to be a next time. Before I could stop myself, “I’m on the pill,” fell off my tongue.

“I like the sound of that,” he said. “Now bend over. I want one of my daydreams to come true.” Giddiness that he’d just said I’d been in his dream fluttered through my chest, and I bent over again, holding onto the back of the couch while he pushed up my skirt. “That is good, Julia. So good.” His calluses were rough along my hips, but his overworked hands had a charge of their own.

He toyed with me, massaging my ass, my thighs, rubbing his cock against my pussy. And I stood, taking it, because each time he got closer to my entrance, the more I quaked.

He took his dick and played with my clit. “Do you know what else I like, Julia?” I loved how he said my name. He dragged his dick over my swollen lips, and my legs jolted under his touch.

“No,” I moaned, chasing the head of his dick with my hips. I hated and wanted his teasing at the same time.

He placed his cock at my opening, and his hands gripped my hips. He slammed into me, and I called out his name while he shouted mine. “I love that you’re in heels. Heels and a skirt, with my dick inside you.”

He pulled back and thrust in again. His cock pushed against my walls, sending heat, building tension. Soon, he was pushing and pumping in a strong rhythm. My fingers dug into the couch harder with each slap of our skin together.

Our energy twisted low in my core, and he kept telling me how much he liked fucking me. How he loved watching me squirm. Every word he said brought me closer to coming.

Then he slowed. I whined, looking over my shoulder at him. His eyes glinted with mystery. A coy smile curled at the corner of his lips. His thick shaft settled inside me, pressing against the right spot inside, and he rocked his hips back, rubbing over that spot. My walls spasmed around him, squeezing a grunt out of him.

Nick wrapped one muscled arm around my waist, dick still inside me, and brought me to standing as much as I could in heels, while being fucked, with a man as tall as he was.

His other arm wrapped around me, but not in support. His fingers snapped to my clit, and I cried out as his forefinger traced the silky skin and pressed into the center of me. I moaned as his hips started thrusting into me again, and the tension twisted deep inside me.

With one more rock of his hips and rub of my clit, the explosion burst through me. I clawed at his skin, needing something to dig my fingers in while he rode me through my climax. I jolted and twitched. My knees went weak, but he held me up, and the convulsions started to subside.

When my limbs were relaxed, my breaths still hard, he bent me over again and fucked me until he went rigid against me. He grunted my name, and I started to come again over his dick while he hit the highest note of his climax.

He didn't bother pulling out but collapsed over top of me, thrusting as hard as he could as his release ebbed away.

His hand grabbed my breast. He squeezed it lightly. His lips came to my throat, and he slowly pulled out of me. I instantly missed him inside me.

I spun and planted a kiss on his lips, and he held me tightly. I might have to admit to myself that I was falling for Nick. Just the same way I had fallen for Jared. And I didn't hate it as much as I wanted to hate it. I needed to hate it. For the sake of my business, for the sake of my friendship, for the sake of this contract, I should have hated it. But I couldn't.

13

NICK

"If I would have known getting you to sleep with a twenty-year-old would slap that goofy smile onto your face, I would've encouraged it sooner," David said, leaning back on the couch and taking a drink of his bourbon.

My eyes flicked to his. "She's not twenty. She's twenty-eight, and it doesn't have anything to do with her age. She's a good person."

David tipped his head and smiled around the rim of his glass. "Whatever you have to tell yourself." He leaned forward, placing the glass on the table. "You deserve to have a little fun after the divorce."

I was not amused at the way he was blowing off what was happening with Julia, but I couldn't say anything. Not yet. I didn't know how she felt, and just because we had sex a couple of times now, it didn't mean anything. Especially if we were both riding the wave of bad breakups. Rebound sex was a thing.

"Why did you change your tune about Kendra?" I leaned back in my chair and asked.

"Dude," David said, having the audacity to look hurt. I rolled my eyes.

"You're a forty-four-year-old man. Saying 'dude' is way too creepy to hear," I said.

"Says the forty-four-year-old who's screwing—" My sharp gaze had him swallowing the rest of his words.

"Fine. I'll knock it off." David lifted his hands in surrender, then relaxed. "You are right about Kendra. She's a shark. I never denied that, but she had a good sense for business. But the taxes thing?" His brow rose. "That was all to fuck you over. I knew she was rough around the edges, but since she'd done it for three years?" He shook his head. "It was like she was gearing up to drive the knife in."

"Yeah," I said, playing with my glass. I swished it around and watched the amber color glint in the light. "I just want to know when it's going to be over. I paid the IRS, got that situated. I don't even think I want to go after her for her half of the money at this point. I'm just ready to eat it because I'm so tired of her games, and mentally, I just don't think it would be worth it."

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“I don’t, man. That’s a lot of money to just toss away.” David’s eyes rolled to the ceiling. “Of course, she did fuck you out of the teachers’ party.” He wiped a hand down his face and looked at me. “She’s going to the holiday party at the restaurant, right?”

“Yeah. You should talk her out of it,” I said, not in the mood to talk to or see Kendra ever again. Especially when something might really be happening with Julia.

David sighed. “The staff still like her, Nick. They want her there. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you tell them what she did.”

I shook my head. “I’ll just come off looking like an asshole if I do that.”

“Well...”

“For fuck’s sake, David. Just act normal,” I snapped.

“I have more bad news.”

“No shit. You have a terrible poker face.”

“I don’t. I take your money all the time.”

“That’s just what I want you to think because I feel bad for you.”

David chuckled. “You wouldn't just give your money away. Especially when you were with Kendra. She wanted all of it.”

“That’s the truth,” I huffed. “Just tell me so we can get back to planning this menu.” I waved the notebook at him.

“Finnley’s is also doing a rebranding now,” he said.

“The corner bar?” I screwed my eyes closed. “That place is spending money to rebrand?” They hadn’t so much as updated the blood stains on the wall from their first bar fight in 1970. “Why would they be doing it now?”

I wondered if Julia took on another client? It wouldn’t be wrong of her to do it, but it would be weird if she went to them. Maybe they... One look at David told me it wasn’t Julia.

David lifted his glass to me. “I’ll give you one guess.”

“I’m going to hold it over your head for the rest of your life how much you sided with Kendra on everything for a really long time.”

“Still excited to have her come to The Bridge for the holiday party?” he asked, and I wanted to knock the cocky grin right off his face.

“No one is excited to have her come to the party,” I said dryly. My mind started to drift to Julia. I was agitated and wanted to talk to her. I wondered if she could make sense out of this for me since she was outside the cluster fuck. “And it’s not going to be called ‘The Bridge’ anymore. It’s Gray’s.”

“That’s big. The town is gonna have lots of opinions on that.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for.” I looked at the paper and skimmed the menu to see if there was anything else I was missing or didn’t think of. I tossed it to David. “Here, something’s missing. What?” I asked him. He always helped me with my menu planning, even though he was an insurance guy. He had a good eye for food and could have been a chef. But he always said he wanted to make money more than he wanted to make food.

I couldn’t blame him there.

He perused the notebook and muttered to himself.

I took a minute to process what Kendra was doing. “Maybe I should tell her off?” I said.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea to do it at the party,” David responded absentmindedly as his eyes raked over the menu. “You can do another appetizer,” he finished. “This is all the new food?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to test it out on the staff so they can start getting used to the new menu, even if it’s not changing for a little while. It’ll give us time to pick out the issues and pin the positives.”

“That sounds like something your twenty-eight-year-old girlfriend told you.” David chuckled. I started to defend her, but he didn’t really say anything terrible. I went to tell him she wasn’t my girlfriend. Not only did that sound weird because I was forty-four, but we hadn’t even spoken about that. “She’s... I don’t know what she is,” I answered.

And that was the truth.

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“What do you think about this?” I gave Julia a new spoon to try. She took it with a smile and put it into her mouth. She was here for some taste testing of my menu—her idea, not mine. She closed her eyes and hummed. When she blinked her eyes open, they shone. That was the thing about food. You could always tell when someone enjoyed it.

“That was really good.” She stepped over to me. “What sauce is that for?”

“It’s for the new fish dish I’ll be making. People in this town love fish on Fridays.” She took a step closer. Whatever perfume she was wearing made her smell like a flower.

No one was in the kitchen today. We were open long hours, six days a week. Mondays were the day for everyone to rest. “You know what I realized?” I said, pulling her in closer to me. She looked up and smiled softly. I leaned over and kissed her, supporting the back of her head with my hand.

Her hair swung over the back of my palm, tickling the skin and sending a vibration of heat down my arm. Her mouth opened to me gently, and she hummed around the kiss, letting me know she liked my tongue just as much as she liked my food.

She backed away, and I placed my forehead onto hers. “That isn’t a realization,” she whispered.

“No, but it was fun,” I said and leaned in for one last brush of her lips. I turned to stir the sauce again and moved to flip over the burger. “I haven’t taken you on a proper date yet.”

“Oh.” Julia stepped back and crossed her arms.

Well, that’s not good. Maybe I misread everything. I waited for her to continue because I hadn’t the foggiest idea what to do.

“Well, it’s just...” I checked her over. She didn’t look like she was going to tell me she didn’t want to see me anymore. She chewed on her lip. “My last boyfriend, the bad breakup?”

“Yes?” I faced her fully now.

“Well, he was kind of...” Her eyes swung down, and she fiddled with her fingers. “He was also one of my clients.”

“Hmm...” I nodded, still not sure where she was going.

“We were together for about a year and a half, and I just don’t want to...” She fidgeted more. “I don’t want you to think I only date clients. And I don’t want to think I only date clients.”

“Do you think you only date clients?” I walked over to a stool and sat so I could be on her level.

“No.” She rocked back and forth. “But Mia?—”

“There she is again, protecting you.” I smiled. Although it was annoying, having a friend like that would have probably helped me stay away from Kendra. That being said, I knew what it was like to be in love, and I might not have listened to them, either.

“Yes, she is a good friend. But we moved here because he totally trashed everything.

My reputation, my career..." She looked down at her fingers. "A lot of things. Moving to Heart's Creek was supposed to be a fresh start for us, and then I meet you and it just..." She bit her lip, and her eyes flicked over my face. "I'm just not sure what I want yet."

"And going on a date, a real one, with me would do what harm?" I smiled at her and held back from going to hug her. I wanted to, but it was obvious she was uncomfortable. I didn't want to make it seem like I wasn't listening to her.

Her eyes roamed around the kitchen as she thought about going on a date together. "We could just keep having sex if you'd like," I said to break through the silence.

Julia's eyes snapped to mine, and I let her see the joke in my expression. A sad smile fell over her face and she relaxed a little. She stepped closer to me and dropped her arms to her sides.

"What would you want to do on the date?" she asked.

"Are you saying yes, then?" I looked at my stove. My steak was burning. "Shit." I rushed over to it and turned the burner off. When I looked up, Julia was gone.

"Dammit." I didn't know what I said to scare her off, but I'd have to ask so I didn't do it again. I liked having her around me, and if I had to control myself so she'd stay, it was something I was willing to do.

14

JULIA

"You look great," Nick said, taking my coat from me.

“Thanks,” I said back with a polite smile. I hated the way I bailed on him the other day, and when he texted, asking me to come to the Christmas Eve party, I wanted to say no. But he did make it seem like he was inviting me because I was part of the team now, and I didn’t know whether I liked it or hated it.

“I’m happy to see you,” he said. His breath skated down my neck and twisted over my breasts. My nipples hardened at the thought of taking him back into the office and taking him up on his last offer of no-strings sex.

Mia didn’t want to come as a buffer tonight. Her words were, “You don’t have to go. But if you go, you need to figure out what you’re doing with him, because the waffling and the in-between aren’t good for either of us.”

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I checked out my heels thinking about how Nick plowed into me while I was wearing heels and a skirt. I smiled at the memory. Although I wasn't wearing a skirt today. My red dress came to my knees but flared out from my waist, making it a good outfit if he did want to stick his hand under it.

"You're almost as red as your dress." He put an arm around me. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I swallowed and forced myself to meet his gaze. My cheeks flamed. "I think you should probably come to my house after the party. What do you think?"

I nodded before I even thought about it. "Yes," I said. When he pulled away from me, I scrunched my eyes. I couldn't believe I just did that. But maybe there was a reason for it?

"Well, Nick. Look at your girlfriend. Isn't this fun?" Kendra said, slinking her arm around Nick's shoulder. I took a step back and did not want to be in the middle of that. That woman had some nerve. I mean, it wasn't like we were actually dating, but she didn't know that. I could tell she was just here to cause trouble. Instead of listening to them bicker, I walked over to the bar and Frank gave me a red wine.

"Thanks," I said as the other staff members started to watch Kendra and Nick snipe at one another. My discomfort grew. I turned to look at Frank, whose eyes bounced back and forth from me to them. "Did that happen a lot?" I asked. He looked terrified.

He shrugged. "Not this way. Nick is actually much calmer than he used to be. I think it had something to do with you, though."

I brushed the compliment off and took a sip of my wine. “This is a good one,” I said, trying to take the attention from the Nick and Kendra fight. I heard her screech, and I whipped my head to where they were arguing.

“I’ll try to save him,” I told Frank.

“I appreciate it,” he said. He probably didn’t want to get in the middle of his old boss and the current boss, even if he technically still worked for Nick.

I walked over, giving the other staff members a sympathetic look. They all watched with wary eyes, and it told me they’d seen this show one too many times. I stopped next to Nick and Kendra. “Excuse me, Kendra?—”

“That is Mrs. Grayson to you,” she spat.

“You are not my wife. You also changed your name. I know you haven’t had that much to drink that you’ve forgotten,” Nick snapped back. I placed a hand on his arm. “What?” he spat. Instant regret popped into his eyes. I could see he was trying to hold back his frustration when speaking with me.

“You have a phone call. I told them you’d take it in the office,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t press the question further. His sapphire eyes danced over my face and some of his steam simmered down.

“Fine...” He looked back at Kendra. “I’ll take it there.” He walked away muttering, but I was relieved to break up the argument. I didn’t bother to stop when Kendra said something about me under her breath. She might not realize it, but I’d had enough barbs thrown at me in the six months before I moved to Heart’s Creek that the words of an angry ex-wife couldn’t touch me now.

The rest of the staff looked at me with relief, and I nodded to them, hoping to get

them back in a celebratory mood.

Nick opened the door to his office and let me walk in first. I flicked the lights on and was surprised by how comfortable I felt here. I chewed on the inside of my lip. I never felt that way with Jared. I was constantly on edge second-guessing myself, questioning what I was doing wrong when he was acting strangely.

I liked that when I was with Nick, I didn't question whether it was my fault that he was angry. Instead, I knew it wasn't my fault, which actually had nothing to do with Nick and everything to do with the lessons I learned from being with a manipulative asshole.

I tried to shake the thought because comparing them didn't feel right, but I couldn't help it. With the ringing of what Mia said in my mind and the crazy good sex, it was hard for me not to wonder what it all meant. I was growing more used to the idea that I did like Nick and that I couldn't find much more to argue against.

Even the idea that I was making a mistake because he was a client was fading pretty quickly at this point. Even as I thought it now, it sounded more like an echo of another life.

Nick's groan pulled me back to him. He wiped his hand over his face and sat back in his chair. I walked over and sat at the edge of his desk, and almost automatically, he placed his hand on my leg. While it wasn't the time to get turned on, the excitement of having our skin touching pulsed up my leg and tangled in my core.

"I'm sorry," he said, his eyes finding mine. I gave a brief smile but waited for him to keep going. "It's just a lot. She's pulling these punches that make me feel like I'll never be free from her." He dropped his hand away from his face. "And that really is what I want. I just want to move on from the mess."

"She didn't pay the IRS for three years, almost like she was planning on fucking me over at every turn she took. That's why the budget had to be cut. I don't even want the money back from her. Then, she egged the principal of the high school to go to another place for their staff party. It usually brought in a good chunk of money. Then, with the bar across the street, she's 'consulting' them with their new 'rebrand'."

He sighed. "Plus, how she treated you the other night and tonight. It's wearing me down."

I tipped my chin. "I think that's a normal reaction for someone who's going through what you're going through." He leaned forward and pulled me onto his lap. I couldn't straddle him because of the arms, but just being close gave me all kinds of other thoughts. It was comfortable in a scary way. He massaged my neck, and even though I closed my eyes, I said, "It's just as important to rebrand your outside persona as it is to rebrand your restaurant."

"Like you're doing?" he asked. His breath tickled up my neck, and the hairs stood at attention. His hand rode up my thigh, and when I opened my eyes, our lips were incredibly close. As much as I wanted to kiss him, I didn't.

"Yes," I said, keeping only a small space between us. "It helped that I moved away from the chaos, but I don't think that's something you want to do." His sapphire eyes sparkled with humor. I was happy to see my words were helping him feel better. I could also see the alcohol in his gaze too. The party had been intense, and I'd seen him drink one too many.

"You're right. I don't want to move away. Why move to a different town when the prettiest girl in the world lives here?" His playful smirk made me snicker.

"Mr. Grayson, I think you're drunk."

“Can you drive me home? I think I’ve had a bit too much to drink.” His grip on my thigh tightened, and I felt the warmth pooling in my groin again. I should have said no, but I couldn’t get the idea of his hands on me out of my head.

“That also plays a factor in why you’re reacting so strongly to her.” I laughed.

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“You might be right there,” he said, leaning in and kissing me. It was a light kiss, no more than a whisper, but the heat of the kiss did the job it was supposed to. My body vibrated with desire for him, and I promised myself and Mia that I wouldn't do this again, but here I was, failing at setting that boundary.

“Yes,” I said. “I'll take you home.”

15

NICK

“We'll have to get your car in the morning,” Julia said, pulling into my driveway.

“Does that mean you'll be here for breakfast?” I said, joking, but not really. I wanted to gauge her reaction.

She rolled her eyes at me and leaned in, teasing but not following through on the kiss. “Is that your way of asking me to come in?”

I ran my fingers through her hair and pulled her in for a kiss, not caring that her red lips would leave mine stained when I pulled away, still hoping to see what the color looked like over my dick.

She tasted like wine, and I couldn't wait to get her in bed. “Let's go. I'll show you around the house.” I opened the door and got out of the car. By the time I got to the other side, she was already getting out.

I held the door open for her anyway and closed it when she walked around me. “This is your place?”

I chuckled. “Do you think I’d bring you to the wrong house?”

She shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.” I took her hand and led her to the side door. “It’s nice that you decorated for Christmas, especially with the hours you work at the restaurant.”

“Yes...” I put the key in the lock and opened the door. “It’s one of the things I force myself to do so I can step out of the headspace of a chef. Keeps me grounded and gives my brain a break.”

We walked into my kitchen and she spun, looking around. “Very nice,” she said, running her fingers over the black granite countertop. “Not quite what I expected, but very nice.” She pointed over to the living room. “Can I go take a seat?”

“Sure, I’ll get some wine and other things, and after we eat, I can show you the house.” The words came out of my mouth dripping with innuendos, even though I didn’t mean for them to. I was so horny thanks to the alcohol, but I didn’t want her to think the only reason she was here was for a booty call. I liked her, and what sort of man would I be if I just used her for sex?

“That’s fine,” she said, perking her brows at me. I could tell we were on the same page, though, that she wanted me too. She disappeared into the other room, and I pulled together a quick charcuterie board and heard her call, “Your place is great.” I smiled, glad she liked it.

Picking up the tray, I brought it into the living room and saw that she’d taken her heels off. I was happy she was comfortable enough with me to make herself more comfortable, although I was hoping she’d put the heels back on later for other

activities.

“Wow, you just had all that stuff sitting around?” Julia asked, scooting forward on the couch to look at the tray.

“I am a chef, you know.” I thought of her bologna and cheese and snickered.

“Yes, but again, you spend all your time at the restaurant. I’d think most of this stuff would go bad before you had a chance to use it.” She lifted a brow. “Unless you entertain women often.”

“Ha! No,” I said, moving to the bar to get us a drink. “Kendra cheated on me. I’m positive it was more than once, but one time was all I needed to know about for me to leave.” I surprised myself with that statement. I hadn’t thought about that, ever. Was it true? Did I only need an excuse to leave her?

I did. But did that mean I never truly loved her?

“I really haven’t been in the trusting space.” Until Julia, but that didn’t need to be said. In just the short amount of time I’d known Julia, I’d started to look at the world differently, and I did like it.

I poured each of us a glass of wine and walked back to her.

“That’s pretty understandable,” Julia said and took a sip of her wine. “This is good.”

“Yeah, but now that I’m outside of it, I see how messed up it was.” I laughed at my realization. “Although it looks like we” —I placed a hand on her knee— “are both rebranding ourselves at the same time.” I took a sip of the wine and saw her flinch.

Her eyes dropped to the floor, and I rubbed her knee. “What’s up?” I asked.

Julia took another drink of wine and placed it down. With a huff, she stated, “The stuff with Jared is still fresh. Not that I’m still getting over him, but he trashed almost everything I cared about and worked so hard for. This situation with us, it’s new for me. And I’m worried that I’m falling a little too hard, too fast.”

I studied her features, not trying to let the shock ride over mine, and I think I failed miserably at it. I leaned forward and kissed her. Although she didn't pull back, I could tell she was still hesitant about what she told me. I peeled away from the kiss and stared into her eyes. “Would it be so bad if love rebranded us both?”

Julia examined me for a few breaths. A sultry look came over her face, but it was stormy, mixed with apprehension. It made my chest tighten, but I didn't want to lose the mood. We both wanted each other, even if it was just sex.

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I stood without another thought. “Come on, I have to show you the rest of the house.” I took her hand, and she followed willingly.

I didn’t say another word as I walked down the hallway until we got to the last door and walked through. The chemistry between us sizzled the entire time. She made a few comments and praised my eye for design, which I couldn’t take credit for since it was Kendra's work, but I let Julia think what she wanted. And when we got to the bedroom, my dick was swollen, and the snack I prepared was forgotten.

I turned my bedroom light on and spun around, yanking Julia to me and opening her mouth up to the kiss. Our tongues played together as I fumbled around her back, unzipping her dress and letting it fall to the ground. She didn't shy away, either, which meant I had read her correctly. I backed away to look at her and ripped my shirt off as she started unbuckling my pants.

“I’ve wanted your red lips around my dick since you walked into the restaurant,” I grunted as she shoved her hand down my pants and into my underwear and wrapped it around my cock. She milked a long moan out of me. Instead of arguing with me, like I was used to, she tucked her fingers between my skin and my waistband and slowly lowered the briefs down while sinking to her knees.

She batted her lashes up at me. “Like this?” she asked, licking the tip of my dick, and the light movement sent a burst of energy down my shaft. My hand flew up to her head. My eyes caught on hers, and I watched her red lips engulf the head while she sucked me.

“Fuck,” I grunted, my other hand digging through her hair.

She popped off my cock and looked up at me. “You don’t have to hold back,” she said, and it was all the permission I needed. I shoved the entire thing into her mouth, and she took all of me down. I growled as she sucked me in, hollowing her cheeks, and I began thrusting.

This thing that was happening between us happened so fast, it made my head spin. One second, she was hesitant, and the next, she was my toy, begging me for more. It was like she was at war with herself, and I was glad this side was winning, though I hoped at some point, we could have a serious discussion about making this more than just hot sex.

“You’re taking my cock so well,” I hissed, pumping harder into the sweet wetness surrounded by red. Into her mouth, over her tongue, down her throat, and her eyes stayed trained on me. Electric heat thrummed over my dick in a way it never had, and I watched her deliver the most intense pleasure.

I pumped. Fucked her mouth.

She hummed and dug her nails into my ass, pushing me farther down her throat. “Oh, my God...” I kept at it and looked down. “You still have your bra and panties on,” I huffed. “Stick your fingers between your panties and touch yourself while I fuck your mouth,” I ordered, loving that she did it without a blink.

The heat began expanding as I came closer. Pressure built in my balls. I didn’t want to come just yet, so I pulled away and she whined. Her hand fell from her underwear.

“I didn’t tell you to stop touching yourself.” I kneeled and watched as she put her finger back into her panties and tensed with the feeling. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and I tore her bra away, not worrying about hearing the fabric rip. I’d get her a new one.

Her tits bounced into the room, and I sucked on one of her nipples, not being gentle, going harder as her hand came to my back and she moaned. Her nails scratched into my skin. I thrust my hand down her panties. “My turn,” I grunted, and she let me take over. “Fuck, Julia. You get wetter for me every time I see you.”

She was so slick. So wet. So ready for me.

I slid my finger inside her, feeling her swollen, warm walls, and I almost blew my load. I couldn’t stand it anymore. I pulled away, picked her up, and threw her onto the bed. She laughed as I peeled her panties off her and didn’t wait for anything else.

Her legs crooked just before I shoved myself into her, and her back arched. An enormous sense of satisfaction shot through me as she reacted to the pleasure I was giving her, and I slammed into her harder. Her scream had me pushing and pumping into her, and my fingers found her nipple.

I twisted it, and the long sound of pleasure streamed from her mouth. I fucked her harder, the way she seemed to like it from me.

She called out my name. “Keep doing that, baby,” I said. “You’re taking me so good.”

The skin on skin sex was more than I thought I could handle, but I handled it well. “I just want you to stay like this, waiting for me to fuck you again,” I said, wrapping my hands over her hips and changing positions.

“You can fuck me whenever you want to, Nick,” she said as her eyes rolled up in the back of her head. I slammed into her once, twice, and three times. Her pussy spasmed over my cock, and I called out as it squeezed my dick to the point of pleasure rocketing through my body. I stayed inside her. Knowing she was on the pill was more freeing than I thought it could be as I spilled into her.

My body went rigid and hers went limp. As the climax ebbed away, I dropped on top of her and lay there while we both caught our breaths. I listened to her heartbeat slow from racing, and I was more than pleased with myself for getting her to climax at the same time because her warm walls, still soaked, were so amazing around my dick, and I could feel every part of her.

Julia caught her breath first and ran her fingers through my hair. “That was incredible, Nick.” I pulled out of her and enjoyed the small whimper of disappointment because we were no longer connected.

I crawled up her body and smiled. “I like hearing that.”

We got more comfortable on the bed, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her back to my front. I buried my nose into her neck and inhaled her sweet strawberry scent. Then I traced up and down her arm and scooted closer, letting my dick push up against her ass.

“What do you think? Would you want to take a gamble on an older guy?”

She turned her head so she could look at me. “We’ve already been through that.” She patted my arm. “You know you’re not old.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear you say it.”

“I just did.” She laughed and spun to face me. “You aren’t old.”

“That’s nice to hear, too.” I cupped her jaw and kissed her. When I backed away, I said, “Let’s do this. Let me take you on a date.”

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Her walls instantly went up and the warmth in her eyes dashed away. “I—I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” she said and ran her hand across my chest. “I don’t want to have to start all over again if things go south for us. This is fun. Can’t we do this for a little while longer?”

I let go of her and rolled to my back, placing a hand on my forehead, and she snuggled up next to me. “I don’t understand. You said you were falling for me.” I looked back over at her. “Doesn’t that seem like it’s worth exploring?”

“I don’t have a response to that,” she said, scooting back from me. “I—I’m confused, and I can’t give you what you want.” She looked around the room, placing her hand on her head. “Maybe I should go.” She moved before I could say anything.

“Julia,” I started, watching her pick up her clothes. “Dammit, Julia,” I said, raising my voice and trying to get her to look at me.

She stopped, covering herself up with her dress. She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked at me. I watched her, saw her fear through her eyes and realized I couldn’t force her to want to be with me.

I shifted from the bed and walked over to her. I pulled her to me, and she let me hug her even though she was hesitant to hug me back. “I’m sorry. You said you were feeling things for me. I got excited and wanted to jump in feet first because my feelings are developing for you too.” She pulled back and tipped her chin up to look me in the eyes.

Her red lips were only stained with the remnant of the color, but even that on her skin

looked wonderful. I ran my thumb over her lips and waited for her to say something. But she seemed at a loss for words.

“Come back to bed. We can talk in the morning, and I’ll make you breakfast.” I tugged her closer to me, and she laid her head over my heart. This time, her hand came around my back and she dropped her clothes, holding me to her with both arms. “You said you had to help me get my car, remember?”

I could feel her smile over my skin and was happy to get some kind of reaction that wasn’t fear and running away.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” she said to my chest. “I’m not being fair to you. You deserve better than what I can give you right now.”

“Well, that’s a load of bullshit right there,” I said. She moved, looking up at me. Her mahogany eyes were large, and a sense of awe swept through them. “You don’t get to tell me what I do and don’t deserve. That’s up to me to decide. I get why you’re hesitant to step into something serious with me. I get that I’m a client, but I hope that one day, you’ll see that even if you dated a hundred clients—don’t do that, by the way. I’m the only client you should date.” Her smile was worth the thought of her being with someone else, even if it was a hypothetical.

“You’d still be you. You’d still be good at your job and creative, kind, hardworking, and intelligent when it comes to business. No matter what happens with us, I hope you’ll never forget that,” I finished, surprised at how fluidly those words came out.

I really must have meant it.

I might be into the non-relationship with Julia deeper than even I realized.

As I looked Julia over and tried to piece together what she was going through, the

realization that we did have sixteen years between us sank in a little more. I'd gone through all the mistakes I'd made. Most of that time was with Kendra. But I'd learned and grown with those mistakes.

Forcing Julia to think like a forty-four-year old was pretty unfair.

I'd probably have to take a few steps back to make sure she could figure out for herself what she really wanted.

"It's okay. I can wait until you're ready," I said. "Come back to bed. We'll get everything sorted out soon."

Relief that she was staying washed through me as she nodded and turned back to the bed, but I wasn't sure if I could wait until she was ready. I wanted to be, but I didn't know if being so much older than she was would start to cause more issues. I didn't want to hurt her and I didn't want to get hurt.

16

JULIA

I hadn't seen Nick for a few days.

He'd asked me to go to a New Year's Eve party with him after we had sex again, but I couldn't bring myself to say yes, even though I wanted to. That was still days away. We had a meeting at The Bridge in the morning on New Year's Eve, but I was hoping if I stayed away, maybe he would find someone else to go with.

There was just too much history I still had to sort out. Plus, he probably deserved someone his own age who wasn't... Well, who wasn't me.

I looked at my laptop screen, trying to pull together some new ideas for a client Mia landed. She and I were in talks to make her a partner instead of assistant, which would be amazing and would mean that my business was growing—in the right direction—and we’d have to find a new assistant. But for now, this client wanted a social media package for a full year.

We’d gotten a few more bites that looked like they were going to turn into long-term clients, which was promising. I propped my forehead up with my hand and started writing out ideas for the client when a bell rang. “Shoot,” I muttered, looking over my shoulder. I thought I’d locked the door.

I stood up and walked around the corner, only to stop short. “Jared, what are you doing here?” I placed my hand on the wall to stop myself from falling over.

“You need to fix what you broke,” he snapped.

“What?” My brain caught on the word. “What?” I walked forward, scrubbing the spot between my brows. “It’s been almost a year.” I stopped short of coming within arm’s length of him. He was never abusive, but he was manipulative, and the gleam in his eyes told me that nothing good was going to come from this visit.

“What does that have to do with anything? You told me you were going to fix things.” He took a step toward me. I crossed my arms but stood my ground. I wasn’t going to back down from him.

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“I’m not getting into this with you again. I can’t believe you drove all the way down here to... what?” Damn my brain. I threw my arms in the air. “You were a dick. I left. You have all the freedom in the world to do whatever you want.”

“You ruined my reputation. No one will even look at me now. The gym is dying, and I’m fucked. Are you happy?”

I scrunched my eyes. I didn’t want to get into a fight with him. I slapped my thighs and scowled. “I’m the one who left. You couldn’t stop running your mouth. You did the job you wanted to do, literally ran me out of town. You won. I left. Now you’re here to what? Try to make me feel bad about myself?”

“You should feel bad about yourself.”

“You’re the one who got a restraining order slapped over you because you couldn’t control yourself. I didn’t have anything?—”

“Spare me. If you would have kept me satisfied, I would have tried to?—”

“Then why are you here?” I took a step forward. “Why did you come here if I ruined everything and couldn’t keep you satisfied?” My question popped his bubble, and for the first time in, maybe, ever, I saw him falter. “That’s what I thought.” I spun on my heel and went back to my desk. “You can leave. You’re not welcome here.”

He took a few steps in my direction, and I snapped my head up. “Don’t make me get a restraining order put on you too.” I stood. “It’s time you start holding yourself accountable for your actions. Did you even consider, for one tiny second, that flirting

with a woman wouldn't be received well?" I looked him over and huffed. He still couldn't fathom it. I don't know what the hell I was thinking when I started dating him.

The red flags were flopping everywhere in my face. I was just glad I didn't stick around for him to cheat on me.

Oh.

That thought slapped me in the forehead. Nick was right. We were coming from a similar place. We could rebrand and heal. Mia's words whispered over my mind, but I shook out the thoughts and Mia's words. I wasn't going to figure that situation out now.

"Your flirting and harassment are what got you into the mess you were in because, for some reason, you believe that every woman wants you. When really, none of us do because you're an arrogant, obnoxious prick who couldn't find the right spot on a woman to make her come even if you had a road map. I told you to leave." I pointed at the door. "Leave. I won't say it again. I'll call the cops."

Jared stood staring, fingers balled into fists, breaths coming in heavy, nostrils flaring. He wasn't an ugly man. Far from it. But as I stood staring back at him, waiting for him to move, I could see just how ugly he was.

"This isn't over," he said through gritted teeth.

"You're not welcome anywhere near me," I clipped.

He looked at me. His eyes bounced over my face and he grunted. Then he spun on his heel and stormed out of the building. I waited a few seconds and hurried to the door, making sure to lock it completely.

The next few days were a bit of a blur, but they were not without some bits of excitement. Christmas came and went, and Mia and I celebrated in our normal fashion with Ramen and movies.

Jared texted me and apologized. I didn't respond, but I was surprised, nonetheless. He said he wanted to meet me and actually get together to talk. Both Mia and I rolled our eyes at that one.

He sent flowers and a card that just said he was nervous to see me, and it all came out in the wrong way. He was embarrassed by his behavior, and I was the best thing that had happened to him.

While I wasn't falling for any crap he was pulling, I did find that I wished it was Nick who was texting me instead. Not that he would have anything to apologize for, but I was starting to realize that I missed him. That didn't help with my fear and what Mia said could happen.

As I doodled, waiting for a new client to hop onto a video call so we could start on their social media strategy, I picked my phone up and went to text Nick but put it down at the last minute. I didn't know what I was doing or thinking anymore. My desire to be loved warred against my better judgment and the pain I'd gone through.

The client popped into the meeting and startled me. "Julia, hello," she said. "I'm sorry I was so late. I have been running all over town trying to find some place to do the printing of my banner. Can you believe they inverted the colors and spelled the name wrong? I looked at the file I sent them and I sent them the right one, but they're trying to tell me that now I have to pay them again. Have you ever heard of such a thing?" Her hazel eyes sparked with annoyance and the line between her brows scrunched tighter.

"Actually, you'd be surprised by what I see." I smiled, wanting to ease some of her

stress. “Tell you what. Let me call the printer I know in Buffalo. I’ll give him the rundown of what happened. I can’t guarantee it will be free, but Carlo will work out a good price for you. He’s a good guy, and reliable too.”

“Thank you,” she huffed. “You’re a wonderful person.”

I gave her a small smile and turned the conversation back to the social media strategy but not before she said, “Buffalo is definitely less of a city without you.”

My breath caught in my throat, and they were words I longed to hear six months ago. That my work was appreciated and I was good at my job. I looked around my office, and a warm feeling enveloped me. Even though it had been hard to pack up everything and leave the place I grew up, I hadn’t thought about missing Buffalo. I didn’t miss being in Buffalo.

Heart’s Creek really was the right place for me to be, with or without Nick.

I continued the meeting, but my mind lingered on his request to take me on a date. The fact that he had to ask whether I’d consider dating an older man revealed his own insecurity, but his invitation had caught me off guard, triggered my own insecurities. I wished I hadn’t reacted that way because I sort of did want to date him. I just had all these hangups, and they were getting in the way.

Why couldn’t I just shake them? And why now, after so long, had Jared stomped back into my life? It felt like a sign that I was doing the wrong thing with Nick, but how could it be wrong when it felt so right?

NICK

“Hi...” I reached over, helping Julia out of her red coat as she walked through my office door.

The color reminded me of the last time we were together when she slipped out of my bed before I even woke up, with a friendly text thanking me for the wonderful night.

I cleared my throat and moved to hang her coat up as she said, “Thank you,” for helping her.

I sat down at my desk, and the image of fucking her on top of it popped into my mind. I smiled around the daydream and tried to act like a normal human being. “How’s it been?”

“It’s okay. I have a few new clients, so that’s keeping me busy. Along with the stuff for Gray’s, of course.” She wouldn’t look me in the eye. Instead, she moved around and started fiddling with her briefcase. “The interior designer sent over these preliminary drawings for you to look at.”

She turned her gaze to me and brushed hair from her face. “I assumed you didn’t look at the emails, correct?” She pulled out her laptop and stood, bringing it with her.

“Is that a dig at my age?” I said, happy she was teasing me. Maybe I hadn’t blown it.

“You’re the one who’s fixated on your age.” She walked around my desk and set her laptop down. She flipped it open, and the screen popped right to her email. I didn’t

want to look while she was searching for the right file, but seeing the name Jared brought up a red flag. I thought that was the guy who'd trashed her name.

But the subject line "I'm sorry," hit me deep in the gut. I looked down at Julia, wondering if she had forgiven him. As much as I'd hate to not be with her, I also didn't want to have another guy involved, either. I wasn't built for that kind of stress—it would turn into jealousy faster than I wanted it to. It had already sparked when she brought him up the first time, even though she wasn't with him.

I'd never been a jealous person. I'd had enough confidence in myself where I knew I'd be okay, no matter what. But the stuff with Kendra was fresher than I wanted to admit.

I tried to shake off the fear that crept into my stomach, but I didn't get all of it loose. She clicked on an email and her phone vibrated. "I have to get that," she said. I refrained from running my hand up her thigh because she was in a skirt again, and I wondered—hoped, maybe—that she was wearing it just for me.

Julia pointed to the screen. "The screen is touch sensitive. You can tap these arrows"—she pointed to either side—"and it will take you through the carousel of images the designer sent over."

Her phone vibrated again, and her irritation spiked to a huff and a scowl. She snatched up her phone and looked at the screen. I did my best to concentrate on the pictures, but it didn't work well.

"I'll be right back," she muttered, not waiting for me to respond, and she walked out of the office without another glance in my direction.

I sat back in the chair wondering what to do and succumbed to the idea that maybe she wasn't as into me as I wanted her to be. Despite the fact that she said she was

falling too hard, too fast, if she was going to run from it, should I try to chase her?

I rubbed my forehead and leaned forward, starting to look through the images the interior designer sent over. There were a lot, and it hit me that she did just say she was getting busier with clients.

Maybe I was reading too much into it. Maybe she was still interested, and maybe I wasn't too old for her.

I heard grumbling as she came back into my office. She had a scowl on her face and her posture was rigid now. It made me wish I would've run my hand up her thigh to pull a smile from her lips before she had to deal with whatever that was. It had upset her.

“Everything alright?”

“Oh, uh, yes.” She waved her hand through the air and placed her phone down. “Sorry about that. I had to take a call.”

I wanted to ask her about the call, but I bit the question back. She was obviously in a weird headspace and didn't want to share it with me. Or maybe she needed me to ask anyway.

I scoffed. I was totally out of my depth. I had to focus on now and then wait until I had a better understanding of what to do.

“Did you find anything you liked?” Julia asked.

She brought a chair next to me and sat down. Her thigh brushed against mine and I was instantly hard. “I'm having a little trouble focusing here,” I said.

Julia turned her gaze to mine, and a question rode over her face. She cocked her head, waiting for me to continue. I didn't like the clueless look she had, because I knew she wasn't clueless. My eyes flicked to the laptop screen, then back to her.

Dammit, I was out of my depth with this. I closed my eyes and shook my head, trying to clear out the lusty fog. "Ah, these are just examples, right?"

"Yes." She scooted her chair closer and leaned over. I got a whiff of her strawberry scent and practically lost it. "These are samples the designer has done, and they are examples of what the interior designer would want to do."

"I'm sorry, I can't concentrate with you so close."

I pushed my chair back and stood, walking around to the other side of the desk. She looked at me with confusion. "You're not returning my texts. You're obviously perturbed about something, but you're not telling me, so I'm assuming it's me. I want to bend you over my desk again, but I also need to get the interior design shit situated. Honestly, this is driving me crazy."

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Julia leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Crazy good or crazy bad?”

“Fuck,” I hissed. “I don’t even know the difference anymore. I know what you said. That you wanted to just have fun, but you also said you had feelings for me. I don’t know if you know what that means, but it does mess with a person’s head a little bit...No.” I took a breath as heat filled my cheeks. “No. You are being honest with me. But I just don’t know what to do now.”

Julia stood. “Do you still want me to do the PR representation?” The fear in her eyes was valid.

“Yes,” I huffed. “Yes. I don’t want to stop working together. But you look stressed, and I want to ask you if you’re okay, but I know we have work to do. I just fucking hate all the thoughts I’m having.”

I just wanted to go back to a level ground. But I didn't even know what that would look like anymore.

“Nick...” Her mahogany eyes bounced over my face. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Come to dinner with me,” I said. She opened her mouth to say something, and before she got anything out, I added, “Here. Just stay after our meeting, I’ll cook us something, and we can celebrate the New Year together.” My God, I sounded ridiculous.

“I can’t tonight. I have plans with Mia.” She fiddled with her fingers. “We have this tradition and, well, we’ve had it planned for a while. I won’t cancel on her.”

I threw my hands into the air. “You’re right. You’re right.” I took a beat and almost went to ask her if she wanted Mia to come too, but I’d already made a big enough ass out of myself tonight. “Gimme a few minutes. I’ll look at the designs and pick something.”

I pointed to her phone. Each time it vibrated, my nerves crackled a little. “You should get that.” I took the laptop and turned it to face me, needing to not be so close so I could get my head on straight.

She reached over and picked the phone up. It was a quiet groan, but I heard it, nonetheless. I bit my tongue to stop the question about who was harassing her from coming out. It continued the rest of our meeting until I saw her out with designs finalized, but watching her walk away after that interaction was unnerving.

“I don’t even think I saw you this twisted up when you were first dating Kendra,” David said later that evening when Julia had left. He laughed and took a swig of his beer, and his eyes were fixed on the TV screen above the bar in his basement. I’d ended up at his house tonight since neither of us had any plans.

“Trust me. I made an ass out of myself.” I took a drink of my water and rubbed my eyes. David yelled as his team made the goal. He’d gotten really into hockey for a reason, and I didn’t care. I enjoyed sports, but I just couldn’t get into it tonight. “I don’t know what is wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” he said, tossing a few chips into his mouth. He leaned back and crossed his ankle over his knee. He swallowed and pointed his beer bottle at me. “You haven’t been laid in a long time. Probably longer than I even know, and I’m positive she’s more adventurous than Kendr?—”

“Hey,” I snapped. “Do not go there.” I wasn’t going to talk about my sex life with anyone other than the person I was having sex with.

“Fine.” He tossed his hands up. “It’s been a long time for you, and maybe that is affecting you more than you realize.” He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, thinking. “I think there’s some kind of period for a person who’s just coming out of a relationship. It’s like a buffer period, and mostly, anyone who’s in that space doesn’t last. It’s just psychology.” He snapped his fingers at me. “Palate cleanser. That’s what she is.”

“Fuck you, you dick.” I stand. “I’m not listening to this anymore.” It definitely wasn’t making me feel any better.

“Did you say she was coming down from a bad experience too?” he called after me. “Maybe you guys?—”

I walked out of his house and slammed the door. I had no interest in going down that weird and twisted road David was headed down. I had to start trusting my gut instead of listening to everyone else.

I pulled out my phone and texted Julia. I didn’t have to ruin her night with her friend, but I could stop by to say hello.

18

JULIA

I took another swig of my beer and giggled. “I don’t know why you’re bringing up Halloween from the seventh grade.” I tossed a balled-up piece of paper at her and moved around on the couch trying to find a comfortable spot.

Mia pointed a hot wing at me. “Because you’ve always just gone for it. Even when you were skating in the seventh grade. It didn’t matter that you didn’t know how to twirl in skates. You did it anyway.”

“And fell right on my ass.” I laughed, rubbing my butt. “I can still feel the bruise sometimes.”

“No, you don’t.” She laughed back and turned her attention to another band gearing up to play a few songs on the New Year's Eve TV broadcast. She clicked the button on the remote. “What channel do you want to stream? There are too many to pick from.”

“I don’t know. I think if we pick one channel, there will be movies to watch until it’s ready for the ball to drop.” My doorbell rang. We both whipped our heads to the door.

“Did you lock the first floor doors?” Mia asked. Her eyebrows were high in surprise.

“Yes, I don’t have a doorbell on this door.”

“Do you think it could be your silver fox?” Mia scowled.

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“His hair is barely gray.” I brushed the comment off. “Besides, I told him we were hanging out tonight. Plus, he’s not my anything. Your warnings have been stuck in my head since the first time I slept with him.”

“And yet, you had sex with him two more times after that.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was really good sex,” I said. The doorbell rang again, and I rose to answer it.

“Take something to protect yourself!” Mia responded as I went out the door, and I shook my head at her nonsense.

“Knock it off, it’s probably just kids being dicks.” I snorted and hopped down the stairs. I stopped when I saw a man’s silhouette through the glass. “Crap,” I whispered. I told Nick I was busy tonight.

Annoyance percolated in my chest. If he wasn’t going to respect my boundaries, that would give me a good reason to really let the idea of some sort of life with him go.

I marched up to the door, unlocked it, and “Jared,” fell from my lips as he turned.

“Hi...” He smiled and stood there with flowers in his hand. White daisies. My favorite. “Can I come in?”

“No,” I said as he tried to hand me the flowers. “Why are you still in Heart’s Creek?”

“Because I came to make amends.”

I shivered, rubbing my arms from the cold air that seeped in around me and the chill down my spine at his words.

“Oh, sorry.” He stepped into the foyer, and I let the door close. The only reason I even let him close to me was because it was frigid outside. Now, I just needed to hear what he had to say so he would think he said everything he needed to and then kick him out.

He handed me the flowers. “I’m not taking these, Jared.”

“I can’t believe you’re that angry with me that you won’t take your favorite flowers.”

“I think you’re delusional if you believe I would take anything from you.”

He leaned forward with a smile he thought was charming and said, “That’s not the first time you’ve said that to me.”

I released a huff, letting him know he was on thin ice, and gave him a hard glare. “What do you want, Jared?” I asked. He knew about my New Year’s Eve tradition with Mia. He even knew that Mia had moved with me. He was totally shitting over everything because he was trying to save his precious ego.

He deserved a good kick to his ego, and I wasn’t sad about being the person who delivered that blow to him.

“Hey!” Mia shouted down the stairs. “Was I right?” I leaned back to see her kneeling down, trying to get a look at who I was talking to. “Oh,” she said, not hiding her disdain. “Do you need a knife or an umbrella?” she called. My eyes snapped close, trying and failing a little bit to stop the laughter from coming out of my mouth because neither Jared nor Mia needed that type of encouragement.

I turned my attention to Jared who did not look amused at Mia's suggestion that I get a knife for my protection. I was tempted to say something, but I didn't.

"Please do this for me. I know I was an ass. But I need you. You were the only one who was doing the job right." I wondered who else he tried to hire and if they rejected him. If they did, I'd send them a fruit basket. "And I miss you too."

"Jared, I'm booked up through March," I said. I really just needed to get him away from me. "I'd keep looking for another PR person if I were you, but if I'm free then, maybe I'll help you out." He handed me the flowers. I shook my head. "I don't want those. I'm not interested in starting any kind of romantic relationship with you ever again."

I didn't blink when his smile drooped. I almost believed his sadness and shock were real, except that I remembered who he was and how he thought he could win people over with manipulation.

"I'll hold you to that project," he said, his smile perking right back up.

"You need to leave." I wasn't going to respond to that statement at all. "I'm spending time with my friend."

"You'll kick me out even though you know I don't have any place else to go?"

"I did not invite you to this town, nor to come and see me. It's your fault you have nowhere else to go."

He tried to hand me the flowers one more time. I opened the door and ushered him out. "Julia, wait." He stepped forward and placed his hand along my cheek. "We were good together, baby. I'm sorry I flirted. Please just think about giving me a second chance."

I took his wrist and moved it away from my face. “No, Jared. It’s time you moved on.”

“Fine. But I’m not giving up on us yet,” he said and clipped my chin with his finger. I pulled back, not bothering to hide my revulsion. As Jared walked away, he placed the flowers on my porch in some weird attempt to prove whatever he was trying to prove.

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If I had shoes on, I'd have picked them up and tossed them at him. But it was a good representation of who he was as a person, leaving me to clean up his mess. I went to close the door, but a truck's headlights caught my attention. It looked like Nick's truck.

My initial thought that it was him at the back door still lingered, but the truck pulled away and drove off. I didn't know what he saw, but if he saw everything, I had a pretty good indicator of what it was.

The fact that both Nick and Jared showed up at my house when I explicitly told them not to pushed my annoyance to the next level. I knew I wasn't going to have anything to do with Jared again.

But now I needed to know what I was going to do about Nick.

I closed the door and started back up the stairs trying to ignore the ache in my chest from when I thought about not being with Nick. And I just wasn't sure what it all meant.

When I got up the stairs, Mia was nowhere to be found. I headed over to the bathroom and knocked on the door. "You in there?" I asked.

"No, you ass, I'm in Antarctica."

"Just make sure to light a match, lady."

"Ew. Where do you get your weird-ass thoughts?"

“I learned it by watching you.” I chuckled and went back into the living room. I plopped down on the couch and grabbed my phone only to see a few messages from Nick telling me he wanted to spend the night with me, and would I be okay with him coming over?

Confusion riddled my mind because it would have been nice to spend time with him tonight, but he did still come over even though I expressly told him I had other plans tonight.

But then, a small part of me wished I had invited him up. He wouldn’t have put a damper on the fun Mia and I were having, and while she would have pouted about it for a minute, it would have been a good chance for them to get to know each other.

I shook the thought out of my brain. They didn't need to get to know each other. They had a working relationship, but it didn't need to turn into friendship.

“Why so serious?” Mia plopped down on the couch next to me.

“Just working through some things,” I muttered and set the phone down.

Mia perked a brow. “Sex things?”

“No. Feeling things.” I sat up and combed a hand through my hair. “Things we aren’t going to talk about because you’ve already expressed your opinion to me, and I don’t want to hear a broken record.” I stuck my tongue out at her, and she faked being surprised, placing her hand over her heart and releasing an overexaggerated expression of shock on her face.

I took the closest throw pillow to me and hit her on the shoulder. “Knock it off.”

“Okay, so we’re going into a new year. Let’s just talk about the possibility of your

catching feelings for a man.”

“Mia...” I warned. “No, this isn’t up for discussion right now.”

“Everything is up for discussion always. It’s why I’m your best friend.”

“Why are you pushing this?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“You look like someone ran over your cat,” she said, sitting up straighter and giving me a serious face.

“I don’t have a cat,” I said.

“Yes, but saying someone ran over your fern has a lot less of an impressive image. Right?”

“My God, your brain is fucking strange.” I picked the beer bottle up and took a drink out of it. “What is the point of this?”

“To determine whether your great sex is just that or not.”

“Again, I say, why the change?”

“Because if you are going to jump into something, then it’s better to know it’s really worth it.” She turned to face forward and grabbed a piece of cheese and pepperoni. Seeing the cheese board she brought made me think of being with Nick the other night.

I loved how he took control. I liked how he told me what to do and the way he let himself be around me while still making sure I was enjoying it too. I took a strand of my hair and twisted it around my finger.

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“See, you have a far-off, whimsical look to your face.”

I laughed. “Do you hear yourself speak sometimes?”

“Yes, but you also thoroughly avoided my statement.”

“It’s a statement. You don’t have to respond.”

“Fine. Why is your face lit up like Rudolph's nose and why do you have a dopy expression?”

I swung my eyes to the ground and tried to find anything else to focus on except Mia’s eyes. When I couldn't, I looked up at her. “I think I like Nick.”

“Well, at least you're being honest with yourself now,” she snorted.

“Not because I want to be. But because you’re forcing me to be,” I whined.

“We both know you can’t be forced into anything.” I perked my brow, waiting for her to finish because I was forced to leave Buffalo to get away from the shitshow that was my professional undoing. “I already know what you’re thinking, so stuff it.” Mia put her hand up.

Then, she pointed a finger. “One: You chose to leave Buffalo.” She added a second finger. “Two: You are killing it here, with or without a guy on your arm.” She put another finger up. “Three: If you like someone, you can’t really help it sometimes. You might just want to see it through.”

She leaned into the couch. “But I’m not moving again if things go south. You’ll just have to figure out a different way to make it work.” Her eyes flicked to mine. “No pun intended, but I’m noting it because it’s clever.”

I rolled my eyes and smiled, turning my attention to the television.

Now I just had to figure out whether I was brave enough to take that step with Nick.

19

NICK

“You’ve been snapping at the staff for two days, Nick,” John said, dropping into the seat across from me. “What’s going on?”

“It’s personal.” I cringed. I didn’t want to treat my team badly, and yet, I knew what John was saying was true. I’d had too much stress within the last few years, and this year wasn’t getting off to the fresh start I wanted, either.

I couldn’t believe I went to Julia’s place on New Year’s Eve after she told me she already had plans. I was an idiot, which was why I deserved what I saw. I wiped my hand down my face. I couldn’t believe there was another guy there. With flowers.

Each time the memory played through my mind, I felt more and more like an idiot. We did only have sex. She wouldn’t even commit to going on a date with me. I thought she was afraid to start anything with me because she was still reeling from all the big changes in her life. Also, because she said what she was feeling for me was too much, too fast. But if she had another guy swimming around her, I didn’t want to be part of that. I’d been pissed when I saw him there, touching her, handing her flowers. My anger shot through me and was to the point where I almost jumped out of my truck and knocked him out.

But... I didn't.

My reaction was proof that I probably wasn't stable enough to even be in a committed relationship. And I probably was too old for her. Maybe I should just leave sex as sex.

David's words came back to me, and I hated that he might be right. Although I'd never tell him that because he didn't need the satisfaction. Plus, he wasn't a relationship kind of guy. Even in his forties, he preferred to not be with another person so he didn't have to change or compromise.

That said a lot about his character, but I did get married and I did change and compromise, and it got me back to the same place he was at, except he didn't have commitment baggage, although he had a host of other kinds of baggage. If he didn't have anyone to share it with, wasn't that less selfish than pushing issues and worries onto another person?

Even though I didn't want to be the guy who just had sex for the sake of sex. But maybe it was a way that gave both Julia and me permission to move forward.

I really did want to move forward with her, though.

John moved, reminding me that he was still there, and I got caught up in my thoughts again. "I'm sorry. I'll apologize to them after my meeting. I might need a bit of a break after this, though. I need to resituate my thoughts, headspace, and stress levels."

"Not a problem. They all know you're a good boss, and most of them are just concerned for you. Of course, there are a few who are afraid of you now."

I scoffed at his comment and a slight smile popped onto the corner of my mouth. "Thanks," I said.

A knock rapped over the door, and I scrunched my eyes closed. Having Julia here was going to make it harder for me to work through my feelings about her.

She came in without being invited, although it wasn't a problem because she was used to just walking in. My attention snapped to her. "We're in a meeting," I clipped.

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Her mahogany eyes met mine and her cheeks turned pink. “Oh,” she said, stepping back through the doorway. “I’m sorry,” she said to John, then shifted to me.

“I’m here. I’ll wait out front.” She went to leave, and John stood.

“It’s not a problem, Julia. We’re done,” John said, looking at me with disgust, telling me he knew exactly why my mood had soured the last few days. He might not know the details, but he knew me well enough to understand what was happening.

He muttered something to Julia, and I didn’t hear if she responded. I sat forward, looking around the door, seeing Julia standing halfway in and halfway out of the threshold. “Sorry about that, Julia,” I said, keeping my voice formal. “You can come in.” I bit back my harsher words and tried to shake out of the mood I was in.

When she walked in and I saw her red lips and red coat, my dick twitched and I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to have a productive meeting with her. If I knew she wanted to pursue something with me, I would have assumed she wore the red for me.

But I did know about the guy at her place New Year’s Eve, and she hadn’t bothered to contact me for any other reason, except those related to my restaurant. However, even if she remained professional, I was going to have a hard time concentrating.

“It’s been a few days,” I said as she sat and took her coat off.

“Yeah, I got your messages, but I’ve been busy with a few other projects too.” Her voice was formal, and she avoided my eyes. “I sent emails answering your questions.”

“I got them,” I said, sitting up straighter. If she was going to play at being formal, I would too, no matter how much I wanted to stick my face up her dress and bury my head between her legs. I cleared my throat and smiled when she looked at me.

Kindness and excitement flooded her face, and my heart twinged in relief that she was going to act, at least a little, like herself. “So, what I didn’t tell you is that I have two surprises.”

“Two?”

“Yes, the first is that I haggled the sign maker down fifty percent lower to what they were originally asking.” She pulled out her laptop. “I’m going to send you the contract, but I wanted to tell you first.” Her smile grew, and mine was growing with hers.

“Wow. That is exciting.” I sat forward and looked at the new price.

“We can figure out some way to do something great with the extra money, put it in a discretionary fund in case something goes sideways, or you can do something fun with the money.” She stood and clicked the screen open, leaning over just far enough that I could inhale her strawberry scent.

My eyes snapped closed. I didn’t want to be enticed by her, but I was.

Maybe I’d have to do video interviews from now on. I didn’t think I was going to be able to restrain myself if she gave me even the slightest hint she was interested, and I wasn’t about to follow anyone around like a sick puppy.

“Great,” I grumbled, not happy with the shift in my tone but unable to stop it from happening. I wasn’t going to fire her, but being in her space might just have me running down a path I didn’t want to take. I pushed my chair back a little. “Can you

email it to me? I'll look at it and sign off on it."

She lifted her eyes to look at me. I reached over to open my screen as she sat down and clicked around on her computer. "Discretionary fund," I said, looking over the new invoice, shocked at how she managed to do this and surprised that she would.

"What's that?" she said.

"I'll put it in a discretionary fund. That way, if anything comes up, I'll have a cushion and if nothing comes up, I can put it back into the loan repayment."

"I can do that," she said, typing away on her laptop. I typed in my name as an electronic signature and sent it back to her. "Great, got it." She closed the lid to her computer and slid it back into the bag.

When her eyes connected with mine, there was a sparkle in them that had me more curious about what she was going to say.

She shifted around in the chair. "So, I didn't want to say anything until it was finalized, but I pulled a few strings and got Jack Ricky to come down for a critique of Gray's food on February twelfth. We can call it a soft opening, and he'll review your food and the review will go nationwide." She didn't bounce in her chair from her enthusiasm, but she looked like she wanted to.

Her excitement was contagious, and I was swept away with the idea of a review going out to all the channels. It was hard getting that kind of attention if you weren't in one of the big cities—New York City, Los Angeles, Dallas, etc.

"Wow," I said, trying to absorb what she'd done for me, my team, and my restaurant. "That is incredible." I scratched at my beard and tried to think of something better to say. "Uh... thank you."

That wasn't in the contract I'd signed, and I was more confused than ever now. Was she doing it because of our romantic involvement or was she just a really thoughtful and caring PR rep who loved doing her job? Could she be both?

"That seems like a great connection to have," I said as she stood, picking up her briefcase. She picked up her coat. Disappointment dropped in my stomach when I saw she was ready to leave. I stood with her and stepped over.

"Do we have anything else to discuss?" I hated how hopeful my voice sounded. "Do you want to eat some lunch? I can whip you up something."

"Ah, no. Actually, I have another meeting I need to get to, but I wanted to deliver the good news in person."

Shit. She was going to see that other guy.

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“Okay,” I grunted, patting her on the shoulder. “Thanks again.”

She turned to me before she walked out. A hint of something for me flitted through her eyes. I tugged my shirt down, needing to keep my hands busy so I wouldn’t grab her and kiss her. I crossed my arms over my chest and let my annoyance at my reaction to her come through. I didn’t want to give in to anything because she wasn’t interested.

Her brows knitted together, and I swallowed at her confusion. There was no reason for her to be confused. She’d made a few things pretty clear to me. I was just too stupid to listen at first.

“Our next meeting is set for Friday. Does that still work for you?”

That was three days away. I gave her a curt nod and showed her the door. “Yes.”

“Can you come to my office? I’ll have some samples to show you that are too big to lug around.” She walked over the threshold of my door. I grunted yes at her again and closed the door before she could ask any other questions.

I was definitely not ready for dating if I was confusing all the signs. I groaned and walked back over to my desk.

I was too old for this shit.

JULIA

I left Gray's with a stormy feeling resting over my heart.

I knew he saw me with Jared, but Nick chose not to bring it up.

Was it because we were in a business meeting? No. We'd had sex the first meeting—well, the second meeting—but maybe he was feeling embarrassed about the fact that he was at my house when I'd asked him not to come?

I shrugged to myself. I wasn't in the mood to try to sort out any games right now. If he thought I was with another guy and didn't have the good sense to ask me, I couldn't be bothered with it.

Plus, I did have to go to another meeting.

It was probably too fresh. I was probably reading into things when I shouldn't be. I didn't know why he was at my house the other night or why he chose to come over after I told him I had plans.

Maybe he was more like Jared than I was giving him credit for, and I was just too blind to see it because I did have feelings for him. Still, his not bringing up the fact that he was at my house that night did set off a few fire alarms in my head.

I just couldn't figure out if it was because I was scared he thought I was dating someone else or if it was because of red flags I was choosing to ignore.

I got into my car, buckled up, and started it.

If I had told Nick the truth about Jared, it would have been opening up a can I wasn't sure I wanted to open yet. Fucking Jared. Ugh. I wished he would just leave me the

hell alone.

I'd thought I'd never have to see or hear from him again, but he was insistent on ruining the small piece of happiness I'd carved out for myself.

I grunted, pulling out of the parking lot and heading down to the bakery.

It would've been a nice walk when it was warmer, with no snow or ice.

I hated to admit it, but a small daydream popped into my head about walking from Gray's to the bakery with Nick. It would've been nice if we could do that together from time to time, like on a Sunday morning or on a nice spring day before his restaurant had opened.

No, I needed to let that thought die away. If I didn't pursue it anymore, we'd get time and space between us, and I'd stop feeling so wretched. I only had one month to go.

I walked into the office happy with the way the meeting at the bakery went. They were hiring my company to do a new marketing blitz for the change in their menu.

Mia was out for the rest of the afternoon. Her note said she was schmoozing another potential client and that we'd have to get an assistant because she was becoming my partner. I smiled at the idea and released a happy sigh.

Placing my briefcase on the desk, I sat down and pulled out the information for the bakery.

I wouldn't be doing much for them except preliminary details.

Once Gray's opened and was situated, I wouldn't have to do as much with them, nor would I have to see Nick as often, either. My hope perked up a little because that

meant I wouldn't be bogged down with heavy emotions.

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Which was what I really wanted to be free from.

My phone rang as I was looking over a document for the bakery. I hit the accept button and said, “Hello, Julia Day here. How can I help you?”

“Julia...”

Dammit.

“Leave me alone, Jared.”

“No, I need you to come here next Tuesday. Things have taken a turn for the worse and I need you to fix it. I’ll pay whatever you want, but I can’t wait until March.”

I closed my eyes and chewed on my lip. He was always pushing against my boundaries to see how much I would bend.

I wasn’t happy that the idea of a huge lump sum of money from him wasn’t enticing, but I was sure he would promise anything to get what he wanted and would back out of it the second he actually needed to pay it. It wasn’t just because he’d be giving money to me, though. I had it on good authority—from one of my own clients—that he’d backed out of paying money to someone else too.

It was going to bite him in the ass in the long run. I just wanted someone to record it when it did so I could watch it on YouTube or something. That would be fun.

“Plus, you need to apologize to that woman you insulted.”

Yup. There it was.

Any thought of how much a chunk of cash would help my business flittered out of my head when he tried to blame the whole thing on me. But... “Why is that woman even around you?” I asked. I did, in fact, react badly the first time Jared told me he was getting slapped with a lawsuit for sexual harassment. It was definitely not one of my better moments, but I did owe her an apology.

“We’re finalizing the settlement on Tuesday. I figured you could come here and you can apologize to that woman, then we could go out for dinner and talk more about us,” he said.

My moral compass told me I needed to apologize to the woman, even if she wouldn’t accept my apology. I knew that she at the very least deserved it from me because I was an ass.

“Fine,” I said. “But I’m not going to dinner with you and I’m not talking about ‘us’. There is no ‘us’, Jared, and if you continue to bring it up, you’ve already heard what I told you what will happen. I wasn’t making idle threats,” I said.

When he said, “I know,” with a patronizing tone, I almost hung the phone up on the spot, but I listened for him to finish. “You always stick true to your word. I remember.” He said it with almost a defeatist attitude that made me think maybe something I said actually stuck around in his overinflated ego. I wasn’t going to comment on it one way or another because it wasn’t going to help get him out of anything, nor would I even consider doing business with him again, so there was nothing I would gain from it.

A weight lifted from my chest when I realized I didn’t have to give in to Jared to make me respect myself. That was a nice feeling.

“I’ll meet you at the courthouse on Tuesday, Jared. Text me the time, please. I’ll see you then.” I hung up the phone, not waiting for him to respond or give me any other kind of hard time. He’d used up his chances with me. I was tired of listening to anything he had to say.

When I saw his text to meet him at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning, I got back to work on the ideas I would have for the bakery and then jumped into the next phase of marketing for Gray’s.

It was going to be good.

21

NICK

“I think it’s a piss-poor thing to do to yourself,” Phoebe said, patting me on the back.

I didn’t bother to look over to her. “What?” I asked. My gaze stuck to the bar across the street. They reopened their doors on New Year’s Eve and the people hadn’t stopped flocking to it for the last two weeks.

My jaws tightened, trying to remind myself that our rebranding and reopening were going to come in almost one month. We’d close down soon, and the big changes were going to be made.

I tried.

It didn’t work very well.

My fingers bunched into a fist as I watched Kendra and another guy walk into the bar as well. If I didn’t know her so damn well, I’d have said she was living her best life

and had completely forgotten about tormenting me, the people she used to employ, and the restaurant. But the special way she tossed her hair to the side and snuck a peek over her shoulder at the restaurant told me she was fucking with me and that she hoped I was watching.

I hated that I knew her so well.

“Hey—” Phoebe clapped her hands in front of my face. I rolled my eyes and looked at her. “Try to focus. They’re going to be new and shiny until we are new and shiny, and then we’ll make everyone look like a fool who tried to screw around with us, alright?” she said.

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She was right. I didn't need to keep staring out the window, but we were so slow right now. I hated to look around the restaurant. No one was here.

It gave me a sinking feeling in my gut and my thoughts then bounced to Julia. We didn't have our weekly meeting this week, and as much as I hated to admit it, I missed seeing her. Even if she wasn't interested in me, she still brought a freshness and light to the place that wasn't there before her.

I grunted and turned from the window.

"Good, Chef," Phoebe said and placed her arm around my shoulder. She walked me away from the window like she was walking me away from a ledge. I shook her off.

"I'm not a child, nor am I someone who is close to offing themselves. Leave me alone," I grunted and went to walk into the kitchen when the door opened. We both turned to see a smaller, older man with a derby cap on.

He reminded me of my grandfather when my grandfather was alive.

"Go do your job," I snipped with less annoyance than I'd had only a moment ago. A new customer meant I got to cook, and I was always happiest in the kitchen.

I walked through the door and looked at John and the other line cooks moving around. The air was lighter than it was in the dining room, which wasn't anything unusual, which was one of the reasons I liked it so much better back there.

"Ticket in!" Phoebe called, pointing to the screen.

“Did you really think we wouldn’t see it?” I walked over to the smart pad and ripped the ticket from the tape and turned. “Get out of here,” I said. I placed my hand on her shoulder and started pushing her toward the door.

“God, when did you get so bossy?” she grunted, fighting against me and holding back laughter because there was no way she would win against me even if we were fighting for real. She was short and had no muscle mass. Plus, she always said she wanted to take self-defense but never had.

Maybe if she ever did, I’d worry, but now, I pushed her out the door into the dining area easily. “Go work. Do your duty and get that customer any shit he wants.”

Phoebe turned and placed her hands on her hips. “It’s nice to see you’re cheering up because I told you to,” she said.

I shook my head and closed my eyes. “I’m not even responding to the comment,” I said.

I pushed the kitchen door separating the two rooms closed and heard her call, “That was a response!”

I didn’t turn back, but I did flip her off.

I could hear her laughter echo through the kitchen, and although it was quiet, it also gave me a lighter feeling than I had when I walked in to start cooking. I appreciated that, and I’d have to tell Phoebe thank you once service was completed for the night. Or I might not, depending on how annoying she was when we closed for the night.

I walked over to the table and called out the order for the chefs on the line, and the kitchen flared to life.

After we sent out a few dishes, I stuck my head out the kitchen door watching Phoebe walk to the customer with another drink. “Psst,” I called. She stopped and turned, raising her brow at me.

“What’s up, Chef?”

“When do you think I should go chat with the customer?”

“Why?” She took a step forward. “There’s no one else in here. Don’t you think that will look odd?”

“You’re helping Michael serve him,” I whispered.

“Yes, I’m giving him plenty of attention.” She looked at me sternly. “If we bombard him with all of our people, we’ll look suspicious and weird, and then we really will blow the new opening because the head chef is a creepy dude,” she said.

“It’s just one night, Phoebe. We’re busy other nights,” I said, wishing I sounded more confident now. Her words freaked me the fuck out.

“Fine, if—and that’s if—he asks to speak with the chef, I’ll come and get you.” She turned to walk away but stopped. “And I won’t prompt him to speak with the chef. Again, that would be weird. We’re trying to convey we’re normal, everyday people-types who aren’t socially awkward because they think their restaurant is failing when it isn’t, got it?”

“Yes,” I said, not admitting defeat about talking with the customer but wanting her to get on with it so the guy didn’t see us standing in a dark corner constantly checking over our shoulders at him.

That really would be weird.

I walked back through the kitchen door and didn't look through the window like I really wanted, so that was something, I thought.

Phoebe came into the kitchen about twenty minutes later with disbelief splashed over her face. "He wants to talk to you," she said, shaking her head. "I did not talk him into this, nor did he hear us talking. But he did ask for you specifically," she said.

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“Like by name and everything?” I asked, not bothering to hide my shock. Most customers didn't know the names of the owners of restaurants, let alone the chef.

“Yes,” she said and held the door open for me.

I grabbed a hand towel and wiped my hands, walking into the dining room. I threw the towel over my shoulder as Phoebe whispered, “Don't be weird!”

I didn't look back at her to give her the dirty look I wanted to, but I already knew she knew what my face looked like.

“Hello,” I said, walking up to the table, offering the man my hand.

“Hello, Nick. It's very nice to meet you. I am Jack Ricky,” he started.

The food critic.

“Oh,” I balked. “I was told you were coming here on the twelfth of February.”

Jack pointed to the chair across from him. He pulled out his phone and looked at it while scrolling. “No, sir. I received an email earlier this week asking me to come today. I made a special trip out for it.” He looked at the phone again and gave a nod. “Yes, from Ms. Julia Day,” he said.

He didn't show me his phone for me to see the email, but really, it didn't matter. I don't know why Julia would've done that. “Maybe she meant for you to come on both days to taste the difference?” I suggested, but he shook his head.

“The difference of what?” Jack asked, tucking his phone back into his coat pocket.

“This concept, as it stands right now, is changing within the next two months. We’re rebranding. We’re getting a new menu, a new everything, pretty much,” I said as I attempted to dig myself out of the confusion. “Ms. Day explained that you were going to be coming on February twelfth for the soft opening. There must have been some kind of mistake.” I said the thought out loud, but I wasn’t talking to Jack, not really.

Jack looked at his notes. “That would be interesting. What is your new concept?” he asked. He perched his pen over his notepad and seemed genuinely interested.

“It’s going to be an elevated casual restaurant. Think family-style Italian.”

“That does sound promising. As it stands right now...” he said. Jack’s eyes ran over his notes, and I could kill Phoebe for not noticing he was writing things down. “The food is delicious and the ambiance is nice, but the prices are a bit steep.” I couldn’t roll my eyes because he was looking at me, but I wanted to.

That was the same thing Julia said to me, and it only reinforced everything I already knew.

I didn't know what the fuck was wrong with me. Letting Kendra run shit seemed to ruin everything in my life. I shook my head to continue listening to Jack.

“I must be honest. The restaurant review, as it stands with the cost, the ambiance, and the location atmosphere, none of it fits together,” he said. He placed his glasses on the rim of his nose. “I’m sorry. I won’t be able to come back on February twelfth. I’m a busy man. I can’t entertain every invitation. Most restaurants only see me once.” He pushed his chair back.

“The paper I’m sending it to will pay for the meal, so you don’t have to worry about eating the cost,” he said, chuckling at his joke. He handed me his card. “Your staff was lovely. And I did want to think higher of the restaurant,” he said.

I nodded absentmindedly as he continued to say other things I couldn’t pay attention to. I tapped his card on my palm and gave him a wan smile. “I’ll run this for you and get back to you soon.”

My brain didn’t know what direction to go in. There were too many things swimming in it, from the mistaken date to what the critic said.

Had I just let myself get too wrapped up in Julia personally that I didn’t see her shortcomings? Was she not as good at her job as I thought she was? Or was I just reading too much into this?

I couldn’t imagine that she would purposefully try to sabotage the restaurant.

But a flash of anger sliced through my thoughts when my mind rested on it. What if she was more like Kendra than I thought?

22

JULIA

I stood outside the courthouse in downtown Buffalo. The wind whipped around me and I looked at my phone. “Eleven thirty,” I muttered. I wasn’t waiting for Jared outside any longer. I tugged my coat closer to me and burrowed down as far as I could get without coming out the other side.

It didn’t do much to protect me from the wind as it slithered its way down my collar, inviting goosebumps to my already uncomfortable state.

I grumbled, turned, and walked up the stairs.

When I walked through the door, I handed the security guard my briefcase and combed out my hair with my fingers, readjusting my coat.

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I gave the guard a quick nod and a “Thank you,” and made my way through the metal detectors.

When I looked around, I still didn’t see them, and although I was warm, I checked my phone. “Dammit,” I said, seeing the message that just came through.

Jared said the court date got moved and he asked me to meet him back at the gym. I had all the mind to tell him no, but I needed to tell him how pissed off I was to his face and that I wouldn’t be coming down a second time.

Not because I expected him to change from it but because I was tired of hearing from him. Plus, I needed to say some things for me, just because I wanted to stand up for myself.

I didn’t text him back and instead, hopped into my car and hurried over to the gym. I parked in front of the building and fed the meter the lowest coin it would take, knowing I wouldn’t be in here long.

“Hey, Mark,” I said to the gym manager.

Mark smiled at me with kindness. It was nice to see something like that from my old life. It was nice to know that not everyone I left behind in Buffalo thought I was a fuck-up. “Hey, Julia,” he said. “It’s nice to see you.” He looked like he wanted to walk over to me and give me a hug, but he didn’t. I didn’t know if I was happy or sad about it, but I wasn’t here to overthink a possible gesture from an old acquaintance who came from my old life.

“Thanks, Mark. It’s nice to see you too.” I looked over my shoulder and into the gym. No one was here. I guess what Jared said was right. His business really was hurting. “Is Jared here? He asked me to meet him,” I said. I didn’t want to just barge in on him if he was working... On second thought, I didn’t care. I pointed in the direction of the office and walked down the hall without getting the okay from Mark.

I loved the fact that I really didn’t care anymore. It was freeing. I had uprooted my entire life because of him, and I wasn’t going to be taking shit from him again.

When I got down the hall, I twisted the knob and walked in, then froze.

Several dozen long-stem roses were sitting in crystal vases.

I looked over my shoulder and didn’t see anyone coming.

I walked into the office and searched the roses for traps or hidden meaning. It was hard to believe Jared would buy all of these for me when I told him I didn’t even want the daisies.

I sniffed the roses. They did smell nice.

I wished I would get something like this from Nick.

My heart twinged in pain at the thought, and I was swept away in a wave of ache. I didn’t know I missed him as much as I did. I really was good at avoiding my feelings. I hadn’t thought about him in days—well, I hadn’t let myself think about him in days specifically because I knew it would hurt.

I just didn’t know how much.

I touched a rose. Its petal was soft, and I chewed on my lip wondering what missing

Nick meant, if it meant anything at all, or if I should pursue it.

A woman's giggle skipped over the air, and I turned just in time to see a tall brunette woman planting a kiss on Jared's lips as both of them started to feel each other up. They had to know I was here, right?

Plus, why the fuck would Jared ask me to come to his gym if he didn't know I was coming? I rolled my eyes and turned back toward the flowers, trying to think of what I should say. This wasn't worth my time anymore.

"Oh, hey, Julia. Thanks for stopping by," Jared said. "You didn't text me that you were coming." The woman of the hour was still on his arm. I balked. It was the woman who was suing Jared.

"Oh, my God," I muttered. "What a joke," I said, my eyes meeting his, then the woman's. "I'm tickled to know you won't drive down to see me again," I said, not worrying about the woman's shock. "Thank you for the reminder of what a dick you are," I said, no longer feeling any aggression toward him. Instead, I was relieved. I walked past Jared and patted him on the shoulder. My eyes flicked to the woman's. "Good luck. You're going to need it," I said.

I walked out of the office and called, "Please lose my number. I never want to hear from you again." I pointed to the woman. "Check his phone and delete it for me if he doesn't, please."

"Julia!" Jared called. But I turned and kept walking. I could hear that woman's squawking as I walked through the front lobby and out the door saying "goodbye" to Mark on my way into the cold. I didn't even feel bad that I hadn't apologized. I didn't think I was wrong for the way I treated her now.

"Fuck Jared. Never talk to him again," Mia groaned.

“I won’t be. If I ever see him again, even within fifty feet of him, I’ll be filing a restraining order. Ugh.” I gagged, thinking about them fooling around in front of me. “It was so gross and strange, Mia,” I said. Deleting and blocking him were the first thing I did when I got into my car.

It was refreshing, and I felt the shackles of my past finally fall away for good. It was annoying that I drove two hours to Buffalo to find my justice, but even if Jared wasn’t going to get punished for the sexual harassment suit, the justice I got from the trip—that I was no longer chained to my past—was well worth the gas.

“Gross and strange could be his new advertising promo. How long do you think it will take you to get back?” Mia asked. I could hear her typing in the background.

“Probably about two hours. Are you thinking about taking a half-day, partner?”

“Heck, no.” She snorted. “We have enough work for three of us, let alone the two of us,” she stated. It was true. “I’m going to be meeting potentials today, so I wanted to make sure you’re on your way back in case I find anyone worth meeting a second time.”

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I laughed. “You’re brutal. Maybe you should just let me interview them so you don’t scare all the people away.”

“I’m sure we’d have one left over,” she said.

“And that person would be desperate or some type of sociopath. I know how you work. Be nice to the people,” I pleaded.

“No, I weed out the weak ones and then you can butter them up with your sweetness and really keep them on their toes.” She cackled.

“Alright, don’t make me speed to make sure you don’t freak people out. If I do, you’re paying for the ticket,” I said.

“Yes, and we can both afford to because we have so many clients,” she said, then her humor dropped away. “See, I told you that you were good at your job.”

“Yes, you did,” I said. I released a long sigh.

“What’s wrong? We are swimming in clients, only a few are with the help from your wonderful, loyal, and amazing assistant?—”

“That’s a great way to pump yourself up.” I laughed.

“Well, someone gave me a lot of confidence, so I know how to say good things about myself now,” she said.

“You’re a freaking nerd,” I said.

“Takes one to know one, sister!” she said.

“Awesome.” I bit my lip and didn't want to say what I was thinking. But I battled with it, and “I miss Nick” fell from my lips anyway.

I turned onto the freeway and started to pick up speed to keep with the traffic.

“Don’t say anything, alright?” I said to Mia. “I’m just feeling vulnerable because of what happened with Jared, and I did catch some feelings for Nick in the midst of everything. But you were right. I can’t ruin things for us again?—”

“You didn’t ruin things. Jared did,” she said.

“Fine, but I don’t want the possibility of it happening again to even be on our radar,” I said.

“What if you protected your heart and kept your business stuff out of your relationship? I think you do need to guard yourself a little better, but I think you're taking too much of the blame and putting it on yourself. Like you want to kick yourself when you’re down,” she said.

I sat with what Mia was saying. “You think I’m trying to kick myself because things are going well?” I asked.

“Yeah. You had Jared to do that before. Now you don’t have that.” Mia released a long, dramatic sigh. “And as much as I hate to admit it because I don’t know that sleeping with a client is the right call for either of us, Nick doesn’t seem like the asshole Jared was.”

She paused for just long enough that it seemed as though I dropped the call. Then she said, “Just the fact that he’s kept away from you this long after you told him not to come around says something about his boundaries. They’re in a better place,” she said.

“He did come over when I told him I was doing something with you,” I pointed out, waiting for her to take the bait and tell me that she was joking. I’d never heard her rationalize about a guy before. She was pretty cynical about life.

“But did you really tell him not to come over?” Mia asked. “Because he is pretty old, he might not understand how dating works now. You might have told him what you were doing—at home with your awesome friend, but maybe he didn’t get the code. Things were more patriarchal back when he was a young buck,” she said.

I snorted. “That’s a backhanded way of saying something nice, Mia,” I said.

She laughed. I pictured her raising her hands up in surrender when she said, “All I’m saying is that I’ve seen Jared in action. I’ve seen Nick in action. I’ve seen them both interacting with you. And it’s different. Nick is different. I still don’t think you should bone clients, but that’s all,” she said.

I didn’t say anything for a while because I didn’t know what to say. It was interesting to hear Mia sticking up for anyone. Not that what she was doing was exactly sticking up for Nick, but she wasn’t trashing him fully. That meant something, even if she wasn’t willing to admit it.

“Alright, you obviously have to drive home. And my first interview is coming up in a bit. I want to get ready with some questions,” Mia said.

“I don’t like the tone in your voice, young lady,” I said.

“Ew. You just sounded like my grandmother,” she responded.

“Will it get you to stop thinking about being a dick to the people who are coming in?”
I asked.

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“Mmm, maybe,” she said. I could hear the lie on her lips.

“Fine. Just don’t do anything that could get us sued, alright? Since things are finally looking up, I want to make sure they stay that way,” I said.

“Yes, Ma’am!”

23

NICK

“Hey, Nick.” The foreman turned to me.

It was the last week of January and things were starting to change in new ways. On one side of the coin, I couldn’t imagine life without The Bridge and being under the manipulative thumb of my ex-wife.

On the flip side, I knew I was standing at the precipice of a new life, one where I got to choose what happened and wasn’t weighed down by the things I wanted to do but didn’t because someone else was dictating them for me.

I looked at his hands.

In one, he held a hard hat. In the other, he had a sledgehammer.

“Want to take the first swing?” he asked, nodding to the safety goggles.

My mind churned with a ton of thoughts as I surveyed The Bridge. In just a few short weeks, it would look and feel completely different. I took the hard hat and the weight of the sledgehammer didn't surprise me, but it did give me a sense of satisfaction.

I was getting rid of the old and bringing in the new.

An onslaught of emotions battled in my chest. I wasn't sure what to feel or how long I'd be feeling the mixture of relief, happiness, sadness, and confusion about so many of the choices I was starting to make.

While I wouldn't be doing this without Julia, I didn't realize how great of an impact the change was going to have on me.

I gave the foreman a tight nod. "Where should I start?" I asked.

"Not on the outside walls. We don't want to damage the brick," he said, turning and pointing to the back wall with the bar and then to his right for the wall separating the dining room and entryway. "We're keeping the bar shelves, so I'd steer clear of that, but the rest of the wall is going," he said.

I swallowed the thick emotions that swelled in my throat, and I suddenly wished the construction crew weren't here for the occasion. It felt like something I should do on my own because I didn't want to end up sobbing like a baby for too many different reasons I couldn't pin down yet.

But instead of asking them to leave, I walked over to the back wall where the kitchen entrance met the dining room and stood over the threshold of both. I swung my arms back and flung the sledgehammer forward. Three things happened at once.

The head crashed into the wall, cracking it and taking a good chunk of it with the impact. Plaster and drywall flew through the kitchen, hitting the back wall, now clear

of appliances for the demo. Tears of relief pricked the corner of my eyes as I busted into my new life.

I really wanted to share the news with Julia.

I shook the thought out of my head.

She had that other guy.

The clap on my back anchored me into the present, and I turned.

“How’d that feel?” he asked, holding out his hand for the sledgehammer back.

“Better than I thought it would.” I laughed and handed it back to him. The loss of the weight in my hand brought me a new sense of ease.

I never thought a renovation would bring so much emotion with it. I didn’t realize it would be so metaphorical, either.

“I’ll be in my office. I have some work to get done, but I’ll be clearing that out soon too,” I told the foreman. He nodded and saluted me. I walked away, taking my hard hat off and placing it down next to the other tools.

I looked around the dining room, taking in the splinters of my past and knowing it would be cleaned up for my future. Satisfaction took over and settled in my stomach. This was going to be a good change.

The sound of the demolition starting, sawing, and more sledgehammering followed me down the hall and I closed the door.

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My phone vibrated. I pulled it from my pants pocket and smiled when I saw it was Julia's number. "Dammit," I said. I shouldn't be happy to just talk with her. I should be able to cut off my emotions and just keep it business-related.

"Hello," I answered.

"Hey, Nick," Julia said, her voice warm, and my neck hairs stood at attention hearing it. It wouldn't be too much longer and I'd be able to move on.

"How's the demo going?" she asked.

"Good, actually." I rubbed the back of my neck, pressing the hairs down and spinning to sit in my chair. "I just got to take the first swing at it, and now the pros are doing it." I sighed. I wasn't sure if the release of the breath had to do with the demo or it had to do with the relief at hearing her voice, but I wasn't going to examine the weight lifted off my chest right now.

Probably ever.

"That's great to hear. So, I wanted to go over the next steps and what to expect," she said.

"Sounds great," I said. "Are you, uh, still planning on coming to the grand re-opening?" I asked. I could kick myself for sounding so much like an ass.

"Yes, of course," she responded, sounding more normal than I felt. I guess it really just was fun for her. I had to get better at dating. "I wouldn't miss it for the world,"

she finished. And for one moment, I thought I heard something more in her voice—or maybe I wanted it to be more.

“While we’re in the demolition and building stage, I’ve been laying down a good social media campaign, and it’s getting good results. I’d like to come by and take a few pictures to share with the followers, and it’ll get their interest, plus they’ll feel connected to it. It’s an amazing way to get them interested and excited to see the final product. It’s also a great way to get them amped up for the reopening.”

I looked around my office and knew that pretty soon, it would look and feel different. “That, uh, sounds great. Thanks so much for your hard work. Let me know before you come over. I’ll have to let the foreman and crew know.”

She paused. Or the call dropped. Either way, I was met with silence and anxiety twisted in my chest. “Well, alright,” I said. “I’ll see you around, I guess.”

I hung up before she had a chance to respond.

I dropped my phone down on the desk and stood, grunting with the overwhelming information that things I always wanted to change were changing. And that I had a say in it. Hell, I was doing exactly what I wanted to do for the first time in years.

But also, I’d developed feelings for someone I shouldn’t have developed feelings for. Not only was she doing business with me, but she made it clear that she wasn’t interested in anything else, “Bah,” I grumbled, trying to sort through my feelings and thoughts.

It was time that I focused on something good in my life.

I was moving forward.

I pulled open my filing cabinet and took out the tumbler and snifter of bourbon. I slammed the memory of having sex with Julia after we drank from these very glasses away and I placed one on the top of my filing cabinet. I poured the dark liquid into the glass and topped it off a little higher than I might if I were just drinking to drink.

Today, I was drinking to celebrate, and I was going to soak in the moment.

Then, I'd get to packing up the rest of my things so the movers and the painters could come in when they were ready to.

I took a long swig of bourbon, letting the smoky spice fill my nostrils and mouth, holding it for a few beats, then swallowed it. The warm burn of alcohol spread throughout my chest, and I leaned into the moment.

Things were going to turn around for me.

I sat back down and poured myself another drink and let the idea of a new life overtake me.

24

JULIA

I sat in my car outside The Bridge and chewed on my lip. I didn't think he knew I was outside, and I didn't know if I should go in. But I wanted to.

I'd done a lot of thinking, and my thoughts always came back to Nick. I didn't know what the future would hold for us, but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't try, or at least try to try.

My phone rang.

It was Mia.

I didn't know how she always knew what I was thinking, but it always happened between us. If she was thinking about me, I'd call her and vice versa. We called it best friend's intuition. "Hey," I said. I opened my mouth to give her an update on the restaurant's transition.

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She didn't wait for me to say anything. "Listen, I don't know what you guys have going on, but just fucking figure it out. You battled worse things and came out swinging afterward. I don't like it. It's weird that he's in his forties, it's uncomfortable that he's a client, and you are both getting over bad relationships or are both on the end of recovering from bad relationships, and I don't know what that means for you or him. But if he fucking hurts you, I'll rip every one of his nose hairs out with a tweezer."

I sat in silence, in shock.

Her words absorbed into my brain and flowed into my heart. I didn't know what I had been waiting for before, but Mia was right about one thing—I did survive the debacle with Jared. I was thriving because of it. The experience made me smarter and more impervious to fuckery than I was before.

I knew my worth now. I knew I was good at my job, but the last few months proved just how good I was. Not only did I pick up and relocate, but I had more clients than I knew what to do with, and I was able to promote Mia to partner.

Plus, we were able to hire another employee.

I didn't know if I would have been brave enough to do any of the things I'd done if it wasn't for the mess Jared poured over my previous life.

"Hey! Did you have a stroke?" Mia snapped me out of my thoughts and I smiled.

"No. I'm here. I just was thinking about what you said and how much I agree with it,"

I said.

“I’m glad you enjoy the idea of my pulling nose hairs out of someone. I’d use tweezers.” She laughed.

I laughed. “I don’t even know where he’s at, Mia. He might not want anything, but I’ll be okay if he doesn’t want to go down that road with me. So put your tweezers away, but keep them close,” I said. I snatched up my keys. “I’m going into The Bridge, and I’m going to take some pictures of the work. I’ll be sending them to Kerri (our new assistant) for us to post via social media soon. I’d like to get some live feed also, but we’ll probably have to get permission first.”

“Go get ‘em, Lady!” Mia said, and now I could hear her doing something else and knew she’d gotten distracted. Probably with something shiny.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but be careful, please,” I said, moving to get out of the car. “Talk to you soon. Bye.”

“Bye!” Mia said. I cringed, knowing she was making some kind of weird face and waving in the air at nothing. I only hoped Kerri enjoyed Mia’s sense of humor and wasn’t freaked out by it.

I closed my car door and placed my phone in my skirt pocket and walked into the possibility of uncertainty.

“Wow,” I said, looking around at all the space. Chad, the foreman, and the crew accomplished it in a few hours. “This looks great.” I smiled at him as he touched the brim of his hard hat.

“Thanks, Julia,” he said and waved me over to the table of hard hats.

“Um, actually, I needed to speak with Nick about what he wants me to take pictures of for social media marketing first. But I’d love to come back and get a live feed if you’re alright with it?” I asked.

“You’ll need different shoes and you have to sign a waiver, but I can make that happen for you,” he said, pointing to my heels. “Nick went back into his office. I think he’s boxing things up.”

“Thanks so much. I’ll be back. Let me know where the waiver is, and I’ll make sure to bring steel-toed shoes next time.” I smiled at him.

He looked at me with an impressed expression and tipped the brim of his hat again. “We have them onsite so when you bring your shoes, you let me know and we’ll get you all official and you can run around as long as you’re not in anyone’s way,” he said.

“I appreciate it, Chad. Thanks,” I said, waving as I walked back into the entryway and down the hall to Nick’s office.

I gave a gentle knock and opened the door without waiting for him. When I opened the door, he looked in my direction and tipped the tumbler at me. I cocked my head and bit my lip, feeling my brows knit together. “Hi.” I took a tentative step into the office and closed the door. “What’s wrong?” I asked, walking closer to him.

“Nothing.” He knocked back the rest of the alcohol and stood. “I’m celebrating a move into a new life.” His eyes roamed my legs and landed on my heels, then carved their way back up my eyes. My body warmed the longer he looked at me.

I took a step forward, the ache between my thighs already throbbing with want. It's just what he did to me. Being alone with him made this happen, and it wasn't an unwelcome feeling. “That’s good to celebrate,” I said. “You don’t look happy,

though.” I took another step forward, closing the gap between us. I wanted to kiss away whatever was making him sad.

“I...” He stopped himself. “The restaurant has lost a lot of business to the bar.” He pointed to the door indicating the one across the street. “Last month, Kendra pumped people in like she was trying to save them from a comet getting ready to strike the planet.”

Laughter flipped over my lips. “That’s a very specific reason for people to go to a bar,” I said, stepping a little closer now, feeling his body heat against mine. “But it isn’t going to last,” I said. “You’re upgrading, making things the way you want them to be, remember?”

“Yeah.” His eyes bounced over my face. “But what if it’s too late? What if I can’t save it?”

“You can.” A soft smile spread over my lips as his hands met my waist and he pulled me into his body. I let out a quiet gasp as my body lined up with his, as his hard shaft pressed into my thigh. Was it the alcohol or did our chemistry just spark this hard? “The upgrade is going to be amazing,” I said as his arms wrapped around my back and his hands pressed me into him. “Everything is salvageable,” I whispered.

“Why do you have to wear those damn heels and skirts all the damn time?” he dropped his head. His lips hovered over mine.

I brought my lips up to his, giving him a light kiss. I pulled back to say, “I thought you liked them?” A charge burst through my body when his gaze connected with mine.

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The air around us tightened, and his hand roamed over my back, up my shoulders, and tangled into my hair as it supported the back of my head. “I do,” he growled and brought his lips down on mine with the force of a hammer. I moaned as his tongue beat across mine, opening up every part of myself for him. “Too much, sometimes,” he grunted.

This was just supposed to be a quick visit to snap some pictures and his gravity sucked me in. He always sucked me in. I loved it, despite being apprehensive. Despite my heart being scared of rushing in and being hurt or ruining things.

He spun me toward the desk and pushed me onto the top. Then he leaned into me, and my legs opened as he pressed his hard cock against my core, with only thin slips of fabric between us as my skirt bunched around my hips. I fought to keep my cry contained to this room, but if anyone was walking by the door, I was positive they would have heard it.

His hands made their way up my skirt, and everything between my thighs was saturated, ready for him to slide into me. He broke the kiss and yanked my panties down my thighs, pulling them over my heels, and shoved them into his pocket. “These are mine now,” he said, lowering me to the desk.

Before I could say anything, he spread my legs and sat in his chair. He rolled toward me, his head diving between my legs, under my skirt.

His mouth met my pussy, and his tongue slid over my clit. I fought harder to keep my scream low. But as his jaw worked over the delicate bundle of nerves, sending flares of electric heat through my system, a long, slow moan fell out.

He lifted my knees over his shoulders and pressed the tip of his tongue into the center of my most sensitive place, and my back arched. My scream, buried under the noise of a jackhammer, let me release the pleasure I was feeling from my throat with no worry someone would walk in or hear.

He stopped and brought his head out from under my skirt. “Good God, woman. You’re freaking dripping for me.” I propped myself up on my elbows and watched as he unleashed his cock into the room, dropping his pants and thrusting into me without a second thought.

The scream he pumped out of me was no longer quiet, and I was positive the construction crew could hear everything. I didn’t care.

His large hand grabbed at my breast, tweaking my nipple as he pushed inside me and drew his dick out of me slowly. Then he thrust again, just to pull out at a snail's pace.

My voice vibrated with the sensation buzzing in my lower half.

I threw my head back and let him fuck me, right and good, and gave him the sounds of passion he delivered to me. I lay there, paralyzed by pleasure, as his dick pinned me to the desk and his fingers found their way under my shirt to ravage my breasts.

“Fuck, Julia. I can’t fucking take it.” He thrust into me harder, and I pulled him down so we were kissing. The movement proved to be just what I needed as the head of his dick rubbed against the sweet spot inside me, and before our lips could meet, a heat flared between my thighs and Nick sent me rocketing to the moon.

He held me to him as I writhed and spasmed over his dick and kept the climax alive far longer than I’ve ever had before. He brought his mouth down to mine and swallowed the scream that came with my orgasm.

Just as the final part of the orgasm drifted away and my limbs slackened, he pressed me back down onto the desk and groaned, his dick spasming inside me. He spilled everything he had into me and started to collapse on me.

My arms threaded around his neck as his body went limp. His spicy scent overtook me, and he buried his face into my neck, kissing and licking at the spots he already knew were sensitive, made even more so by the climax I just had.

When he pulled back, I placed a hand onto his cheek and his fingers slid up my skirt to grab my ass. My eyes flipped shut, and I hummed with the sensation. He dropped his forehead to mine, and I lifted up to kiss him.

Our tongues lapped over each other, not sated, but satisfied for now.

“That was a nice surprise,” I whispered. His sapphire eyes glinted down at me, and a small spark of happiness settled in my heart. He kissed me again with tenderness this time, and his hand cupped my cheek.

When he pulled away, the look on his face was something I wanted to see more of and have in my life. I was positive I’d never seen anyone look at me that way.

But I loved seeing it on his face.

I opened my mouth to say something as he slid out of me, and a new emotion flickered through his eyes. Shock, awe, then guilt.

“Oh, shit,” he said and pulled away completely, and I sat up, reaching for him, but he twisted out of my grasp, zipping and buttoning up his pants.

“What?” I asked, trying to get him to look at me, if not for the very least to get my underwear back.

“Nothing. I’m... I’m sure you have other things—people—to get back to.” He turned his back, and I got off his desk.

“Nick,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. My eyes stung, realizing that I might have been too late to tell him I’d wanted to be with him.

“No,” he snapped, spinning to me. Hardness filled his eyes. “I’ll see you for the re-opening. We can keep everything else business-related.”

The wrench in my chest was enough to let me know I needed to go. He didn’t want me for anything but sex, and that was "goodbye" sex. I nodded, dropping my hand and leaving without another word.

I was going to be fine, no matter what.

Even if it did hurt for a little while.

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I was going to work it out for myself.

25

NICK

It turned my back as she walked out the door. I didn't want to watch her walk away. I rubbed my hand over my eyes and wiped it down my cheek. It was fucking poetic. I scoffed at the pun.

I didn't know how I hadn't seen it before, but now that the ache in my chest was there, I knew I loved her. "Fucking fool," I told myself. I couldn't let myself get down. There was still too much to do, and once the demo and reno and grand re-opening were over, I'd be able to get over it, get over her, easier.

I wasn't going to go down that road again.

Even if it hurt.

Even if I wanted to.

I didn't know why I was a glutton for punishment, but I needed to break that cycle now.

Not that she was like Kendra, but I wasn't going to have someone who didn't know what she wanted or who had someone else bringing her flowers.

It was better if we both found people our own ages anyway, even though I still thought I'd be able to have a family. I wasn't going to be looking for anyone else that young again. There was too much difference in life experience.

But what about the shared life experience you both have? Damn stupid voice. I swatted it away, cleaned myself up, and headed back into the dining area. When I looked around, the foreman pointed to the hardhats and I went to grab one.

"What do you know about Julia, your PR rep?" the foreman asked me. I flinched when I heard her name.

I checked him over, trying to figure out why he was asking. I couldn't read anything in his eyes to gauge his interest. "Why?" I asked. The ache in my chest grew. I didn't think I'd be able to talk about Julia with some other guy about dating her. Even though I was a sad sack of shit, I wasn't that much of a sap to push another guy on her.

"She asked for permission to come into the construction area. She wanted to do pictures and a live video. I told her she had to sign a waiver and wear different shoes." He huffed and smiled, like he was letting me in on a joke. I stared, waiting for him to move on. He cleared his throat when I didn't give him anything and had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Are you okay with that?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. Although I had no idea if I really was. I didn't need the reminder that she wanted to be with someone else, even if she just had sex with me. I patted the foreman on the back and needed to go clear my head. "I'm leaving. Let John know when you're done. He'll close everything up," I said.

I left the mess of a dining room and walked into the mess of my life.

I dropped into my car seat outside and thought for a minute. I wasn't even sure where I wanted to go. I just knew I couldn't stay in the office where I'd just had sex with the woman I loved and then sent her off to be with someone else.

I thought back to what David said months ago before I won The Bridge and before I started demolition, and pretty much every time in between that.

Maybe I should've just given Kendra the restaurant.

I could leave and start over fresh somewhere new.

I didn't have the means to open a restaurant on my own, but I did know people. Hell, even the critic said people were talking about me in certain circles—saying good things about my food, not bad.

I went to start my car and looked down at my phone.

I had a voicemail.

It was from Julia.

Hope sprang into my chest thinking she'd gotten in touch with me to tell me something I wanted to hear. Not something related to business. Even though I just told her we should keep it business-related.

I didn't listen to it right away.

Instead, I started my car and drove out to the lake.

I used to go there when I was a kid.

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I'd ride my bike and just hang out by the water dreaming of bigger and better things for my life. It always helped me feel better.

The phone rang while I was almost there. I hit the button without thinking then realized I should have looked. I didn't want to be thrown off by Julia calling me.

"Hey, dumbass." David's voice rode through the car.

I released a sigh of relief and relaxed a little. "What do you want?" I grumbled around a smile. Even if I was in a shitty mood, David would say something stupid to knock me out of it. Probably.

"Where are you? Chad said you left," he said.

"Who the hell is Chad?"

"The foreman," he said.

"That's his name?"

"What difference does that make?"

"I don't know. I didn't even think to ask him," I said, now feeling like a dick. "My head's been up my ass for too long," I said and turned the wheel into the lake's parking lot.

"Since you were born, probably," David said.

This time, I didn't laugh. "I should have sold the restaurant," I said.

"What?" he asked, letting his shock come through.

"When you told me to. I should have listened instead of being a stubborn ass," I said.

"What happened?"

"Why do you suddenly sound like my mother?"

"You're thinking something stupid, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Yes you do. You only admit I'm right when you're about to do something stupid," he said.

"No, I just think that... the restaurant's taken too much out of me. I'm not built for it anymore. I need a whole new, fresh everything," I said and leaned back, placing my head on the headrest and letting my eyes focus on the sunset.

David started laughing.

"You're a dick," I said. "I finally tell you you're right about something and you even fuck that up," I growled. I wasn't in the mood to deal with his shit. "I'll talk to you later," I said, hanging up and not giving him a chance to explain himself. I didn't need to. I just wanted to figure things out.

I moved and walked through the graveled parking lot and found a picnic bench that didn't have snow covering the top. I walked toward it and stuffed my hands in my pockets. Even though it wasn't that cold, being on the lake with the breeze blowing

made it feel colder.

As soon as my fingers touched Julia's cotton underwear, I was pulled back into the memory of seeing the sadness in her eyes when I told her to go. Was it the look of someone who wanted another guy?

Or was I looking into it too deeply? Did I want the look to be pain that I was breaking it off for good? Did I want it to mean something to her too so I made up the look on her face in my mind?

I sat on the picnic table's top and looked out at the water, taking in the crisp air and the beauty of the January scenery.

There was no way I could know for sure. I didn't remember what I thought when I first thought Kendra was cheating on me. I remember thinking I was batshit crazy long before I would let myself indulge in the possibility that Kendra was cheating on me.

I'd thought I was pretty much unbreakable a few years ago, and life did hand me a nice wake-up call. I was an asshole then. It was probably why I was attracted to Kendra in the first place. Two assholes building an asshole life together.

I huffed and pulled my hand out of my pocket, folding my fingers over each other. I guessed if I was going to start over, I could at least entertain the idea of what a new life would look like.

Without the restaurant.

Without Kendra.

Without Julia.

Just myself.

I didn't have an answer right away, but I felt like I was finally on the right track. I stood and left the picnic table behind me.

When I got back in the car, I was finally ready to listen to Julia's message.

I snapped my eyes closed as I heard her say, "Hey, Nick. I didn't get a chance to remind you about the soft launch on February twelfth. The critic is supposed to show up at six, so I've gone ahead and reserved a table for two just in case he wanted to bring a plus-one.

"Then, the final inspection is for February eleventh. I've spoken with Chad and made sure that everything is going to plan for the re-opening on Valentine's Day. I'll be in touch before that, but I'll see you on the twelfth for sure. I want to make sure Jack is taken care of in every way imaginable."

I hung up the phone, confused by the message.

Why didn't she know that he'd already come?

What happened there?

Didn't Jack say she'd emailed him?

My eyes snapped closed.

This had Kendra written all over it.

But how did Kendra get Julia's information?

Maybe I didn't want to know.

26

JULIA

"What the hell?" I drove up past Gray's and the lights were out. There was no way this was supposed to be happening. I checked with Nick and John. The final inspection yesterday went off without a hitch.

I looked at my phone and saw that Nick confirmed the menu for tonight and that he said everything looked good to go.

Now, there was no one here.

To say I was confused was an understatement. Fury was a kinder partner to my confusion. I parked my car and got out. I shook my dress out and walked slowly over the iced parking lot, making sure to miss the patches of shiny and smooth ice so I didn't fall right on my ass.

When I got to the sidewalk and the front of the restaurant, I tried the door and nothing opened. I looked at the clock on my phone. We only had twenty minutes until the critic was coming.

I was not going to fuck this up.

I dialed Nick.

“Hello,” he answered, his voice gruff, his word clipped.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. “Where are you?”

“I’m at home, entertaining someone. I’ll have to?—”

“Are you kidding me right now? Do you know how hard we’ve worked to get this all together? You’re just going to throw it away?”

“You can stuff the act,” Nick growled. “I have no time for your head games. I’m on the other line. Goodbye.”

I was met with silence.

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I'd be damned if I let another relationship ruin my fucking career. I stormed over to my car, not caring about the ice, and got in. I slammed the door and took off for Nick's house.

When I got to his place, there was no other car in the drive and I didn't care if he was still on the phone or not. I parked, got out of my car, and marched up to his door.

I tightened my jacket around myself, figuring that I was going to be out here for a while, and I rang the doorbell. When I didn't hear footsteps coming to the door, I started knocking.

The living room light was on and I saw him moving around, so I knew he was home. I rang the doorbell again and started knocking at the same time.

The longer I stood out in the cold, the more my anger flared. I couldn't believe he was going to fuck it all up because of... whatever he thought happened.

David had called me the other day to tell me that Nick was on the verge of messing everything up, something he did pretty much always, and despite the fact that Nick didn't want to be with me, I did care about what happened.

Not just on a business level, but on a personal one too—one that was based on human decency, not on wanting a romantic anything with him.

Even if I still did.

When he still didn't come to the door, I knocked harder. "Nicolas Grayson, open this

door right now!” I shouted. I went to knock on the door again, but the door flew open.

Nick stood in front of me, staring. A cocktail of emotions flipped through his eyes and they landed on anger. He was in sweats and wasn’t wearing a shirt, and the second my eyes fell on his chest hair and carved muscles, my voice and the cold were swept away. He lifted the phone to his ear and said, “I’ll have to call you back.”

He hit the button and darkness slid over his features. “What are you doing here?” He looked at my dress and gave me a once-over. I was sure I saw desire on his face before he let the hard shield slide over his features. “Why are you dressed like that?” he snapped.

I opened up the screen door and pushed past him, ignoring his protest. “It’s too damn cold to stand outside having you stare at me like I’m an asshole,” I snipped.

Nick closed the door and placed his phone down. “What do you want?” he said, placing his hands on his hips. My eyes caught on the happy trail of hair that disappeared behind his sweatpants.

I mentally slapped my forehead. “Why in the hell would you tell me that something was on for tonight if you didn’t mean that it was? What happened? You even had John lie to me.” I took a step forward, my anger rising.

I swallowed down some heavier emotions, but they all percolated right under my surface.

“Why don’t you go ask fucking Kendra what happened?” His voice grew louder with each word.

“What?” I tried to make sense of what he meant, and I couldn’t. My fingers balled into fists. “What?” I asked again with a little more force, stepping closer.

“Kendra. That’s who you’re really working for, isn’t it?”

“You’re joking, right?” The longer I studied his face, the more I saw that what he said was what he believed. I dropped my shoulders and my anger deflated. Not much, but enough for me to say, “Why would you think that?” I tried to parse through my emotions, but I couldn’t find anything to land on.

His anger didn’t deflate. It grew as he took steps toward me. “The food critic you hired. He came a month ago. He told me you emailed him and asked him to come then. I thought it was a mistake, and when he showed me the email, it had your name signed to it.”

I took a step back. “I did not send him an email.”

“Yeah, right. Get out of my house,” he shouted.

“I won’t,” I said, keeping my tone steady, even though every emotion was on the edge. “You’re not going to accuse me of something I didn’t do and treat me like fucking garbage. I won’t back away from it, either. If you think I’d do something like that, you don’t respect me or my opinions or my work at all.”

I took another step back and saw a new reaction I didn’t understand. “I believed in what we were doing. I worked my ass off, and for you to think the worst about me without even a second guess to it... well, it shows me just what you’re like.”

I took a few angry steps toward him. “I didn’t email him. You’d better get your story straight before accusing me of something like that. If you don’t want to believe me, that’s your problem. Not. Mine. You just ruined something that was going to be incredible for you.”

I pointed at him with the anger I was feeling, even though the sadness was quickly

cresting. “Don’t you even think about trying to take my company down with your self-sabotaging ways. I have a ton of other clients who will back me up.” My voice started to quaver. I had to get out of here soon. “I’m good at what I do. I could have been good for your restaurant too.”

I had to get out of here. “You deserve your ex-wife,” I said with a huff, breathing the heartbreak out of me with one long breath. I couldn’t even look at him. I was going to break. I spun on my heel and walked out the door. The tears broke over my lids just as I reached my car. I didn’t stop when I heard Nick call my name. I didn’t look at him when he ran up to my car and knocked on the door.

I flipped him off and backed out of the driveway, hoping I didn’t run over his feet because I didn’t want to feel bad about any of my actions.

And right then, I did.

I was a mess, a quivering, shaking, sobbing mess, and I drove all the way home like that, with blurry vision and trembling hands, and Mia was there for me the instant I threw myself onto the couch.

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“Alright,” Mia said, handing me a glass of wine. “I didn’t want to be right about Nick.” She rubbed her arm and sat down across from me. My cheeks were tear-stained and I sat in a cozy cocoon of blankets she’d wrapped me in.

“It’s fine.” I sniffled. “I learned my second lesson.”

My phone vibrated. I picked it up and went to throw it against the wall. “No!” Mia lunged, grabbing my phone from my fingers. “That cost a lot of money. We might be doing well right now business-wise, but there’s no way to use it as a tax write-off if you purposely throw it against a wall.”

I looked at her as she plopped back down. “Hello?” she answered.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to flame that fire. I was proud of myself for finally sticking up for what was right. I wasn’t sad about the possibility of Nick thinking I was a bad possible girlfriend. I was livid that he questioned my work ethic and threatened my business.

Yes. I was heartbroken he would also think that about me, but his believing I would do something to damage his livelihood and take my reputation down with it said a lot about the place he was in.

It made the heartbroken part of me understand that maybe I had made a mistake with Nick, but too many other good things were happening with my company to even think about stepping away again.

I might not be good at love, but I would learn from it and move on.

“I don’t think she has anything positive to say to you right now, Nick.” Mia stood and pointed to the door. I shrugged and took a drink of wine. I didn’t care how long she talked to him. I had nothing to say.

Mia walked out of the apartment, and I could hear her giving him a hard time the whole way down the stairs. I snuggled into my blanket and promptly fell into a deep and warm sleep.

27

NICK

“You really are more of a dick than I gave you credit for at first,” Mia said over the line. “You have a lot of balls trying to call her and getting me to try and talk to her,” she said. I could picture her frowning at the phone with her dark hair flying in all directions. “I mean, I knew you were. But I was almost ready to admit I was wrong.”

I still didn’t have anything to say.

I had acted like an ass.

I didn’t know what was true and what wasn’t. But I hadn’t expected Julia to react like that. I expected her to tell me I was crazy, that it wasn’t what I thought. I expected her to cry fake tears or burst out laughing at what a fool I was for believing she would want to have sex with me or even that she would try and save my business. I didn’t expect her to question my trust and loyalty and how I viewed her business ethics.

Because she was right.

I didn’t trust her.

The second I had a chance to make the right decision, I bailed.

I didn't respect her enough to even doubt the thought that she was working with Kendra even a little bit. Once the seed took root, it only needed a little light to grow and spread like weeds in my mind.

I was a fucking fool.

I'd played the game with Kendra for too long.

I'd proven to Julia that I was exactly like that other asshole she'd been with.

"I'm going to assume you're no longer on the phone and hang up now. You don't need to call back. She doesn't want to talk to you, and frankly, anything you have to say can be said through an attorney or it can be said in an email. Oh! Because I can hear you and because I know you're still there, you should have looked at the damn email address first before you jumped off the rocker and started to try to?"

"You're right." I coughed.

"What?" Mia said. The shock in her voice sounded genuine.

"You're right. I was an asshole."

She paused for a minute.

Maybe longer.

It stretched out longer than I was comfortable with, but I didn't know what was happening. I pulled the phone away from my ear and checked to see if she was still there, but the longer she was quiet, the more my skin itched.

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“What can I do?” I asked, more so to add something to the silence than to prompt her to say something. I figured as long as she was still on, I had a shot.

“What do you want to do?” Mia asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly and was surprised to think she might actually help. “Is the guy she’s seeing coming?” I hated to ask it, but had to. I needed to know how deep to dive in to help. If she’d already called that guy to come over, then she didn’t need my forgiveness on a romantic level, not that I wouldn’t forgive her, but... it just wouldn’t be something I would need to pursue.

“What are you talking about?” Mia groaned. “Why don’t you fucking communicate with Julia?” She muttered other things under her breath, and I think one of them was that she didn’t know why she was wasting her time on an old man who had too many commitment problems.

“New Year's Eve, there was a guy on her back porch,” I stated.

“Ew. Jared? Double ew. You shouldn’t have been creeping on her either,” she said, and I was starting to feel like a bigger pain in the ass than I originally thought I was.

“Alright, fine. If it was Jared and I am creepy, then I’ll go. It’s obvious you’re only keeping me on the phone to fuck with?—”

“See, and there you go. Running away from uncomfortable things. You don’t deserve her,” Mia stated.

I huffed. “You’re right. I don’t. I’ve been in the trenches fighting for my sanity for years, and I have no clue what I’m doing. But I want to try. She’s caring, intelligent, and creative. I want to get to know her on a better level and see if she’ll have me, chinks and all.” It sounded stupid when I was saying it, and it felt even more uncomfortable admitting it to myself, and I waited for Mia to burst out laughing and I wondered why I was even still on the phone with her, and—Oh.

I caught myself, ready to give up again.

“It’s fine. You can think what you want about me. I just want to make her happy.” That was it. Honest. True. And I surprised myself. I didn’t think I was capable of surprising myself anymore.

Guilt began to eat away at my resolve, and I couldn’t fall down that road of self-sabotage. “I’m going to open the restaurant on Valentine’s Day. Can you make sure she comes?”

“I haven’t seen you this nervous since you tried to ask out Tracy Stall to prom our junior year,” David says, leaning against the bar.

“Shut up,” I said to him, rolling the sleeves of my chef’s coat up.

Gray’s was officially open for business in a few minutes. Mia also told me that she’d be bringing Julia. Although Julia fought Mia on it, she finally relented when Mia brought up the contract and a possible lawsuit if she didn’t fulfill her end of the bargain.

I was grateful to Mia for orchestrating it even if Julia didn’t take me back or... well... still didn’t want to start dating me for real. I could at least thank her for the hard work she did at the restaurant and try to apologize for believing the worst in her when she’d done nothing to make me believe it.

“What are you afraid of more? Having your restaurant fail or having the woman you love reject you on your big night?”

“Fuck, David. I don’t know why I’m friends with you at all.” I knocked his hand away from my shoulder, spun, and went back into the kitchen where the kitchen was buzzing and alive in a way it had never been before.

The crew was lighter, happier, and they looked as though they were enjoying being here. I couldn’t believe so much changed in such a short amount of time and that there was so much left that was going to happen.

I also couldn’t believe I almost blew it up because of my fear and my self-sabotaging tendencies I refused to admit I had until a few weeks ago. “Is everyone ready?” I called.

“Yes, Chef!” the team called back.

I wasn’t too proud to admit that the pride that filled me up from their looks of respect had me choking up a little and happy tears pricked at the corner of my eye. I wiped them away with my fingers and turned to go back out into the dining room. The guests were about ready to arrive. I wasn’t going to stay on the floor long, but I was going to be there to see the first people walk in.

Even before I stepped out on the floor, people were flooding the dining room. I had to take a step back as the sight of so many familiar faces tried to knock me over. “See. I told you they would all come.” David slapped me on the back and I snapped my eyes shut.

“We’re done being friends,” I said. David perked his brow and nodded over my shoulder. I turned to see him looking at Mia.

“I’ve got some people to entertain.” He fixed his tie, and I couldn’t help the smile that wiped over my face. Mia was going to eat him alive. Instead of heading into the kitchen like I originally planned, I walked over to see the mayor and his family sitting down. “It’s wonderful to see you guys!” I said, crouching down to the kids’ level. “What do you want me to make for you?” The twins shrugged and looked at their mom.

“Everything looks amazing,” she said, looking at me. “I think we’ll need a minute to look at the new menu. It looks like there’s a lot of yummy stuff on here!”

I patted her hand, and she grabbed mine. “Great job! This suits you.”

“Thank you. I don’t think I could have a better compliment,” I said. I meant it too. I stood and went to go over to the next table when I caught a glimpse of Julia walking in. Her back was to me, and there was a man on her arm.

Knife to the chest, but maybe that was her way to get back at me. Or back at Mia since Mia basically forced her to come. I did stop and say hello to a few more diners along the line I was walking in, but when she turned and her eyes met mine, I almost had hope that the spark I saw in her mahogany glare was for me.

In a blink, she turned to the guy she was with and I was almost to them. When I got up to the hostess station, Julia was alone, and I stepped up to the stand.

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She tried to look anywhere else but at me but leaned against the station and propped herself up on her elbow. Julia turned and looked at me, square in the eye. “It’s a good thing you got your head out of your ass,” she said, looking around. “You have quite a crowd.”

“Probably all because of this PR service I paid for.” I smiled and grabbed two menus. “Is Mia sitting with you?” I asked, trying not to point out that I knew her party had three.

Julia shook her head. Her strawberry scent wafted over to me, and the flame in my chest for her burned to life. I didn’t know how I was going to get her to trust me, but I didn’t want to be without her. That much I knew for sure.

She turned and motioned for someone to join her, and I remembered that she did bring someone. I wasn’t going to let it?—

“Nick, I believe you’ve met Jack already?” Julia said. Her red lips grew into a smile. Jack held his hand out for me to take.

“Hey, Nick. Your wonderful PR agent does quite a good job of convincing people of things.” He placed a hand on her shoulder, but it was more of a friendly gesture, and a wave of relief washed over me. “She’s going to be doing more work for me and some of the papers I work for too.” Jack winked at Julia, and I swept a hand in front of me, letting him go first, but I stopped Julia, placing a hand on her shoulder.

The anger in her eyes wasn’t the same rage I saw the other night.

She'd brought him not only to prove her point, that I was an ass and didn't trust her, but also as a peace offering.

"You didn't have to, you know," I said.

"I know. But I'm good at my job." She snatched the menus from my hands and walked over to the open table. When she looked back at me over her shoulder, I knew things were going to sort themselves out.

28

JULIA

"Bye, Jack," I said as the restaurant critic tipped his hat and slid from his chair. I was excited to have gotten in touch with him, not only because of the new project Mia and I were starting with him, but also so he could see how good the food, the ambiance, and everything was about Gray's.

Even though Nick made me furious, I was still proud of the work I did for this restaurant. And the downhome feel, raw brick, and moody lighting were only enhanced by the incredible food. Mia plopped down next to me and brought David with her. My brows perked.

"Is this going to get weird?" I pointed between the two of them.

"No way, man." Mia slid closer to me and hiccupped.

"You're so drunk." I held back my laugh. "You're lucky this isn't your client, or else I'd fire you so fast." I shook my head at her.

"Please, you need me." She laid her head on my shoulder and hiccupped again. I

looked at my phone. The party was winding down. “Alright,” I said. “We can get you home.” I moved to pick her up from the other side, but David stood.

“I’ll take her,” he said. “You have to close your account.”

I squinted at him. “Why does that sound creepier coming from your mouth than it should?”

“I think because I’m technically old enough to be your youngest, most attractive uncle.”

“Ew,” Mia said, leaning against him. “Don’t talk like that, especially when I’m going to try to seduce you later.”

“You’ve had too much to drink for me to let that happen, Mia.” David looked at me with a promise not to let it happen.

I pointed at him. “I’m trusting you,” I said. “If something happens, I’ll know.”

“You have my word. She will not seduce me.”

“I might throw up on you, though.” She laughed as David took her away.

Although the party was winding down, I looked around again and realized I’d started to think of Heart’s Creek as home. I propped my chin up with the palm of my hand and surprised myself. I didn’t know when that had come true for me.

“I think you deserve a free glass of wine,” Nick said, placing a large wine glass in front of me and sitting across the table in a chair. Instead of sitting next to me like I thought he would. However, it was nice that he didn’t. Maybe that meant he was actually trying to respect what I’d said.

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip of the wine. It was tart and dry and a great way to end the night.

We sat there and stared at each other for a few seconds, and I reached for the glass again, breaking our stare. I didn’t really know what to say, do, or think at this point.

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My feelings didn't just go away, but I also wasn't going to blow everything up business-wise because my romance didn't work out. I'd proven my point and stood my ground.

Nick reached out and placed his hand on my free one. The warmth and heat from his hand traced up my skin and invited goosebumps to ripple over my arm and up my skin. I pulled it away from him, not wanting to be reminded of all the things I liked about Nick.

"I'm sorry," he said, his low voice rumbling down my spine. I placed my free hand on the back of my neck and massaged it while dropping my gaze to the now tablecloth-free table.

I didn't know what to say. Nothing he'd done was alright.

But I'd made some stupid mistakes too. I took another drink of the wine and placed it onto the table. When I looked into his eyes, I swallowed and said, "I'm sorry too. Maybe we can be friends after everything is cinched up."

I hated the way that sounded, but...

Nick moved closer to me. "I don't want to be friends, Julia. I was a huge ass. Mia, then David, then Mia again gave me a long talk about how to communicate better and the mess I pulled you into because I was still playing by a different set of rules."

He took my hand again.

I didn't want to like it. I wanted to pull away and tell him he blew it.

I didn't want to fall into any more games.

"I saw you on New Year's Eve. There was a guy at your house."

My nose wrinkled. "That was Jared."

"I know... Now. Because I talked to Mia, and instead of coming to you and asking like an adult, I just hid away and pouted, which is something I apparently do a lot of, if I remember what you said."

My cheeks warmed at remembering everything I shouted at him. None of it was wrong. "I wish I didn't yell like that."

He moved his chair closer to me, and when I didn't pull away, he slid into the booth side of the table. "You had every right to yell." His breath was warm on my neck. "I was being a fucking moron." His sapphire eyes bounced over mine, and things began to soak and saturate.

"You're wearing heels and a dress with a pretty full skirt," he said.

"I'm not sure you should get rewarded by pointing out the obvious," I stated, inhaling his food-and-spice scent. I broke our eye contact, looking around Gray's. "Is everyone gone?" I whispered, noticing there were no sounds of clinking dishes or people's conversations.

"Yes." His lips hovered above mine. The heat of his breath played over my lips. His fingers walked up my knee, and I didn't push his hand away as it skated up my thigh.

"Nick," I whispered, my eyes locking on his.

“If you say my name like that, I might just have to do something about it,” he said, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth. “What do you think? Do you want to try to be with an old man?”

“See, you go and break the moment when you say stuff like that.” I gasped as his fingers slid into my panties.

“Does that help?” he asked. His callused finger toyed with my entrance and my hips chased it, trying to get him to work into me.

“Yes,” I whispered, closing my eyes as he slipped his finger between my wet and swollen walls. I dropped my head back, tipping my chin up to the ceiling, and he moved his finger oh-so-slowly into and out of me.

I hummed.

“What do you think? Do you want to give me—give us—a chance?”

“You’re going to ask me that while under the skirt, things are happening and expect me to give you an honest answer?” I whispered as his finger hit the right spot and he curled it just right. I slapped the tabletop with my hand and cried out.

It wasn’t a fair situation as he thrust his finger in and out of me, and my hips ground down on it, there was no other answer I could give but, “Yes.”

And I meant it.

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“I’ll ask you again after,” I said. My mouth crashed into hers as I lifted her up and over top of my lap. Her lips didn’t leave mine. Our tongues thrashed around each other, and my desperation for her had me ripping at her panties while she tore at my coat.

She yanked the chef’s coat open. Buttons flew through the air, bouncing over the tabletop and onto the floor.

The fabric of her panties fell from her hips. I tried to remind myself to pick them up after, but when my hand touched her naked ass, any other thought evaporated from my mind.

Her pussy hovered right over my dick, which was still stuck in my pants.

Julia slipped my shirt off while I hurried to get my pants unbuckled, unbuttoned, unzipped.

I lifted my hips, brushing against her inner thighs while I did so.

She moaned, wiggling her hips over me.

I shimmied the pants down past my hips and held my cock straight for her to sit down on.

And she slid down on top of me.

The intensity radiating over my shaft from not being inside Julia for so long was

almost enough to make me burst.

“Hold on,” I whispered, placing my hands on either side of her cheeks. She sank onto me slower, pressing into me deeper, and we groaned together with the feeling. I dug my fingers into her hair and pulled her mouth to mine.

She flipped her head back, and I kissed up the line of her neck, running my tongue under her jaw and sucking at the spot I knew she liked. Her hips rocked with the sensation, and electricity shot down my shaft and my hands dropped away from her face, snapping to her hips.

I thrust up into her, and she fell forward, grinding down on my dick, speeding up the urgency of our lovemaking.

I lay back and let her go, watching her writhe over me, and tried to hold my shit together until she found pleasure.

Everything she was delivering to me was nothing short of a damn miracle that she forgave me. “I can’t wait to fuck you on the bar, in the kitchen, on every single one of these damn tables,” I said as her walls spasmed around my cock.

My hands squeezed her hips, and I took control, fucking up into her as she rode me, and her body went rigid. The scream she let loose rose through the restaurant and echoed off the walls. I kept going, stretching out her orgasm as long as I could until her body started to collapse over mine.

I hit the final spot I needed and shot up and inside her with a blast of white light shooting through my system. A roar ripped from my throat as she kept gyrating her hips over mine and rocked out a few more aftershocks as I released everything I had inside her.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the smile she gave me as she leaned over. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” she said with a shaky voice.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” I replied with a shudder. I pulled her into a hug instead of letting her pull away. The relief I had that she was going to forgive me finally washed over me, and tears sprang into my eyes.

“What?” she said, placing a hand on my jaw and running her thumb over my beard.

“I love you,” I said.

Her smile widened and she said, “I love you too.”

We christened every square inch we could throughout the bar, the dining room, the kitchen, and made our way back to the office once or twice. Finally, we made it back to her place.

When I woke up in the morning, she was in my arms, and I kicked myself for missing out on all that time with her because I was too much of a stubborn ass. My hands roamed over her body. And while we definitely celebrated several things throughout the night, I was really just enjoying the feel of her naked skin at that moment.

I dropped my head and kissed her neck. She hummed and blinked her eyes open. “Good morning,” she said through a stretch.

“Hello,” I said, leaning over and kissing her cheek. “Do you have stuff here to make breakfast?”

“Does cereal count?”

I laughed. “I guess, but I was thinking about actually making you breakfast.” My

finger traced her nipple. It peaked and rose to a point, and I plucked at it. She rolled onto her back, running her fingers through my hair, and my lips met the stiff peak of her breast. I licked it, then bit it, encouraging it to tighten even more.

“Nick,” she purred.

“I like it when you say my name like that.” My hand engulfed her other breast and I picked my head up. “We could go out to breakfast,” I suggested.

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“That would require getting out of bed,” she whined as I took my hand away from her breast.

“Yup, it would. But we do have all the time in the world, since you’re going to give me another shot.” I plopped down next to her and laid my head on her chest as her arm wrapped around my shoulders.

“Is that your way of asking me to give us a chance again?” I tipped my head up, placing my chin on her chest so I could look at her.

“Yes. Totally,” I said. “I didn’t forget about that.” I grinned. I had because my mind was still charged up with dopamine. Plus, she told me she loved me last night, so I kind of assumed instead of asking.

“Uh-huh.” She laughed.

“Fine, you caught me.” I made my way up her body and placed my forehead to hers. “Would you consider giving us a chance?”

She rolled her eyes like she was thinking about it. “Mmm, yes. I guess so. Although we are still naked and you’re offering to feed me, it is as good of a time as any.” She sighed.

“You’re hilarious,” I said and fell back into the cuddle.

“I’m glad you think so. It’s smart of you to know.”

“I think the smart thing was realizing how much I wanted you in my life and making sure that I don’t fuck it up again.”

“That’s sweet of you to say.” She combed her fingers through my hair.

“Thanks. I like hearing that too.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek because I didn’t want to scare her away, but I also didn’t want to wait for too long to talk about it. I was trying to learn from my mistakes. “Do you think, if this works out between us, that you’d want a family? Children?” I scrunched my eyes and waited for the answer because I didn’t ask Kendra until it was too late, and it might be too early for Julia and me to think about kids, but it was something I needed to talk about.

“Actually...” She rolled to her side, looking me straight on. “I do want kids and a big family. My mom died when I was too young and my father kind of shut down. I want the opportunity to give my kids the life I didn’t have.”

Happiness splayed through my veins, and I kissed her with everything that I was feeling. “Good,” I said when I pulled away. “Not that I want to start right now...” I did, but again, I didn’t want to scare her off.

“It’s okay.” She chuckled. “We have time.”

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EPILOGUE: JULIA

“I can’t believe it’s been a year,” Mia said, handing me another pink balloon. I looked around Gray’s at the staff our company had acquired in the last year. We were still a small, but a mighty five, and I couldn’t have ever guessed our business would have grown so much.

Especially because I moved away from the city and found a home in Heart's Creek. But the amazing thing about our company was that we could pick up clients everywhere. We could travel to other cities for openings and still make our way back to the small town we loved.

If I'd have stayed in Buffalo, I might not have thought bigger than what I was doing because I was surrounded by city life. I was truly getting a chance to spread my wings and I loved it.

I couldn't imagine it any other way.

"Yeah, me either, but I'm more than happy with how things turned out," I said as Nick walked through the entryway from the kitchen. My smile grew as his eyes found mine, and I hung up another balloon.

"My God, your face looks dopey," Mia said, and I climbed down the ladder.

"Please, it isn't anything compared to how you look when David comes around." They just started dating, and Mia assured me that he wasn't anything but sweet last year when he took her home. Even if she wanted him not to be. I always rolled my eyes when I said it, but I was grateful she'd found someone to be herself around.

Mia pointed her finger under my nose. "You cannot see your face. You have no idea how it compares to mine."

I laughed. "Doesn't that mean the same thing for you?"

"No, I always make sure I can see myself somehow."

"That is a wild and weird statement to make." I tugged on her finger and walked over to Nick, leaving her with the ladder and balloons.

The smile on his face probably did rival mine because he did look dopey. As I thought about what Mia said, my smile grew.

“What do you think?” I said, waving my hand around the space. “Valentine’s and a one-year anniversary all in one.”

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“For more than just the restaurant,” he said and took my hand.

He pulled me toward his office, and although I hurried after him, I said, “This is not the time for an adult ‘situation’.”

Nick laughed. “That is the only thing we do in my office.”

“I don’t remember the last time we were in there and it didn’t lead to something,” I said. He gave my fingers a squeeze, and we reached the office door. We walked through, and there was a vase of daisies sitting on his desk. I looked at him and perked a brow.

“It’s just for a thank you,” he said, sitting on the edge of his desk. He pulled me toward himself, and I went willingly, nestling between his legs and leaning into him. We’d talked about moving our relationship in a new direction and we’d recently moved in together. I still had my apartment above my office, and we were talking about renting it out, but I still needed to clean it up and I had a little nostalgia from it because it was part of my starting over.

“So, I know we’re moving at a snail's pace slow.” I scoffed because we weren’t, but he put his hand up before I could argue. “This isn’t a formal proposal, because we can’t have all of our celebrations all in one day. I want to make sure we can celebrate us throughout the year. But I want to marry you, Ms. Julia Day.”

He cupped my jaw, and I leaned into it feeling my cheeks blush and the dopey smile slap onto my face again. “Soon,” he said. “Do you think you’d want to marry an old man like me?”

“I’m going to have to figure out a way to punish you for saying things like that about yourself,” I said, shaking my head.

“Is that a yes?”

I eyed him. “Is this because your ex-wife just got married? Because sometimes it might feel like you have to keep up with them?—”

Nick pulled me down into a kiss and ate the rest of my words. His tongue caressed mine, and I relaxed into it. My fingers gripped onto his shoulders and my body perked up, getting ready to fall into our normal routine of sex in his office.

Then I remembered all the people who were in the building. I pulled away with a gasp. “We can’t do that right now.” Even if I wanted to.

“You need to get your head on straight. I was just kissing you. And no, this isn’t because Kendra got married.”

She’d married the owner of the bar across the street, and Nick finally realized there was enough business for everyone. He stopped fretting about who was doing better and started enjoying his success.

It was a nice cherry on the topping of Gray’s constantly growing business.

I thought about how far we’d come—the struggles I’d faced, the hurdles I’d jumped, and how amazing Nick had been through it all. Warmth slid up my throat to my cheeks as he kissed me again, spearing his hand through my hair. It was a warm, luscious kiss that lingered, the kind you can’t pull away from but that you know is meant to communicate affection, not arousal.

I opened my eyes and looked into his and saw the sapphire affection he had. It didn’t matter that we were miles apart in age or that he lived an entire lifetime before he met

me. Nick and I were good together. We challenged each other and helped each other chase dreams. I wanted that. I'd always wanted that. And this non-proposal was his way of saying he wanted it too—with me.

“Yes, then, I would want to get married to you,” I said, and a smile spread across my cheeks that drew one from his lips.

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” Nick’s hand slid down over the curve of my ass and he grunted. “Mmm, Mrs. Julia Grayson... It has a nice ring to it.” The stubble of his lips scratched against mine, and I grinned.

“Or Mr. Nicholas Day... I’m just saying.” I pinched his arm, and he winced playfully as I backed away and snagged his hand. We had people to tend to.

“You’re one of those women who’s going to have a best man instead of a maid of honor, aren’t you?” The sparkle of mischief was never far from his eye. I loved how playful he was with me.

“Maybe... maybe I’ll ask David since you hate him so much.” I winked and turned, only to feel a light smack to my rump. The snickering between us carried us out into the dining room where the final decorations were being hung.

One year later and I was the happiest I’d ever been. Jared hadn’t ruined me. He had taught me who I was. And now I was thriving. I could happily say I was thankful life happened the way it had. Or else I may never have met Nick.