



It Happened in Vegas

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: It was supposed to be fake. Just one impulsive Vegas wedding to save a reality show finale and boost a brewery's brand.

But now I'm back in Holly Creek, playing house on borrowed time with a grumpy, gorgeous brewmaster reality TV star who kisses like sin and makes my heart do dangerous things.

Sixty days. One big payday. No falling in love. Can we do this?

Too bad we're breaking every rule—and my past just showed up with a secret that could ruin everything.

What happens in Vegas? Turns out, it follows you home.

This fake husband is about to become unforgettable. One-click now and dive into Book Four of Zee Irwin's addictive It Happened series.

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THE HOP-PENING

SOPHIE HATCHETT

I didn't need caffeine today, jittery enough over this meeting, although it didn't hurt. I also didn't need prayers, although I would've accepted a wink and nod from the universe if it came with a salted caramel cupcake from Vivian's Cupcake Cottage down the road.

What I needed was simple: my pitch deck, my favorite bold-red power suit body-con dress with matching blazer, and the right lighting on the slide that would win over the broodiest brewer in Holly Creek and his billionaire investor.

I clicked the controller, and the show was on.

The new Holly Creek Hops Brewery logo beamed extra large on the screen behind me. Playful and modern, the black ink design of a stylized hop cone worn as a beard on a dude with sunglasses and fabulous hair exuded a cool vibe. The slogan, "BrewedWithLove," sat emblazoned on the circle bordering the image.

It was the kind of branding that made you want to open a bottle of craft beer no matter who you were, even if you were more fancy wine-and-cheese than casual beer-and-BBQ type. I hoped.

Like I unveiled a new era, I turned toward the boardroom table at Richard's home

office—and in a way, I was.

“Now this,” I said with a flourish, chin up, “is the next chapter of Holly Creek Hops Brewery. It’s confident. Cool. A little mischievous. Just like the man behind it.”

I gestured toward Keaton Kingston and was met with his broody glare as he slouched at the end of the table like he’d rather be anywhere else. His arms were crossed over that annoyingly broad chest—and was that a wink of his pec muscles flexing at me? His flannel sleeves were shoved up to reveal forearms and sinful tattoos that had no business looking that good at this early hour of the morning.

He was stupidly hot. Like, full-on crush, making me rethink my entire existence kind of hot. And the dark shade of stubble across his face didn’t help. Or the way he sneered at the logo, like it had personally attacked him.

Richard Buchanan, seated beside him in his tailored casual wear—khakis and polo shirt which, since he’d moved to Holly Creek, seemed to be his new uniform compared to the suits he always wore in New York City—gave a polite nod. “It’s stylish. Eye-catching.”

“My testing shows that this logo appeals to both men and women in your target age group. Men want to be cool like that, and women, well, want to date a cool man like that,” I added with a wink.

Keaton snorted. Okay, maybe I was wrong about him. I’d hoped we could get over the fact that I went from simply the flirty woman in our group of friends, to now taking over his entire marketing campaign. He had no idea that each time I sat at the bar talking to him at his brewery—I was doing more than checking him out.

Everything at the Hops came under my scrutiny. His marketing and labeling were like my kryptonite, and I took it as my personal mission to help this guy be more

successful.

I pitched Richard first, as the investor, knowing he'd be more adaptable to my marketing campaign ideas. And I was right about Keaton being more of a challenge to win over.

"Which in the mind of the average craft brew drinker, should translate into more desire to drink, meaning more sales. Is that right?" Richard asked, all business, nothing personal.

"Yes. Absolutely." I agreed with him and clicked through a few more slides, showing seasonal depictions of the same logo. Then I leaned over, placing my hands on the boardroom table, staring at Keaton down the center, who faced me at the other end. Just for fun, I flexed my own chest, and said, "The craft brew scene has an entire vibe, and I want to help you tap into that more. This logo rebranding is just the start."

"She's got flair, Keaton. And the logo is impressive. What do you think?" Richard arched a brow at him, clearly as impatient as I was for some sort of reaction other than a grunt. But still nothing from Mr. Grumpy until he stood and walked closer to the image on the screen.

This was like dragging words out of a man who'd been forced into therapy when he didn't want to talk. Finally, he opened his mouth. I waited with bated breath at whatever he'd deem us worthy to know.

"You don't like my original logo?" He asked.

"Well, it has a certain handmade appeal. Homespun. Home town. There's a place for that, but in my opinion, if you want to attract a national distributor, a new logo with on-target branding is the first place to start."

“Paris helped me draw the old logo,” he huffed. “I’ve been kind of attached to it.”

My stomach flipped. Not the butterflies kind. The oh no, what have I done? kind. Paris was his niece, and, while healthy now, had some serious issues when she was little, landing her in the hospital for some time. I would never want to take that part of his history away.

Keaton didn’t elaborate, but he didn’t have to. The original Holly Creek Hops logo—a rough, hand-sketched crooked pint glass—appeared charming in a nostalgic made-by-a-child way, as you would put a child’s drawing on a fridge. But completely unmarketable to anyone outside our small town demographic.

“My niece was four,” he added, voice low. “We doodled it on a napkin at a family dinner.”

I swallowed. Hard. “Well... that’s incredibly sweet,” I said, genuinely. “And I understand the sentimental value. But Keaton, you’re aiming for bigger things now. That means big-box shelves and maybe millions drinking your beer one day soon. This—” I motioned to the screen, “—isn’t about losing that history. It’s about evolving to your better self.”

He remained stoic. I wasn’t about to give up. “Tell you what. We can frame the original, and hang it in the taproom. Maybe we even do a throwback label of a beer named for Paris on your ten-year anniversary of opening. Or when she turns twenty-one?”

He shrugged a shoulder to his ear. I hadn’t expected him to care so much about the old sketch. But then again, this wasn’t just about beer for him. It was about family. And if I wasn’t already infatuated with the former reality TV star, I was now.

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I took a few steps closer to him. Big mistake. The man brewed beer, and immediately I could pick up the typical scents of citrus, pine, and earthiness that were all hops, perfectly matching his style, like he was a solid tree in the center of the earth. But I had a job to do here, not a man to climb.

“Paris’ drawing got you started. But this new logo gets you noticed. This says you’re not just a brewer—you’re a brand. You’re a guy who knows craft brewing, and you want to be taken seriously. The goal is to take your business nationwide, and based on informal research I’ve conducted at the Hops, people love your beer. You hold the power here to make that happen, but only if you say yes to what I’m presenting here today.”

Richard gave an approving nod. I held my breath. My body stood at the ready, armpits sweating like crazy, and I hoped they couldn’t tell.

Keaton stared at the table for a full minute. Then, after what felt like a lifetime, he muttered, “The logo is... not terrible.”

Richard chuckled. “That’s practically a standing ovation coming from him.”

What was that on Keaton’s face? A lip twitch? A hint of a smile? Probably just a muscle spasm.

What I wanted to hear, what my marketing genius needed to hear, was how darn good it made him feel. Good was my word. Everything we touched, experienced, tasted, heard, smelled... it all produced a reaction within the body. Reactions translated into enjoyment or displeasure, and I tested those responses, much like the way my

neuroscientist best friend Maisy spent the past few years measuring human responses to stressful situations.

My job was to create the right marketing that would reach the right people, so that when they drank Keaton's beer they received extreme pleasure from the entire experience—from the point they saw the logo, picked up the bottle, drank it, to how good it made them feel.

I clicked to the next slide. "And, to make this even more fun, I've brainstormed five new brew names for the relaunch. Market-tested with a very elite panel of twenty-somethings who may or may not have been bribed with pizza while I was at the Hops one night."

"I don't recall you doing that?" Keaton asked.

I shrugged. "You weren't there that night."

I rattled them off with dramatic flair. "Reality Star, Hoppy Field of Dreams, Flirty Nature, Buzzed & Bitter, and Dark Romance were the most favored in my informal analysis."

I winked as I finished, and Richard laughed out loud. "Those are great," he said.

Keaton raised a brow. "Were these twenty-something females? Because they don't sound like me and my vibe."

I crossed my arms to challenge him. "You don't think they are more original names than your Beer #4, Keaton's Amber, Barley Bro, One Hop Wonder, and Brown-ish Ale?"

Richard snorted and shook his head. "No comparison."

“What? Brown-ish Ale really is kind of brown,” Keaton took a defensive stance. And then... he looked at me. Not glared. Not squinted. Full on planted his blue eyes on me and I felt it radiate through me to the back of my spine.

Was it an attraction? As handsome as he was, I wouldn't think I'd be his type based on all the women I watched him connect with on his season of Brewed for Love, not to mention the looks and flirts he gave to other women patrons at the brewery. Although he certainly flirted with me enough, too, every single time I visited.

I clicked to the final slide and read the slogan.

“Holly Creek Hops—Brewed with love. Served with swagger.”

A beat of silence. Then—just for a second—he smiled. Not full-on. Not enough to claim victory yet. But enough that my heart performed a pitiful little somersault.

Crap. Do not fall for the broody brewer who was a relatively recent reality TV star, who had blonde bombshells fawn all over him in front of millions in the viewing audience.

He had arguably been one of the favorites in the show Brewed for Love, which put craft brewing men in the same house as beautiful women without a brain and forced them into situations to see who would couple up. One by one, couples got eliminated each week. The last couple who remained won. Unfortunately, Keaton finished as the runner-up.

I'd been glued to the show long before I ever met Keaton in person. And when we did meet, I had to sit on my hands at the bar to keep from draping myself all over him as his biggest fan-girl. I hoped he never found out that I'd been the most vocal on social media about the fact his female companion on the show, Starla, had cheated him out of winning the whole thing.

“Humph. Brewed with love is kind of too similar to BrewedforLove, isn’t it? What would the producers think if I came out with this slogan? Talk about taking advantage of my ten minutes of fame.” He asked a valid question.

“Which is why I took the liberty of reaching out to Melanie at their studio to clear it before presenting it to you.” The head producer and I had a lovely conversation about how adorable Keaton was and how she’d wanted him to win, but at the time the front runners, Vanessa and Ben, were fan favorites and earned more votes.

“Well, I’m very impressed, Sophie. Nice work.” Richard stood. “I have another meeting to attend. So, Keaton? What do you think? With this new branding and the marketing and advertising under Sophie’s lead, if we can improve the image, improve sales, then I know we can attract the attention of major bottling and distribution companies.” He leaned his hands on the back of a chair, once again, waiting for Mr. H.C. Hops himself to weigh in.

Keaton scratched his beard, fingers scraping his jaw. “Sounds like we have a plan.”

I had to hold myself back from jumping up and down and screaming, Keaton Kingston chose me... Me! This was not the time to be a raving fan. Nope. I was a professional and would take this win with a demure, polite, albeit enthusiastic smile.

“Great. Sophie, I’ll look forward to regular reports on the progress.” With that, Richard walked out, leaving me on my own with Keaton as I tried hard not to gush about how happy I was.

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I needed this right now in my career more than they knew.

“I’m looking forward to working together over the coming months,” I politely said as I packed up my laptop. Keaton hadn’t moved. He was still watching me with that unreadable expression.

“So,” he said, voice low and rough, “when you visited the Hops, you had ulterior motives? You weren’t there to get to know me, but my business, and figure out an angle to work your way in to pitch us today? You used me.”

I smiled as I slid my things into my tote. “Can’t a girl multi-task?” For a second, he appeared genuinely amused. Then his smile faded as I added, “But now that we’re working together, I suppose we should drop the flirting. Right?”

He didn’t answer. Just gave me a long, slow once-over and muttered, “Well, that’s a damn shame.”

It was. Truly. And I tried not to let my exhale sound too excited by his words. But now this was business.

“Maybe. But the day you wake up and find your brews are in the hands of fans from coast to coast, you’ll be glad I came on board.”

“Rather cocky, aren’t you?” He asked, eyebrow half-cocked above blue eyed mischief.

“You’ll find I’m as sure about my talents as you are. See you soon.” My heart raced,

and I didn't breathe until I got back in my car and finally let it all out. I screamed, hitting my hands repeatedly on the steering wheel, probably looking like a crazy woman if anyone happened by.

"Yes! I did it." I got the account. Now I faced an uphill battle to get Keaton's business where it should be. Although—I lost an opportunity to see if things could go any farther between him and me personally. But this boss babe needed the work right now; my love life could wait.

As he left Richard's office and strode down the walkway in front of my car toward a glossy black truck, his hands tucked into his denim pockets, I stared. With a view of his perfect backside, I couldn't help but utter the same words he did.

"Damn shame." I pushed my sunnies up my nose along with forcing any lingering attraction to him out of my head. My work required full focus on the goals Richard laid out, which did not include fueling a fire burning between Keaton and myself.

2

SISTERLY ADVICE

KEATON KINGSTON

The moment I left the meeting, the midday heat blasted me in the face—though not nearly as hard as the realization that I apparently had a brand now. A real one. With a logo. A vision. A plan.

I was officially the face of a craft beer empire—one that came with a marketing expert in heels who talked about consumer trends and demographic reach like it was a casual conversation over coffee. And yeah, maybe it was hard to focus on numbers when Sophie looked that good doing it, the words spilling from her red, glossy lips the

entire time.

My truck rumbled as I pulled away from the Buchanan estate, the early afternoon sun sizzling on the country road. Windows down, arm out, I headed straight to the only place in town guaranteed to reset my brain before work with something to eat: Vivian's Cupcake Cottage.

The bell over the door chimed as I stepped inside, and the smell hit me like a sugar-frosted hug. Vanilla, chocolate, lemon zest, and probably a dozen other spices. While I used spices in my brews, I was a self-taught brewer; I wasn't the culinary artist who studied in France, like my sister was. Cupcake Cottage was her little slice of heaven here in Holly Creek.

"Ah, look who it is. Come by for your daily dose of sweetness on the way to the Hops?" Vivian peeked out from the kitchen, cheeks flushed and wearing an apron dusted with flour.

"Hi Uncle Keaton!" Paris called out from behind the counter, completely covered in what I guessed was probably spilled cupcake batter, but looked more like she'd mud wrestled in it.

"Hey, sweetheart." I ruffled her hair, noting a batter streak in it, grinning. "Are you saving any of that for the oven, or are you doing quality control straight from the bowl?"

She held up her little spatula like it was a sword. "Both." How fast she had grown, now ten, and healthy after her kidney transplant surgery a few years back. Although from occasional texts Vivian sent me, she was sure that Paris displayed a pre-teen attitude a few years too early now and then.

"She's been taste-testing more than helping, but we're calling it creative expression."

Vivian smiled while reigning over the large butcher block island in the center of the bakery's kitchen.

“Where’s Isabella?” I asked, and dipped my finger in Paris’ bowl for a lick.

“Go ahead and peek in on the baby—she’s snoozing in my office. But don’t wake her,” Vivian warned, and yanked her head in the direction.

I made my way to the back, easing open the office door. There, in a fancy pink bassinet surrounded by ruffles fit for a princess, lay Isabella. Tiny, peaceful, and totally unaware of the chaotic fun her sister was having in the kitchen.

I closed the door softly and got a little jealous of everything Vivian had. Since her marriage to Richard, she’d led a charmed life. She really didn’t have to work these days, but still kept the shop open throughout the summers, saying it grounded her to bake a few times a week, and she wanted her daughters to grow up seeing her working as well.

I suppose I should feel glad that Richard and his money could afford to take good care of these people I loved most. I knew first-hand of Vivian’s struggles as a single mother before meeting him. She’s still humble but doesn’t have a worry in the world with Richard by her side. He’s a good man, treats her well—better than her ex ever did—and is a wonderful dad to the girls. So I couldn’t complain.

I just wanted what he had. A good woman to love. A family. I tried not to be jealous of what he and my sister found together.

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Back out front, I leaned against the counter near Vivian. She handed me a warm mini cupcake without a word. I took a bite. Cinnamon swirl, nuts, frosted with a drizzle of caramel on top. Damn good. No complaints from my stomach.

“Mm. More,” I said through a mouthful.

“You sound like Richard. But at least you get to the gym more often than he does these days.” She tossed me another mini and I caught it in my mouth.

“Yeah, I noticed a little pudge on him today at the office. Getting the dad bod, is he?” I stole another mini when she wasn’t looking.

“Hey, are you calling Daddy fat?” Paris asked, slightly amused. I didn’t need that getting back to my brother-in-law, who was mostly footing the bill for my expansion into bottling my brews and taking my beer business national.

“Nope. He’s fit as can be. If anything, he must have gained weight because his heart is so big now, loving the three of you.” Good save on my part, and she giggled at that.

“Mommy, can I go upstairs to listen to music for a while?” She asked.

“Yes, hit the bathroom first and wash your hands and face and... anywhere else you see batter.” Vivian instructed. Once she was out of earshot, she turned on me, watching me over the top of her mixing bowl. “That’s her latest obsession, listening to allof Richard’s old records. The two of them have had at least half a dozen conversations about music. It’s really cute—Hey, what’s wrong? You’ve got that look.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What look?”

“The look that says you just walked straight into a marketing ambush.”

“Ah. Richard told you about the meeting?” I should have known. “Sophie unveiled the new logo today. It’s... different.” I scratched the back of my neck. “You know Paris helped me design the original. This feels like I’m erasing that.”

Vivian’s expression softened. “Keaton, that little girl loves you. She’ll always know she was part of your beginning. But life moves on. This is about growth. And Richard’s got the kind of business sense that turns home brews into shelf space across the nation. This is a great time for you to lean into him. You started from scratch and built what you have with nothing, but now you have two experts on your side—Richard and Sophie. Do you know how many business owners would kill for that?”

I grunted, not because she was wrong, but because I hated how right she always was.

“Or could it be something more?” Vivian gave me a knowing look. “Didn’t you say you had a little thing for Sophie the last time she stopped in at the Hops?”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

“You did—stood right there eating the French lace cookies I’d just made, and you called her ‘an adorable spitfire.’”

Yep. I had said that.

“Simply an observation about her personality, that’s all. She’s visited often enough with Maisy and Chelsea to Holly Creek. How could I not notice her? Doesn’t mean I have a ‘little thing’ for her. No.”

Could have fantasized about having a thick and longthingfor her, but no more of that. We're basically in business together now.

Why did that conjure up a dry mouth and dirty thoughts about her? Until today, those chocolate eyes and thick lashes of hers paired nicely with tight tank tops that showed just enough skin to derail my coherent thought processes.

Sophie was energy and light rolled into one. Each time she'd walked into my bar, all sass and sunshine, and every time she left, I found myself looking forward to her next visit.

Vivian eyed me with the womanly ability to see through bullshit. It irritated me at times how easily she read me, how a single glance from her could pry open the lockbox I kept on my feelings. Still, there was something comforting in it too—my sister knowing the truth even when I didn't want to admit it out loud.

“What? She's smart and driven. I admire that.” I said finally. “She knows what she's doing. And yeah, easy to talk to.”

Vivian grinned. “You forgot pretty.”

“Pretty... amazing with the branding stuff. It's all about business now.”

“Mm-hmm. Keep telling yourself that.”

I shoved another mini cupcake in my mouth to keep from responding.

Even so, I mumbled through the mouthful, “See you later,” and waved goodbye, but couldn't get out the door before Vivian got in the last word.

“Sophie is staying in town for a while to work on things at our guest house. In case

you want to stop by to see her. You know... to work.”

Great. Nothing like temptation served to me on a platter. Although I had plenty of work to keep me busy. And I sure as hell wouldn't go looking for her—not in a town where running into someone happened whether you meant to or not.

3

SNOOTY EXPERT

KEATON

I left my truck parked where it was and strolled down the main street of Holly Creek. We grew up here, and I could mark each store by the families who owned them; nowadays more of my generation took over.

On the corner, down from Vivian's, sat the hardware store run by my old high school buddy, Ace, and his father, Bruce. A combo hair salon and ladies' boutique held court on the next block, run by the homecoming queen of my high school class and her mother. I passed Flora's Diner, where Chelsea and Maisy's mother must be baking peach pies by the smell of it spilling out into the street.

Neighbors and friends and family all waved hello and smiled, some stopping to talk and catch up on the news or the latest gossip along this main road through town. Blink and you'd miss out on a quaint place, the only home I'd known.

I wasn't at all like Vivian, who studied in Paris and saw the world with her husband; hell I didn't even possess a current passport, which was why I'd missed out on her elopement with Richard in Denmark.

She liked to remind me now and then that, at my age, I could uproot my home and business and live anywhere. She thought after I completed filming on the reality show out in Denver that I'd be raring to upend my life, move away, and make sweeping

changes. But why? I found contentment right here in Holly Creek.

Life since *Brewed for Love* aired brought plenty of changes, as it was. More tourists gravitated to the area, curious about me and my brewery, along with some crazy fans as well. I took the time to install better security around my home and at the Hops last year. And every single time I posted something online, it blew up with a group of ever-growing female fans.

Like that shirtless video of me chopping wood last fall—it went viral overnight. What the hell did women see that was so sexy about a man chopping wood? I still received requests in my DMs for more of that type of content.

I took it all in stride though, because at the core of it, I was still me. Keaton Kingston, proud of the business I built and excited for the future... and looking for love.

I didn't find it on *Brewed for Love*, though. And despite keeping in touch with a lot of my friends from the show—the ladies in particular—I came to the conclusion that it was the wrong place to be looking for love to begin with.

My arrival at the Hops stopped my thoughts from going down the paltry rabbit hole of dating as a reality TV star, and the hot summer sun made me extra cranky about it all. Thankfully, inside, the cool air hit me like a reward for surviving. Air conditioning was my big splurge last year with some of my earnings from the show. One thing this converted Victorian home didn't have.

I had surprised some people in town when I started remodeling this old mansion into a brewery. Set for destruction, I bought it at a tax sale for cheap. It'd seen better days. But it called to me the minute I stepped foot in it. I loved the old carved wood throughout and the wooden floors. It took about a year of remodeling and adding on, but the end result was worth it as an eclectic mix of old and new.

We served light fare over lunch; but mostly the beer I brewed was the draw. For a Monday, the lunch crowd was thin, only a few regulars from town. Behind the counter, Jessa was polishing a row of glasses in her usual attentive way. Hard to say if she loved this place more than I did. I had several exceptional employees here, but I counted on her the most, like my right hand.

“Afternoon,” I said, stepping behind the bar.

“You’re back,” she replied, not looking up.

“Meeting ended quicker than I thought.” I sighed. “We’re getting a new logo and such, designed by Richard’s snooty new marketing expert.”

Jessa nodded toward my office with her chin. “You mean the snooty one sitting in your office chair right now?”

I blinked. “What?”

She smirked. “Better hurry. She could be marking her territory in there.”

I marched toward the office, heart already thudding with a weird mix of irritation and curiosity.

Sure enough, there was Sophie, comfortably settled in my chair at my desk, laptop open, a beer flight of four different brews next to her like she owned the place. She glanced up with her brown eyes crinkling, giving me a playful wave that should not have hit me so hard in the chest—but damn if it didn’t.

“You?” I stuttered.

“Yep. Your snooty new marketing expert.”

“You heard that?”

“Yes I did.” She chuckled and shook her head. She appeared so at ease in my chair, like she belonged there.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “Didn’t think you’d be working from here. I must have missed that in the meeting.”

“Since I’m tasked with working hard to make your dreams of expansion come true, I can’t very well do that entirely off-site. There are things I’ll need to know and to test and to experience, in order to create the perfect marketing campaigns for you. Because that’s what snooty marketing experts do, in case you didn’t know.” She arched a brow with a tilt of her head, her lips curved and teasing.

I quickly recovered and leaned against the doorframe, one arm high above my head. I couldn’t miss the way she bit her lip. “It’s not exactly a spacious office for two.”

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“If I may suggest... we rearrange the furniture and bring in a table for me to sit at under the window there, it could work. Tight quarters, but... that could lead to some interesting opportunities for creativity.” She winked.

I raised an eyebrow. “Or compromising positions if we aren’t keeping things professional.”

She blushed—just a little. Then smirked. “You wish.”

Damn. I did wish—was this considered flirting?

“Now tell me about these brews, Keaton. What makes each one different?” She pointed to the glasses.

“So the marketing queen doesn’t know everything,” I flatlined.

“I know what I researched online, and obviously from spending time at Hops. But I’d love to hear directly from you, with your experience.”

“Sure. I don’t mind sharing, and I’ll try not to be snooty about it.” I chortled.

“Hey, you don’t really think I was like that do you?” Her brow creased, voice full of concern.

“Nah. Just teasing. You were fine, and you impressed the heck out of Richard. Anyway...” I sat across from her and gladly imparted my knowledge with her on the world of craft beer. With a captive audience of one, I took advantage and gave her my

extra special attention. After an hour or so, including having her taste each of the four beers, it was clear the ales were more to her liking.

“I’m working now to bring out new Autumn flavors. Those special holiday editions are perfect for bottling, with flavors like pumpkin and fall spices. Otherwise cans are usually better. But the artwork on the label and can has to be on point. That’s the unique thing about craft brew culture—I can show what my company represents through the art shown there,” I finished.

“I get it. You’re creating the whole vibe and experience you want your fans to love,” she said, her eyes locking with mine. “Which is exactly what I do in marketing. I think we have a better understanding of each other now, don’t you?”

I sent her my best smoldering smile. “It’s a great start.”

She licked her lips, then chuckled and reached for her bag. “Wow, I think the beer samples might be going straight to my head. And on that note, I think I’ll leave you to it today.”

I grabbed the beer flight and dropped it in the sink behind the bar as I walked her out. “You met Jessa on the way in, I presume?”

“Yes, we had a lovely chat—about you,” she teased.

“She’s just as much a fan of Brewed for Love as I am,” Jessa called out.

“Well, you know. I mean... who wouldn’t be? Obviously, America fell in love with you, since you made it all the way to the finals.” Sophie’s cheeks pinked a little walking out.

I knew right then that pretending I was not attracted to her was going to be a full-time

job.

I let that hang in the air until we reached her car, a red sedan, nothing fancy. She looked great in red with her dark hair around her shoulders and a smart red suit. As she leaned in the backseat to set her bag down, I noted her toned tanned legs and an ass that redefined the word nice.

“So, you’re a fan of my reality TV work?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“Don’t let it get to your head. I won’t ask you for your autograph or anything,” she quipped.

“You know where to find me if you need me.”

“I do. Would you mind if I work here in the mornings through lunch each day?”

“Not at all. See you tomorrow.”

Back in my office, I opened my laptop and pretended to work while her sunshiny fragrance lingered in the air. She got under my skin. If pretending not to be interested was the plan, I was already losing the game.

4

TAKEOUT DATE

SOPHIE

I hadn’t meant to skip dinner. But in my defense, branding the entire future of a craft brewery empire while resisting the temptation of its brooding, bearded owner had taken more brain power than expected this week.

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My stomach growled like a beast as I entered Flora's Diner. I pushed the door open, greeted by the heavenly scent of fried something and baked everything. Inside, the air was warm, humming with conversation and the clatter of dishes.

This was the kind of place that made you nostalgic for a small-town life.

I doubted Keaton could tell that I'd once been a small town girl from Pennsylvania. Back when my parents were still together, when I was young—before Mom and I left my father, being the abuser that he was. After the divorce, she'd made her way to New York, with me in tow, hoping to make it big in the field of graphic design. Times were tight for a single mother in the city, and as much as she tried to hide it, I knew there were nights where she gave up her dinner for me.

About the only thing I recall of those years before she met my stepfather was how often she promised me things wouldn't always be so tough.

I hadn't thought about those nights in a long time. But sitting here now, in a town where people knew your name and offered you a comforting place, hit me harder than expected.

I smoothed my pale blue linen top over my denim cutoffs, and tried to remember if I'd run a brush through my hair before leaving the guest house. Not that it mattered. This was a quick in-and-out, grab my dinner and pie and go. Of course, that's assuming I could get away without Flora dragging me into conversation.

"Evening, honey," Flora called from the counter. She looked great, like a grandma, but with just enough sass to run a biker gang out of town. I'd met her years prior, on

freshman move-in day, when she brought Maisy to Columbia. As roommates go, I got lucky; Maisy became my best friend. And Flora was the motherly figure I needed right then, while mine was jetting off around the world with husband number three. “Your order’s just about ready. Sit here.”

I did as she asked and before I knew it, she’d put a diet cola and a cookie in front of me while I waited.

“Chelsea told me you were staying in town for a while. I’m so glad to see you, dear. How is everything?” With a warm smile, she patted my hand.

“Fine. Good to see you, too.”

“She said you’re working with Keaton now? Oh, he’s such a nice man.”

“He is.” And if I didn’t know better, I’d say she was a fan of his too, judging by her dreamy eyes. That was the thing about Keaton with all his guy next door brooding brewer charm. Easy on the eyes. Easy to like. He’d never have made it on the TV show as a villain. He was the good guy from the start—and captured the hearts of women across the nation who fell for his golden retriever personality across a dozen episodes.

“Did you see Maisy’s latest photo drop? She’s gotten so tan. Island life must be paradise. I miss her.” I could forgive her for leaving without me only because she was finally with the love of her life—Brooks. And that made me happy. They were good together and meant to be. I had no idea if I’d ever find a love like theirs, but I’d be just as happy to sit on the sidelines and cheer them on for life.

“Me, too. I’ve been worried sick she’s never coming back, but then last night she called. They’re sailing and will be in town in July. And...” She wiggled her eyebrows. “She says they have news.”

“Oh, wonder what it is?” Maisy hadn’t sent me a message yet about any of that, but the minute she was back in town, I’d hopefully get a girls’ night with her to catch up.

“I suspect it’s one of two things. Either he proposed or she’s with child. Both would make me happy. Then my girls would at least be settled. Colt, however, is another matter entirely.” She sighed, her worry lines deepening. Having been around the Calhoun family enough over the years, I knew the depth of their family love.

A far, far cry from my own family.

“Have you heard anything from Colt? I know the two of you are friends,” she inquired. And yes, we had been friendly before he entered the Navy. Anymore though, all we did was trade funny memes by email.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine when he gets back home, Flora.” What else could I possibly say to help leave her fears behind?

“Order’s up,” the cook called out behind her, and she left me there to peruse her daily dozen list of pies available. The woman knew how to make a mouth water with her baking.

“Here we go.” She set two bags on the counter, and I grabbed the one for me with my name across it.

“Thanks, Flora. We’ll talk more soon.” I waved and turned—and almost rammed right into Keaton’s chest.

“Oh, hi.” My breath caught and my hand landed on his pec. The muscle flexed and reacted to my touch, where a thousand jolts of electricity ignited. He wore a black t-shirt with the old Hops logo that clung just enough to his body to suggest he’d lifted a million kegs today. His hair was tousled like he’d run a hand through it fifty times.

And don't get me started on his eyes penetrating into me.

"Imagine seeing you here," he replied, eyes scanning my face down to my lips in a way that felt entirely unprofessional.

"You're stalking me now, Keaton?" I teased, enjoying the warmth of our contact a little too much.

"Obviously. You're hard to miss in this town."

Flora cleared her throat. "Your order is here."

He chuckled, low and rough, and stepped to the side to grab the bag. "Picking up dinner, too?" he asked.

"Yep. Long day." I shrugged. "You know, rebranding your empire, setting up marketing campaigns, and making your dreams come true. The usual."

"You make it sound so easy. I'm glad to have an expert like you on the case."

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I raised an eyebrow. “Careful, Kingston. That almost sounded like flirting.”

Flora interrupted. “Dinner for two done at the same time? You even ordered the same peach pie for dessert. You want to stay and eat together, too?”

Keaton and I exchanged a look.

“Oh no,” I said quickly, holding up a hand. “This is takeout. Strictly solo. I have a date with my laptop and a spreadsheet that refuses to behave.”

“Same,” he muttered. “Tap lists and a temperature gauge that thinks it’s funny to display ten degrees hotter thanks to the summer heat.”

Then, out of nowhere, he tilted his head and said, “Or... we could skip the sad solo dinners. I know a place. Great view.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Are you inviting me out?”

“It’s not a big deal, Sophie. Just a hill on the edge of town with a good view. You’re new here, and it’s one of the top five sights in Holly Creek, according to the tourist bureau’s brochure.”

I feigned shock. “Be still my marketing heart.”

He gave me a look. That one where the corner of his mouth twitched and his eyes went warm for half a second. It was unfair. And ridiculously effective. I was unprepared for this onslaught of Keaton charm.

“You in or not?” he asked.

I should’ve said no. “Lead the way, Kingston.”

The drive was short, winding up a quiet road I hadn’t taken before. At the top of the hill, the world opened up, revealing a carved stone stage and tiered seating nestled into the hillside. As the sun was getting ready to set, the lights twinkled in the valley below, scattered across Holly Creek like someone had flung glitter carelessly across a map.

“Gorgeous view,” I said as I stepped out of my car parked behind his truck, takeout bag in hand.

“It’s where we used to do Shakespeare in the Park.”

“We?” I lifted a brow.

“Yep. Thanks to my high school debate and drama coach. Some of my early thespian work was performed right here. But the coach retired. Now it’s mostly used for proposals and high school make-out sessions. Or for two, uh...colleagues grabbing a bite to eat. Follow me.”

We climbed to the top tier and sat on one of the stones. The air was cooler up here; the breeze carrying a hint of pine and whatever wildflowers managed to survive the heat.

We set about eating—a chicken salad for me, and a burger wrap for him—and of course I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to know more about his acting career. Okay, I admit I sort of stalked his social media accounts, infatuated with him since his show first aired, but not once did news of his past interest in acting come up.

“So, you had the acting bug early in school? Is that why *Brewed for Love* appealed?” I asked.

“I suppose it solved a latent fantasy about becoming an actor.”

“Really? Why aren’t you in New York or L.A. capitalizing on all your recent reality star fame?”

“I lived in New York for a while after high school, attending college there, studying theater. I landed some off-off-Broadway shows, even one off-Broadway. But after just a few years of the hustle and the grind, I came back home for a rest. I got into making beer with my dad, and I guess my interests changed. The dream of building Hops was something in my control; I didn’t have to rely on a producer or director telling me what I was worth. So, I stayed, built something of my own, and here I am. No regrets.”

My mouth dropped, finding this out about him. “Oh, shoot.” A piece of lettuce doused in ranch dressing tumbled off my fork and down the front of my shirt. I hunted through my bag for a napkin, but he passed me one of his instead. Hard to act cool and not fan all over him when he’s just revealed the roots of his acting talent.

“Why not start up a drama group here and put on some plays in the summer?” I asked, in order to draw his interest away from me pawing at the ranch stains.

“It’s on my bucket list. What about you? Tell me something interesting from your past.”

“What?”

The past? Even my best friend, my soul sister Maisy, didn’t know certain things from my past. I laughed nervously. “Tell you what. We’ll play two truths and a lie.”

“Okay. I’m game. And if I win, I’ll show you another of the top five sights to see in Holly Creek the next time we serendipitously meet up at Flora’s for dinner.” His soft lips, framed by dark whiskers, drew into a teasing curve.

“Deal.” I thought for a moment, then proceeded ahead. “Number one. I’m an heiress in hiding. Number two, I haven’t had a decent date with a guy in five years. And number three... I hate board games. Which is the lie?”

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He choked on a laugh and rolled his eyes. “You made it too easy. Obviously number one.”

“You don’t think I could be an heiress in hiding?” Interesting.

“If you were, then Holly Creek would be a great place to stay for a while.” He finished his main dish, and I had to agree with him. Holly Creek was a great town to hide away from my past. He continued, “Five years of dating disappointment? Now that I can believe. Dating isn’t easy?—”

“Says the man who tried a dating reality show,” I quipped.

“And failed,” he was quick to remind me with a snicker. “As for board games... I can understand that. In this day and age of games on our phones, it’s hard to go back to checkers or Monopoly. Although I happen to be a board game collector. So, I’m going with the hiding heiress as the lie.”

The truth was... each statement held a little of my truth in them. But I wasn’t about to confess how much. I went with his guess. “You’re right. Someday, you get to show me another one of the five wonders of Holly Creek.”

“I love winning.” He winked, as I finished my salad.

“Must have really hurt like hell the night you lost Brewed for Love?” I recalled how the cameras focused on the tears in his eyes back then during the interview in the car ride after he lost.

Telling by the way his jaw clenched, I struck a nerve.

“Yeah, but honestly, I was more pissed at Starla,” he admitted.

I couldn’t agree more; he had every right to be with the way she caused so much drama on that show. “You should have been with Cassandra in the end, not Starla. Many people online said how you got cheated out of the win. I couldn’t believe the comments on social media the night you lost.”

“That’s all in the past and, sadly, available to rehash online any time. But enough about me.” He shrugged, like it mattered little anymore or else he didn’t want to talk about it. “Let’s talk about how five years is a long time to not have a decent date. Tell me about that.” He leaned his hands back on the boulder, his face tilted toward the sky, tempting the giddy fan inside of me to take in every inch of his profile.

I’d rather not admit to him that eating dinner at a scenic overlook beside him in this small town was better than all the dates in my past combined.

I laughed him off instead. “I think we can save dating horror stories for another time.”

“Okay. Noted and I’ll hold you to that. So, what’s your favorite so far? Of my beers, I mean.”

“Honestly? The floral IPA. It’s light, crisp, just the right amount of surprising. I think it’d be an excellent candidate for renaming it to Hoppy Field of Dreams.”

“Are you always this poetic about alcohol?”

“About anything. Especially when it’s really good.”

“That being the case, later this week I’ll have you try a new pumpkin spice I’m working on.”

“Perfect. How did you know I’m a fan of pumpkin spice latte and anything fall-related?”

“Lucky guess.” His smile smoldered on me while the sun was on its final descent, the colors in the sky picture-worthy. I shifted my gaze to the horizon before my butterflies jumped out of my stomach and flew away. We sat in silence for a few minutes, the kind that doesn’t press or prod, but feels like something. I took some photos of the sunset until it was nothing but a sliver.

“Any regrets about doing Brewed for Love?” I asked.

“None. The money I made and the exposure have helped build my business. I may not have come away with love, but I ended with so much more.” His confidence so appealed, and my stomach flipped again.

Maybe a few months from now, I’d take him and anything he said to me in stride, unaffected by his charm, his scent, his subtle smiles under the whiskers, hell, his entire aura. But being around him, for now, drove my heart wild.

We reached for the pie at the same time. Our hands brushed. The electricity sparking between us shocked me. I gasped.

“Sorry,” I said, pulling back.

“No worries.” He handed me the pie with that same unreadable grin. “We’ll call it a tie.”

I took it, heart thundering. If he was any other man, any other night, this might be a

perfect first date. And I'd even let him lean over right now and kiss me, then take me home and do anything to me he wanted. Or I wouldn't be beyond making the move on him myself.

I'd finally break my five-year record of dating disasters.

But this wasn't a date. We weren't taking this thing any further than the mild flirtation it initially was.

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The moment was quiet again, but this time it pulsed, charging the air between us.

“This was nice, having dinner like this,” I said softly. “Unexpected, but nice.”

He nodded, his eyes on mine. “Yeah. We probably shouldn’t make it a habit, though, since we’ll be working together.”

“Definitely not,” I agreed, even if I already wished we could.

Above us, the sky shifted to deep violet, stars winking into view like they were watching. Waiting to see what we would do.

That told me it was time to leave. I’d save my dessert for later tonight, and my sanity, when I was alone in my bed, thinking of him with every bite.

5

NO WAY IN HELL

KEATON

A few weeks into this marketing gig with Sophie and I’d become hooked. Not only was I kicking myself for not hiring a marketing person long before now, given how much Sophie’s ideas touched almost every facet of my business—and made it better—but I’d gotten used to having the city girl in my office. From the way her scent permeated the room first thing in the morning, to the way her skirts softly swished as she sashayed in and out of it.

But today, Sophie wasn't here.

No soft knock on the front door ten minutes before we opened. No humming while she worked, or laptop cords snaking into my territory. Just silence, an empty chair, and the faint ghost of floral perfume lingering in the air. Things weren't the same.

"Uh-oh. You've got that look," Jessa said as she came through the swinging doors from the storage room, clipboard in one hand and a lollipop between her right cheek and teeth. "Like a man who just realized his morning coffee tastes better when delivered by a pretty brunette."

I rolled my eyes. "Sophie's not my coffee delivery girl. She's a marketing consultant."

"Sure. If you say so," she drawled, perching her curvy frame against the edge of the bar and flipping her blonde hair behind her. "Come on, Keaton. Just admit it. You've got a little crush."

I snorted. "On Sophie? No. It's a working relationship. She's here to help with the brand relaunch, not... whatever this is you're conjuring up."

Jessa gave me an infuriatingly perceptive look. With her blonde waves pulled up in a messy bun, sunglasses perched on top like a crown, she was part small-town sass, part bartender babe, and all heart—though she kept that part locked tight, with good reason. I doubted anyone knew her in town as well as I'd come to know her over the years working together here at Hops.

"Don't lie to me, Kingston. I've seen the way you look at her. All smolder and side glances."

"You're wrong. I smolder at every woman who walks into this place," I muttered.

“Especially the cute ones.”

She snorted. “And I appreciate the extra tips that go into our tip jar because you do. But there’s something extra about Sophie. You change when she’s around.”

I shook my head, grabbing the inventory sheets from behind the bar. “Shouldn’t you be helping me restock before the Fourth of July rush hits?”

“Trying to distract me with work? You don’t play fair, boss man.”

We got into the rhythm of it quickly, checking off bottles, pulling cases from the stockroom or cooler, and reorganizing shelves. Jessa scribbled notes, cracked jokes, and occasionally rapped her knuckles on the bar when I zoned out.

“You’re still thinking about Sophie, aren’t you?” she asked, double checking through the sheets before calling the job done.

“Nope. There’s nothing to think about.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” She rolled her eyes. “Should I be worried she’s about to take my place as your work wife?”

I chuckled despite myself. “You know you’re irreplaceable.”

“Damn right.” She grinned. “But if I was being replaced as your work wife, I’d want ample advance notice, please. It’s a small town and it’s hard to find a decent job.”

Jessa hadn’t always had it easy. She’d stayed in town after high school to help raise her younger siblings when her mom got sick, their father long gone years prior. Never complained. She showed up on time, stayed late, and ran this place like it was her own. I’d wondered once if maybe there could’ve been something between us.

She made it clear, though—after one slightly tipsy night when we almost kissed—that I was another type. I agreed she was too valuable of an employee to ruin with anything else.

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By the time we finished checking inventory, the morning sun could cook an egg on my truck hood. Each July started as basically a slow burn into craziness in our hometown. The Fourth of July festival would kick things off, and then the town would tumble into its second biggest month of the year: Christmas in July.

Tourists from all over came to Holly Creek for the holiday decorations and music, parades and fake snow all down Main Street. The holiday movies played nonstop at the old theater, the indoor ice rink operated again, and ice sculpture contests, along with Christmas Tree Lane, happened in the school gym. Between Flora and Vivian, there were enough pies and confectionaries to enter a sugar coma until Labor Day. The locals all exuded real cheer, in part because of the tourists and their money rolling in, although some grumbled about the traffic.

I loved it, and typically brought out my limited edition brew, Hoppy Jolly Christmas, and thrived with the brisk business pace all month. The money from this each summer helped fund all the expenses I'd face through the fall and holidays, and getus through the winter when snow blanketed the town and the crowds reduced until spring.

But this year? Something made me antsy. My legs were restless. I blamed it on Richard's drive to help me gain nationwide distribution. I'm sure it had nothing to do with the recent addition of a certain female taking over my office.

When I finally dropped into my desk chair, I glanced across the room at Sophie's side. Her laptop wasn't there. Her chair was empty. And dammit, it threw me off more than it should have today.

I reached for my phone and texted to find out if she was coming in, but stopped short of hitting send. I scoffed. That'd be something a worried boyfriend might do, not a colleague.

I wasn't used to sharing my space. I'd built this brewery from scratch. Every brick, all the mortar, all the finishing touches—I picked them. Sweated for them. And now there was this woman with a sharp wit and tight skirts who strolled in, kicked her heels off, and made herself at home.

I liked the sight of her. That was the problem. I needed to refocus. Remember who I was. What this business meant to me, and what I wanted in life.

My brews selling nationwide—that was the plan. Sophie was only here to help me facilitate that. After, when the goal was achieved, we'd both go on our merry little ways.

I swallowed hard at that thought, when my phone buzzed.

“Starla?” I glared at her name on the text screen for a second, then sighed. I hadn't talked to her in some time, intentionally.

Starla: Did you get the invite in the mail?

I frowned, and rummaged through the stack of envelopes Jessa left on my desk earlier. Junk, junk, invoice, flyer for a car wash fundraiser hosted by the Holly Creek High cheerleaders, and?—

Ah. This must be it. A heavy envelope with my name in fancy calligraphy that smelled like expensive perfume.

I opened and blinked a few times, shocked to find not only a complete weekend

itinerary in Las Vegas, but a wedding invitation, sent by the producers of Brewed for Love.

You are cordially invited to celebrate the wedding of Vanessa & Ben.

“In Vegas in August?” I muttered. “Who the hell gets married in a literal oven in summer?”

An entire reunion weekend for the cast of the show was laid out inside, all centered around this wedding. Welcome party poolside with cocktails, reunion filming with cast members, a beach party themed rehearsal dinner, and of course, the ceremony itself. Plus some post-wedding brunch bullshit I already wanted to skip.

Before I could finish reading, my phone buzzed again.

Starla: Check your email. Producer wants all couples there. Non-negotiable.

I opened my inbox. Sure enough, there it was. A little email from the Brewed for Love production team, reminding me of the contract everyone signed—the one that said they could drag me back into this circus up to three times per year after my season of Brewed for Love aired.

Surprise. This was one of them.

Starla: I assume I'll be your plus one. We'll make a splash. One more go-around for the fans.

I set my phone down and stared at Sophie's empty chair.

I didn't hate the show. Not really. It had given me a shot in the arm for my business. Introduced me to some great people, many of whom remained good friends. And at

first, there was something exciting about it—cameras, confessionals, group challenges with kegs and blindfolds. The actor in me loved it.

But Starla?

She had been a game player from day one. Gorgeous, and we were attracted to one another at first and paired up. But Melanie, the head of production, loved her and all the drama she stirred. The longer we stayed on the show, the more it became obvious that Starla wasn't there to fall in love.

She was there to win. At any cost.

I'd fooled myself at first, believing something different. Maybe I'd hoped we'd actually click and find something real among all the fakery around us on set.

But when the show ended, so did whatever illusion we'd managed to create.

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Now she wanted to play the reunion game. Probably parade me around like we were something we never really were. For the cameras. For her own greedy need to claw her way back into the hearts of the fans.

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed a hand over my face.

What the hell was I doing?

I wanted love. Real love. The kind that wasn't edited for reality TV.

I was ready for the type of relationship where you slept in together too long, making love to your wife, then you both rushed around all morning to get the kids ready for school. And evenings where we barbecued while the kids ran around in the yard. Nights where you held her close, watching the sunsets.

Brewed for Love was definitely not the place to find love. I found out only too late how the women there were after fame and fortune, using the show to get noticed. Or using any guy with a recognizable name and profile and money to get ahead.

Good for Ben and Vanessa, the winners, to find something real to hold on to through all of that and to take vows. I wished them well.

I wanted someone to come home to. Laugh with. Build a future with.

I just didn't know where the hell to find that anymore.

Sophie's chair sat empty across the room. What might've been a great start between

us was now mired in business.

And hadn't she used me, too? Flirting to land this consultant job?

Dammit, why the hell did matters of the heart have to be so confusing?

My phone buzzed once more. I didn't bother to look.

Instead, I pulled up the tap list, opened my spreadsheet, and forced myself to think about barrels and brews and bottling and seasonal offerings. Anything but Vegas or the show.

Because love? That was for someone else.

And I'd already learned the hard way not to fall for a fantasy.

Suddenly, I needed some air. "I'm going to Vivian's. Be back soon," I grumbled to Jessa on my way out the door.

With a deep breath of the hot air outside, I walked over to Cupcake Cottage. The town crew was out in force, adding more lights and decorations on the tall fir tree setting in the middle of the quaint square. I nodded at a few townspeople along the way.

When I entered Vivian's, she held Isabella crying on one hip, while boxing pastries for a customer with her other hand. Her smile when she saw me appeared tired, but pleased.

I took the baby off her hands right away. "Come to Uncle Keaton, baby girl. What's wrong? I've got you," I soothed and waited for Vivian at the island in the kitchen.

She wiped her brow after bidding her customers goodbye and joined me there. “You came at the right time.”

“Where’s your help today?” I asked, knowing Richard demanded she hire enough people so she wouldn’t have to be so tied down to the shop this summer.

“One had a doctor’s appointment, and the other had to go on an early lunch break to run an errand. Of course, that’s when we get a sudden rush of customers.”

“What about Paris? I thought she was helping this summer?”

“Yes, well, that I blame on Richard. He bought a few miniature highland cows and now all she wants to do is hang out in the barn. It was bad enough she loves to be out there with her horse. Now she has even more reasons to practically live among the animals.” She shook her head.

“Mini cows?” I shook my head, too.

“Don’t ask. For a billionaire who grew up in the city, Richard seems to think our property is his personal ranching cowboy fantasy come true.” She finished as the door chimed, signaling more customers. “You got her? I’ll be back.”

“Of course I’ve got her. Uncle Keaton is a pro, right, little girl?” I turned on the baby talk and set Isabella’s rump on the butcher block while I held her upright and continued to coo at her.

“Well, isn’t this a treat?” Sophie exclaimed, entering the room and leaning against the island across from me.

“Where’d you come from?” Damn, she was a pretty sight for my eyes, like they’d been starving for her all day. The sleeveless denim dress hugged her in all the right

places, and her hair up in a ponytail screamed for release and my fingers to run through.

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“From Vivian’s office. Richard asked if I could help her design some new shop signs.” She chuckled at the babbling baby in my arms. “You two are so cute right now. I should take a photo. It’d probably go viral in thirty seconds on your social media account.”

“Don’t you dare. This pretty little girl’s face needs to be kept private. I’m very careful about what I post online,” I warned, my mood darkening. Once again reminded that, as typical, some women have ulterior motives.

“I was joking, Keaton. Trust me, I wholeheartedly agree. If I ever have children, there would be a strict no social media understanding with their father. Can I hold her?” She fluttered her eyelashes at me.

Maybe I was too quick to judge her. “Sure. Here.” I came around the island and shifted the baby into her arms. The way her eyes lit up, swaying while staring into the child’s adorable face, didn’t help me keep her in the business zone.

“I should head back to the Hops,” I muttered, making a quick exit before the sight of her with the baby go too real—and messed with the boundaries I was barely holding onto.

“Great. I’m almost done here. I’ll stop by after, if that’s okay? I may even bring you coffee and one of Vivian’s cookies. Something for Jessa, too,” she called after me.

I simply waved, because Sophie was getting to me. And we would soon spend a weekend together in Vegas, pretending we were something we weren’t.

What could possibly go wrong?

6

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

SOPHIE

I smoothed the front of my navy blue dress, trying for an ultra-professional look, as I walked into Buchanan Ventures' conference room. Armed with my laptop and mock-ups of the new Holly Creek Hops' Hoppy Jolly Christmas cans, I had enough energy drinks in my bloodstream to power a small town.

Richard greeted me with a friendly nod from his spot at the head of the table, reviewing a thick portfolio of documents and speaking on his phone to someone.

Keaton sat slouched in a chair halfway down, flipping a bottle cap between his fingers like he was minutes away from bolting.

"Hey, you made it," I said, settling into the chair across from him.

"Barely," he muttered. Earlier today, he'd given me the excuse that he wasn't sure he could make time for me. All week long, he'd been standoffish. Granted, Holly Creek was getting busier as July Fourth neared, and while a part of me wondered what happened between us for this change, another part welcomed it. It made it easier not to fall for him if he was a dick.

"Long week?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "You could say that."

Before I could poke more, Richard closed his folder, set down his phone, and looked up. “I’m ready to see what you’ve been working on, Sophie. Have at it.”

“Absolutely.” I beamed and clicked my laptop awake. “I’ve finalized the Hoppy Holiday launch campaign for Hops—full integration with the brand refresh, the new can and label artwork, plus a launch party event to kick it all off on the Fourth of July. Perfect timing with Holly Creek’s summer festivities.”

Keaton straightened a little at that, seeming curious despite himself.

I pulled up the mock-ups on the screen. Vibrant, fun designs that still kept the rugged authenticity of Holly Creek Hops, just... more polished. Elevating what was already special without losing the roots.

“The launch party would start here in town with a VIP tasting night at the Hops,” I said, flipping through slides. “Then we roll out ads regionally across social media featuring the new cans and a behind-the-scenes video of you, Keaton, talking about the brewery’s story, adding that personal and authentic touch.”

Keaton grunted in a way that could’ve been marked as his approval. Or indigestion. Hard to tell.

Then his phone buzzed.

He glanced at the screen, jaw tightening. Without a word, he hit decline and shoved it back in his pocket.

I kept presenting, highlighting projected growth, engagement metrics, all the marketing stuff that usually got clients excited.

A minute later, his phone buzzed again.

This time, he cursed under his breath.

Richard arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

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“Do you need to take that? If it’s more important than this, I can wait,” I insinuated sweetly, masking my irritation.

“It’s nothing.”

I took that as translation for: It’s something.

We pushed through another few slides, talking about promotional tie-ins with the Holly Creek Christmas in July events, where Hops would sponsor. This town treated Christmas in July like the Olympics. Tourists, music festivals, pop-up shops, fake snow—it was about to get crazy, and I wanted Holly Creek Hops plastered on every cup and selfie backdrop in a fifty-mile radius.

Keaton’s phone buzzed again, and he muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “For fuck’s sake.”

That was it.

“Take the damn call,” I snapped, slamming my clicker down. “We’ll wait.”

Richard coughed into his hand, either to hide a laugh or to emphasize my irritation.

Keaton stood, giving me a dark look that did things to my spine it really shouldn’t have, and stalked into the hallway.

I folded my arms and tapped my foot, seething.

“He’s a little wound up,” Richard said mildly.

“Think so?”

Richard chuckled and excused himself, saying something about checking with his team about another meeting. Which left me alone to stew—and to overhear.

The conference room door was slightly ajar. And Keaton wasn’t exactly whispering.

“No,” he growled. “I’m not flying to Vegas in August. It’s a hundred and ten degrees there in the shade. I don’t want to be paraded around for some reality TV reunion bullshit.”

Vegas? Reality TV?

I tilted my head, straining to hear more.

“No, I’m not bringing a plus one,” he snapped. “Because I’m not going!”

Pause. More grumbling.

“No,” he said again, agonizingly slower this time, like he was arguing with a toddler. “I’m not showing up just so Starla can stir up drama and get more podcast listeners.”

Ah. There it was.

I sat back, connecting the dots. Brewed for Love. The reality show previews had already hit the airwaves. From what I could gather, there was to be a wedding for the winning couple, including a reunion event, which to my marketing ears meant cameras and potential exposure for Keaton and his business.

And here he was, about to blow it off?

I interrupted, opening the door. “Keaton, I need you. Can you tell whoever it is you’ll call them back?” I implored and figured this would not only give him an excuse to get off the line, but time for me to knock some sense into him.

He followed me back into the room and looked about ready to punch a wall.

“Problem?” I asked innocently.

He didn’t answer, just dropped into his chair and stared at the table like it had personally betrayed him.

“You should do Vegas,” I encouraged.

His eyes snapped to mine. That got his attention. “You were listening in?” He glared like I’d grown an extra head.

“Hard not to, with the door open, and you weren’t exactly quiet.” I leaned forward, both palms flat on the table, which was cool from the air conditioning. Softly, I said, “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

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With a heavy sigh, he launched into it, sharing all about the weekend in August he wanted nothing to do with. He added how he'd emailed his lawyers today to see how he could get out of the contract altogether.

I couldn't let him pass this up. "Look, I understand how you feel, but think about it before you write it off. You'll be surrounded by press, cameras, and influencers. If you show up looking like the badass brewery owner you are, it'll boost the brand visibility. Ride the wave, Keaton. Use the fame."

"I don't want to use the fame," he bit out. "I just want to brew beer and run my business."

"And you can," I said calmly. "But it'd be bad to waste an opportunity like this. Reality TV alums boost their careers all the time—book deals, brand endorsements, product launches. This is how you stay relevant."

"Do I look like a man who cares about being relevant?"

"You should," I shot back. "If you want Holly Creek Hops to grow beyond this town, you need to think bigger. And this is big."

He opened his mouth, ready to argue, when Richard returned.

"What's all the commotion?"

"Keaton's being stubborn," I said sweetly.

Richard looked between us, amused. “Tell me.”

Keaton scowled. “She thinks I should go to Vegas to whore myself out for publicity.”

“Leverage your exposure,” I corrected. “Huge difference.” I continued to fill Richard in on the situation since Keaton offered few details.

Richard chuckled and sat down. “Well, she’s not wrong. If you play your cards right in Vegas, figuratively, your growth will spike and the national distributors will notice. They’ll come begging on their knees to distribute your brews.”

Keaton shot him a betrayed look. But after a few beats, he dropped his shoulders. He got up and sauntered with hands on hips to the slide show on the wall showing off all my work.

“Fine. You want me to go that bad?” He turned on me, eyes suddenly gleaming as if holding a tempting challenge. “You’re coming with me, Sophie. You’ll be my plus one. My date to the wedding.”

I blinked. Then blinked again. I had to remind myself that he meant professionally, and not actually taking this fan girl on a date. “Uh... what? Why?”

“Because I’m not going alone, and I sure as hell am not going to be with Starla again,” he put it bluntly. “That’s been her, calling me nonstop, begging to be my date. Then she got Melanie, the producer, involved, so she called and begged me, too. It’s a giant mess I don’t want to be in the middle of.”

I launched out of my seat and faced off with him. “You want me to be your fake date?”

“Yeah. Here you are saying we need to leverage this to our advantage. Who better than the marketing expert herself?”

Richard laughed again, clearly enjoying this.

I narrowed my eyes. “Dating isn’t on the menu of my offerings when I consult with a client.”

“Consider it an emergency assignment.”

I stared at him, weighing the options.

On one hand, traveling with Keaton could be a nightmare—to my quivering loins and heart and fantasies of being his date.

On the other hand... it could be very,verygood for his business. And for my career. Being known as the brains behind his campaign to launch nationwide could take me to the next level. This was the opportunity I’d been waiting for.

But it all came wrapped in a sexy package named Keaton, and all the temptation it implied. More than a trip to Vegas, it would mean proximity to a man I considered dangerously attractive and held a crush for since his TV show aired. I would be pretending, starring in a role I might want too badly to believe was real.

Personally, it could prove too much. Professionally, this could be my shot.

I chewed my cheek a minute more weighing it out. “Fine,” I agreed at last. “I’ll go.”

“Good.”

We stared at each other.

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“Good.” I bit my lip. His eyes zeroed in right there.

Richard cleared his throat and gathered his things, chortling once more. “I’m all for it. Whatever gets the job done. Although I expect you both can be professionals about it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you two to plan your strategy. I have fresh straw arriving any minute for my new cows. Don’t judge me.” With a wink, he exited the room, a little too excited about that.

I waited until he was gone to lash out at Keaton. “Are you nuts? Us, together, pretending to be dates?”

“What could go wrong?” He shrugged, his lips twitching.

“Everything. First of all, we’d be spending a whole lot of time together.”

“So? You’re already invading my space at the brewery as it is,” he pointed out.

“Invading? Is that your issue lately? You want to see less of me? Because I could easily work from here or the guest house and not step foot in your place.” I crossed my arms and arched a brow, waiting for his response.

“I didn’t say that. Don’t mind having you around at all.”

“Then why the grumpy face all week?”

He stepped away on a huff, scratching the back of his head. “It’s this whole business with Starla and the show, that’s all.”

I felt for him. He was too nice of a guy to have gotten paired up with the likes of her at the start of the show. “I never understood what appealed to you about her back then, anyway? Is that the type of woman you go for? Fake breasts and frosted hair?” Oof, I needed to dial back my jealousy.

He arched a brow at me at first, then shook his head, taking a moment to answer like he was self-analyzing. “I don’t know. She was super nice to me when I arrived, and then... one thing led to another. By the time I realized she possessed a rather devious personality, it was too late. We were paired up.”

I bristled at one-thing-led-to-another. With the editing on the show, the producers made it appear as though he and Starla slept together almost the first night, a fast-paced affair. I bit my tongue not to ask for the truth—and I had no right to be jealous.

Except if I were his fake date, I’d want to know what I was walking into here. “Starla’s going to hate me if she sees me by your side, won’t she? I don’t relish being the focus of her drama.”

“Starla doesn’t matter. Besides, there are plenty of other couples she could mess with, and I won’t let anything bad happen to you. You’re safe with me.”

“Safe unless...one thing leads to another,” I implied. His lips twitched at that. “We’ll need rules to survive that weekend together.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” He nodded, but before we could hash anything out, his phone buzzed again. He sighed and glanced at it, reading a message. “It’s Jessa. She needs me to get back. Can we hash out our rules of engagement another time?”

“I suppose we have some time before August hits. You might not even like me by then and want to call the whole thing off,” I snickered.

“Highly unlikely.” A crooked smile planted on his face.

“Before you go, can I have Melanie’s phone number? I’d like to see if the producers would be open to some brand placement on the show.”

“Great idea.” He brings up her contact on his phone for me. “Hey, thanks for everything you’ve been working on so far. I am truly impressed.”

“Oh? You’re saying my snooty marketing expertise is making a difference in your business?”

“Fine. I admit you know your stuff, Soph.” He grinned, his eyes twinkling once again as he walked out compared to how he was when this meeting started. What a relief to see.

I could get addicted to those smiling eyes. What was I saying? I already was.

7

FOOTLOOSE

SOPHIE

Fourth of Julyweekend in Holly Creek proved to be a small town ode to patriotism. The entire population of a few thousand had taken the time to attend the events in force, mingling with countless numbers of visitors. I’d heard Jessa say a few buses had even brought tourists down from Canada.

The throngs of people on the street wore their red, white, and blue proudly. Patriotic bunting was attached to every roofline and fence. Kids ran around and waved hand-held flags everywhere. And Keaton’s bar was buzzing so loud with country music,

packed with people, he worried it might be a fire hazard.

I had planned on observing—taking notes, absorbing the vibe, making mental marketing checklists like a nerdy anthropologist in denim cutoffs and cowboy boots. But when two of Keaton's servers called in sick, chaos hit like a child running amok through the brewery with a lit sparkler.

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“I can help,” I said, hopping behind the bar before Keaton could argue.

“It’s not in your job description,” he grumbled.

“But immersing myself in serving could bring me some valuable brand research.”

“Don’t argue. We could use her. We’re getting killed here.” Jessa was all for it, and tossed me one of the new Hops logo t-shirts and a black apron. “Welcome aboard. We have one rule. Keep the customers happy and they’ll tip us better. We all share the tip jar contents at the end of the night.”

Keaton cocked his head at her. “Be serious. You know our rules. We card everyone, and we don’t serve to minors. And don’t over serve either when you notice someone getting drunk.”

“Got it. I just hope I don’t spill my tray and beer over anyone.” I slipped the black H. C. Hops t-shirt over my red tank, tying it off at my waist, then tied the black apron behind my back.

“Wait—you’ve waitressed or something before, right?” Keaton asked, eyes wide and suddenly concerned.

“Nope. This’ll be fun,” I giggled. “Don’t worry. How hard can it be?”

Two hours later, I was sweaty and exhausted, yet having the time of my life in this celebratory atmosphere of happily buzzed people.

The jukebox played, the beer flowed, drinks served, and I admired a certain rhythm to it all. I served one table at a time and kept up a sweet repertoire with the guests. In between, I grabbed drinks, and swapped stories and gossip about people with Jessa, who knew practically everyone, having lived here her whole life.

Every single time I passed by Keaton, he beamed at me with a smile I couldn't define—was he in his element? The boss of the brewery, making money, and giving people a holiday to remember?

I wasn't the only woman who couldn't keep my eyes off him. A bus must have dropped off an entire group of fans to view Keaton in his hometown. He signed several napkins and coasters with a felt-tip marker, more than once.

When one chick begged him to sign her cleavage, I tried to keep my jealousy under control. He was a big fish in a small pond, and he soaked up every second of it.

Perhaps I wasn't cut out to date a celebrity? The fan inside of me lamented, watching it all unfold. There were plenty of flirty men at my tables, though. Where my dating strategy failed in the past, I should have worked as a cocktail waitress to get more men to notice me.

I found out a particular group of three hockey players from Canada had driven down on their weekend off. One of them, goalie Declan Majors, had relatives in town and was particularly attentive to me every time I stopped by to check on their drinks.

“Aw, that's Declan... I went to high school with him. He's definitely had a glow up since then,” Jessa informed me as she eyed the man. There wasn't much she missed from her post behind the bar. I didn't know how she did it. Making drink orders plus managing the serving staff and in constant observation of the patrons—all while keeping Keaton in line. She particularly gave him grief over signing the woman's chest. I hoped he paid Jessa well. She was worth her weight. “Look at the way he's

been eyeing you.”

“Who is eyeing who?” Keaton asked, appearing by my side as he dropped off a tray of empty glasses.

“Hot hockey men are fawning all over our new server here,” Jessa explained, with a tilt of her head toward me while simultaneously filling four shot glasses up with tequila. “What do you think about that, Keaton?”

He glanced over his shoulder, eyeing them. “I’d say they’d better keep their hands to themselves or they’ll find their asses kicked to the curb.” Was that a green-eyed monster or his usual protection of someone in his employ? To me, he said, “Why don’t I take their table, and you take table eight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax, brewmaster. I can handle them.”

“My, my. So protective of our staff, isn’t he, Sophie?” Jessa commented with an all-knowing glance, and filled my tray with the shots.

“Do you want me to put in a good word for you, Jessa?”

“Ew. No. Hockey players are hot, but not my type.”

“If I’m not your type, and they aren’t either, then who is?” Keaton asked. I was curious about how he knew Jessa wasn’t into him. Having hung out in the brewery the past few weeks, it was clear to me that they had a special bond, like siblings. Had they ever tested the waters for more?

“I guess I’ll know it when I see it,” she shrugged. “Uh-oh. Don’t look now, boss man, but a fresh group of women just arrived.”

“Better grab another felt tip. They’re sporting ample cleavage,” I snickered to Keaton, and moved away toward the hockey players. Never before in my life did I think learning to balance a heavy tray full of drinks in one hand would be a particular skill I’d want to master.

As a teenager, I never had to worry about money or work. It was only since graduating from Columbia that I’d attempted to get my first job ever, trying to put my marketing degree to good use. Mom frowned upon it. “I don’t understand why you’re making this so difficult on yourself. Your stepfather would give you a job in a heartbeat,” she’d said, so sure of her second ex-husband’s offer to employ me upon graduation.

He would have, but then I’d be under his thumb. I’d be obligated to have to work for him and with his sons. My older stepbrothers never exactly took to me. I’d be fighting them just to get ahead.

Fortunately, I was able to land a job with a top advertising agency. It was good, at first. I liked the work, and earning a paycheck made me feel valued. But soon I found out the hardway how cutthroat the business could be. I quit and have been striving to build my own clientele ever since.

“Here you go, guys. Four shots, but there’s three of you. Who gets the extra?” My eyes bounced from one handsome player to the next.

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“That’s for you, sweetheart. Join us in a toast? We’re celebrating my birthday.” Declan handed me the shot glass. “One shot won’t hurt.”

I hesitated, noticing Mr. Grumpy face scowling at me as he stopped by.

“Having a good time tonight, guys?” Keaton greeted them, voice taking on a new tone I hadn’t heard from him yet. Bossy, controlling, protective... sexy.

“Yep. Thanks. I commend you on your stout. It’s good,” Declan said, slyly eyeing me over the rim of his glass. “And Sophie has been taking really good care of us.”

“Good to hear. Carry on. Soph, can we talk?” He yanked his head toward the bar, and I followed.

“Oh, come on. Don’t take the pretty lady away,” Declan loudly complained behind us.

Keaton didn’t stop until we were behind the bar, with Jessa eyeing us carefully. He turned on me, closed in, and lowered his voice. “I need you to take table eight.”

“But what about?—”

“The hockey crew? I’ll take care of them. They need cut off anyway.” He must have noticed my scowl and continued. “Listen, I’ve been doing this longer than you. Trust me. Those guys will only get more rowdy.”

“And you don’t think I’m capable of handling myself?” I crossed my arms. “I’d say

the past five years of bad dates have given me plenty of practice with assholes.”

He mirrored my stance. “Is that right? Damn shame, Soph. Sounds like you needed an intervention by a good man long ago.”

“Do you know where I could find a good man?” I taunted him with a cocked eyebrow.

We stared each other down for a beat until Jessa suddenly yelped when the music changed.

“Woo hoo. Let’s go. This is it!” she shouted, grabbing my wrist and dragging me along with a few of the other servers. We came to a stop right in front of the hockey guys.

“What is it?” Confused, I looked around.

“This is our song. We dance to it whenever it comes on, gets the crowd going. And the more we wiggle our asses, the more we get in tips. Come on, follow my steps,” she urged.

“Yee haw,” Declan yelled, and his friends whistled. The crowd shifted, making room for us to move.

Before I could protest, Jessa was line dancing like she was the product of two country singers for parents. She and the other bar staff shimmied and shook through the lyrics, and I finally joined in. I laughed as I stumbled through the first couple of moves until I gained more confidence with it.

I whooped, clapped, twirled, and lost myself in the music. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d let go like this. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Keaton staring,

acting like he cleared off a vacated table nearby. More like he devoured my every move, pretending not to care while his eyes said everything.

When they landed on my hips, I nearly lost my footing.

“Why isn’t he dancing?” I called over to Jessa, loud enough for him to hear. We exchanged a look, and without another word, we each grabbed one of his arms and hauled him over to join us.

He resisted at first, stiff and broody as ever. Then the music shifted, the rhythm caught him, and... wow. The man could move. With a sexy Wrangler butt, his gyrating hips never stopped, surprising me at every turn.

Jessa whooped. “Okay, Kingston! Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Neither did I,” I gasped.

Then the size of our dance group increased when the hockey players decided to crash in. I could see Declan headed right for me until Jessa intervened.

“Why if it isn’t Declan Majors? I thought that was you.” She forced him to take up her arms and dance. “I was just thinking the other day about those keg parties we used to have in the fields out on old route 365...”

With Declan occupied by her, Keaton suddenly grabbed me and twirled me. If I didn’t know better, Jessa masterminded this whole thing. I giggled and synced with him to the beat of the song.

Everywhere we touched—hands, thighs, knees—something sparked.

Keaton’s grip tightened, like he felt it too but didn’t know what to do with it.

He caught me around the waist and dipped me in a smooth move. My hair draped to the floor as my head lolled, and when he brought me back up, I was breathless in his arms, caught in a trance of his romantic mood. Our eyes met, mine half-lidded staring into his sultry blues. I'd exhausted any power I had to resist his charms.

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“Like I said, damn shame a good man isn’t around to intervene,” he chuckled wickedly.

My chest expanded, trying to catch my breath, as the song ended, yet he held me a second more. What would he do with me if we were alone?

I shook my head and snapped out of it, like I breaking out of his spell. I stepped back quickly, smoothing my apron. “Anyway. Back to work.”

“Table eight,” he growled as I passed him, which did nothing to calm the ache that started to manifest between my thighs.

I sauntered back behind the bar, wiping my brow, and Jessa followed. “Didn’t know your boss had hips like Elvis. How was your dance with Declan? Did you reminisce about high school?”

“Oh, he hardly remembers me. I just wanted to give you and Keaton some time together.”

I shook my head. “Jessa, you can’t force two people together.”

“From where I stand, I’d say there’s plenty happening between the two of you naturally.”

“And you and he never...?”

“What?” She snorted. “Hell no. I’m not into broody guys with beards. Nope, I’m

holding out for a man who is filthy rich. Someone to take me away from all of this.”

Keaton returned to the bar then and eyed us, staring at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Jessa dismissed, and we got back to work.

Over the last two hours until closing, the bar kept humming with people until the very end. At some point, Declan and his buddies had left, even drunker, and he begged me for my phone number. I finally gave it to him, just to get him out the door.

At closing time, I helped Jessa clean up, following her around. She gasped when we came to the last corner table, a cozy one by the original fireplace from the Victorian home Keaton had converted into the brewery. What a mess of game parts strewn everywhere from multiple games.

“Look at all these tiny pieces people don’t have the decency to clean up. I’ve told Keaton a hundred times that having his stash of classic board games here for people to play is more trouble than anything. Why, last month this couple got into a fist fight over who won...”

I stopped listening and eyed the pieces. Gingerly, I helped, picking them up and making sure each piece was correctly put back into the respective boxes. I could hear my stepdad’s voice now, nagging us kids about that. The games had become his life, and ultimately the entire reason mom left him, too. It’d been many years since I’d played or even touched a game.

“Are you okay? You’re looking like these pieces have a transferable disease on them or something,” she noticed and chuckled.

“Uh, I hate board games. That’s all. Played too many of them as a kid, I guess.” I shrugged and laughed it off, hiding the truth.

Finally finished, Jessa and I leaned against the bar for a breather as Keaton finished sweeping up.

“Whoa. You get to do this nightly? My feet are killing me. I have no idea how you’re still standing.” I observed her sensible tennis shoes compared to my boots. Granted, the last thing I ever thought I’d be doing tonight was working like this. If I had, I would have selected proper footwear.

She bumped her shoulder into mine. “Come on, time to turn in your apron and split the tips.”

As I untied the strings at my back, she started counting the coins and bills in the huge tip jar. The other employees gathered around.

“Yes. Big haul tonight. Here’s everyone’s share.” When she handed me a pile of money, I hadn’t expected it. I shoved it right back.

“Oh, no. I was only volunteering tonight. Put my share back in and split amongst you,” I demand.

Keaton must have spotted me limping toward the office to get my things. “You good?” he asked as he came up from behind.

“Debatable. I’ve gained a new respect for anyone who survives a shift on their feet.”

He moved ahead of me, opened the office door, and held out a hand to help me inside. The second it closed behind us, the noise faded and I sunk down into my office chair, groaning at every muscle in my body complaining.

He picked up something from his desk, brought his chair over to face mine, and then he patted his knee. “Foot rubs are my specialty.”

Too exhausted to fight it, I lifted my foot up. He carefully took my boot off, then my sock, and repeated on the other. The item from his desk turned out to be some type of foot lotion which must have contained soothing properties. With some in his hands, he began to knead one foot, then the next with an expertise that could rival the best masseuses at some New York City spas.

“Mm. Oh, my God. Where’d you learn to do this?” I moaned, eyes rolling into my head, ready to sacrifice my entire body to his hands.

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“I learned out of necessity, and from a video on YouTube. You work long hours in a place like this and foot care becomes as important as oral hygiene.”

“Do you treat everyone who works for you this way?” I eyed him through slits.

“No. Only the pretty woman sitting in front of me right now.” His blue eyes a shade darker, we entered dangerous territory here. A smile flickered across his face. “Thank you. For jumping in tonight, by the way. You really made a difference.”

My heart fluttered, thinking back over the night, the way he dipped me during the dance, his protective vibe for me, and now this. After a few more minutes where I was putty in his hands, I pulled my feet away and sat upright. “Don’t thank me. Just promise never to make me wait tables again.”

“You volunteered, if I recall. But it’s a deal.” He chuckled. His fingers worked the tense muscles and bones of each foot, however many they were. Every single one of them acted like an aphrodisiac. I wanted his hands to work further up my thighs.

Hell, he could put his hands anywhere on me and I’d die happy.

Only his hands slowed. “I probably shouldn’t take this any further.” He met my gaze, eyes dark, daring me to say otherwise.

When I held back, he cleared his throat, jolting me away from those thoughts. “Listen, Jessa and I are going to watch some friends of ours set off fireworks in a field right outside of town in a few minutes. Come with us?”

I wanted to say yes, but I needed boundaries. And my track record with romance was not the best. I shook my head. “Thanks. But I think I’ll head home and rest.”

He nodded, but there was something unreadable in his eyes.

I slipped out the door barefooted, carrying my boots and keys in hand, smiling tightly. All I could think about on the way home was what might’ve happened if I’d gone with him.

I told myself I needed boundaries.

But as I lay in bed thinking about his hands, his laugh, the sultry way he looked at me...

I realized I didn’t want space.

I wanted him.

8

DENY, DENY

KEATON

Christmas in July in Holly Creek was the town’s cute gimmick to draw in more tourists. The annual ritual dated as far back as when Vivian and I grew up here.

As a kid, it was a fun-filled part of summers off from school. As an adult with a business to manage? Still fun, but spiked with nonstop motion for a few weeks straight, just going, going, people and faces a blur, and followed by my ultimate collapse into exhaustion when it was all over.

Many of the business owners agreed this had been one of the best July months on record. Some said they believed I had something to do with it, that my semi-celebrity status, refueled by the commercials playing on TV about the upcoming nuptials of former *Brewed with Love* cast members, brought more curious people into town.

All I knew was I posed often for photos and signed a ton of autographs, my cheeks aching from too much forced smiling. When I would empty my pockets each night, I pulled out strips of paper with a name and a phone number on it. Some women would insert them, hoping to get lucky. Last year, I collected them and counted how many I had received. It was a real ego boost. This year, I couldn't care less and tossed them all away.

The mayor even approached me about being an ambassador for Holly Creek. He didn't say this directly, but in the undertone of the conversation, he seemed to suggest that I mention the town more often in my public appearances, and show off photos of the town online.

First women and now the mayor tried to use my small amount of fame to their advantage. Would I ever escape it? It all came with the territory, and so I had accepted that being reality TV famous came with a price. But there's a time to be that guy, and then there's a time to just be me.

Holly Creek was so busy throughout the month, I blinked twice, and it was over. In terms of business, I couldn't be happier, though. I spent the entire month busier than ever, even sleeping there a few nights, elbows deep in doling out my suds, until the final day of July.

I was done with peopling and ready for August to return to normal. As was tradition in town, August first had become an official day of rest. Stores remained closed. Everyone relaxed with family and friends to recover before getting back to work.

For me, that meant spending the morning relaxing and lingering in bed, and later I'd spend the afternoon at Richard and Vivian's as they volunteered to host a party.

I yawned and noticed the time, having slept in a little late. I couldn't help it. Thoughts consumed me about Sophie, thanks to her daily appearance in my life this summer.

From her coffee-fueled mornings in my office, to her laugh echoing while brainstorming funny new brew names with me, to the way she sometimes wore glasses and pushed them up her nose, it took all my restraint not to take her and bend her over my desk.

She brightened my mornings in the office like Hops' personal sunshine, but she also starred in my nightly fantasies, too. The more I was around her, the more she poisoned me with her pheromones. Every night I'd drift off to sleep, craving her.

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I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat upright, scrubbing my face when a text came in. The name Sophie popped up, and a sleepy smile spread across my face.

Sophie: Everyone is here but you.

Keaton: Miss me?

Sophie: Of course. I've been talking up the new brew you're bringing for everyone to try. I tested some names we've been batting around to see which one they like.

Did this woman ever stop working? Not that I minded. She was good for my business.

Sophie: Everyone loves Frisky Frosty so far.

Keaton: Really? I was hoping D.E.L.F. would be the winner.

I chuckled at how she and Jessa were against that name from the start. I thought it was rather creative—Dirty Elf I'd Like to Fuck—but they'd nixed it right away.

Sophie: Sorry to disappoint you. But that name wasn't even on my survey.

I shook my head and looked down at the huge wood twitching between my legs. I gave him a rub.

“Yeah, I know, buddy. It's been far too long since you've had the pleasure of a woman. My hand will have to do once again today.” I stood and read another text

from her.

Sophie: Hurry and get here. It's hot and we all need your beer.

Keaton: Relax, city girl. Be there soon.

I nearly texted her something I shouldn't—something flirty, something real.

But I deleted it. What good would it do?

She was here to work, not to fall for the idiot who couldn't stop thinking about her.

In my extra long shower, my hand provided little comfort. The agony of not knowing the feel of being inside of her had better stop, or I'd drive myself insane. My poor, thick manhood, deprived of any female attention, needed relief. Under the stream of water, I stroked myself, imagining her beneath me or riding me, using every position known to me.

I moaned her name, and growled and painted the wall as I came.

Temporary solace.

She'd become my obsession.

Assholes who tried to hit on her at the Hops weren't worthy of her. Especially that hockey player, Declan, who'd visited again one weekend. I was pretty sure they exchanged phone numbers, and positive the only thing he wanted was sex.

Hell yeah, I dreamt of having sex with Sophie. Obviously, I was the better choice for her over some jerk chasing a puck in the north.

Didn't help one bit that Jessa reminded me—teased me—after seeing how grumpy I got that weekend, that Sophie was still on the market and didn't have a ring on her finger.

The last woman I should want was the one using this marketing consultancy with me to get ahead. When this was all over, Sophie would move on. Nothing tied her here to Holly Creek.

My mind was a clusterfuck. The trip to Las Vegas loomed ahead of us, and all I could think about was getting lucky with her. What was I thinking, asking her to be my date?

When I finally swung my truck into the Buchanans' driveway, they had the place dressed up as a winter wonderland. Richard with all his money—and now Vivian, too, as his wife—lived far beyond anything she and I imagined while growing up here in a tiny two-bedroom house.

I hoisted the keg out of the truck onto my shoulder and hiked around their house into their backyard. Twinkling lights draped the trees, pine garlands framed lattices, and a banquet table stretched so far it needed its own zip code. A line of red and white blooms and battery-operated taper candles spilled down the middle.

Richard waved from behind the grill in his outdoor kitchen with all the fancy gadgets. With a wrist flicking toward his refrigerator for the keg, I made my way there. Along the way, I greeted Rex and Chelsea, who were playing a game of croquet, and Vivian, Jessa, and Sophie, who were talking around the table.

“Here it is. My new formula for a holiday brew. I can't wait to see what you think of it,” I announced to anyone in earshot.

“Neither can I. I have a few questions I'd like to ask everyone after you have all had a

few sips,” Sophie called out, setting down a cinnamon-stick cocktail and producing a clipboard from her bag.

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Damn, she came dressed to kill. I almost tripped over a toddler's ride-on car, getting a good eyeful of her, which would be a disaster if the keg went down. But worth it to see her in a crimson sundress with white polka dots and buttons teasing me down the front.

"It's always about marketing with you, isn't it?" I chortled, giving her crap about it. "Step away from the clipboard. Today is the official Holly Creek Day of Relaxation, if you didn't know. That means no work."

"Thank God. I needed a break," Jessa complained. She'd swapped her usual bartender head-to-toe black for an emerald-green floral dress. Compared to Sophie's slender frame, Jessa's was curvy, or plenty for a man to hold, as she always put it.

Ogling Sophie's curves, she had plenty enough form to hold. I tried not to sneak glances at her while I removed the old keg from Richard's fridge and installed the new, but she entered my line of sight, and my chest constricted.

Fuck. Why did I have this reaction to her every time?

"Is this the Frosty Froth?" She giggled, bringing up another name we'd come up with.

"Nope. It's the Sleazy Elf," I replied, testing the new one I'd thought of in the shower while I jerked off to thoughts of her.

"Hm. Is it the spices you used or the man who brewed it that makes it sleazy?" With a gleam in her eyes, she tapped her chin with a pen. She hadn't tasted it yet. I wanted her and Jessa's fresh opinions today, like everyone else.

“Guess you’ll have to take a sip and find out.” I narrowed my gaze on her red stained lips.

Vivian appeared by my side then, carrying a tray of frosted glasses. “Finally, a day off. How did things go at Hops? I feel like we’ve been passing each other and never had much time to talk all month.”

“The numbers don’t lie. Best July ever for the brewery. How about over your way? Who sold the most cookies, you or Flora? And where are the babies?”

“They’re inside with Paris. Flora is monitoring them... which means she lost. She offered to babysit as my reward.” She moved off to Richard’s side to micromanage his work at the grill, and I filled the glasses. “Hard to beat a hometown favorite that’s been here for years longer than my Cupcake Cottage, but I’ll still try every year.”

Rex was the first to grab a pint of my new brew. Soon we all held frosty mugs in our hands, quickly melting from the blistering sun.

“We need a toast,” Richard announced. “Raise your glasses to the town of Holly Creek. May it and those in it always prosper.”

“That’s it? You couldn’t come up with anything more clever?” Rex joked.

“Asshole. You make a toast then,” Richard shot back.

“Nope. One is good enough. Cheers to all.” He clinked glasses with Chelsea first. I clinked mine with Jessa and Sophie, giving them both a wink of my eye.

“Down the hatch. May we drink in good health?” I took a swig and relished in the flavor profile of cinnamon, pumpkin, cloves, and my personal secret that added a smokiness to it all.

“Ah. Yes. I can totally taste the spices in this malt. Excellent.” Rex wiped the foam off of his upper lip.

“Masterful,” Richard added. His praise meant a lot, especially considering his time and investment in my business.

“It makes me want everything fall-ish right now. Especially if it beats this heat,” Chelsea exclaimed, fanning herself.

Jessa chimed in with, “You know, I love everything you make, Keaton, but this might become my new favorite. The day you launch this, I can see more tips coming my way this fall.”

Sophie eyed everyone and prepared to take notes on her clipboard. “Would you all say it’s warm and comforting or festive and flavorful?”

“Both?” Rex said.

“But if you had to choose one?” She continued to pry and prompt for a few more minutes. Clearly, she didn’t know when to stop.

“Okay, enough work. Let’s get back to relaxing and enjoying the day,” I chided her. She let her shoulders fall, grinning sheepishly, and put away the survey.

Suddenly, a woman shouted from the back door of the house.

“Merry Christmas in July, everyone. Surprise!” All heads turned to find Maisy standing there, with Brooks behind her, both freshly tanned. They strolled into the party like travel bloggers without a care in the world.

Flora came out from the house and joined Chelsea in screaming, and Vivian clapped

like someone had won an award.

“Maisy!” Sophie ran to them and they all formed a group hug of shrieking women.

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“You two didn’t come back here just to tan-shame us, right?” Rex teased Brooks.

He shook hands with all the men as a summer breeze picked up around us.

Brooks sniffed the air and scrunched his nose. In the heat of the afternoon, it stunk. “What is that smell?”

“It’s coming from my new stable of miniature Scottish cows, who produce more muck daily than I’d expected, but I love them,” Richard explained, practically beating his chest over his new hobby-rancher’s heart.

“Look at you, you’re glowing,” Chelsea observed her sister’s sun-kissed skin as they all gathered around the table.

“Well, other than all the sunshine we soaked up on the island, there’s a second good reason for that,” Maisy said, cheeks pinking. “We came home to share some news.”

Everyone went quiet.

Brooks beamed by her side. “We’re having a baby, and I asked Maisy to marry me.”

“I said yes!” she erupted, flashing a ring on her finger.

Cue the squeals, hugs, and clapping from all the women. Flora wiped her eyes. Maisy cried, apparently blissfully happy.

I offered Brooks a frosty mug of the yet to be named brew to celebrate the

homecoming, along with a heartfelt congratulation.

I'd had occasion to talk with him when he and his brother, Archer, visited Richard and Rex, and always thought of him as one of the good guys. He'd found something real with Maisy. It showed by the way he smiled and kept a hand on her, preening like he was proud as hell.

As the women split off planning weddings and baby showers, talk fell among the guys about marriage and kids. I peered around the group, uncomfortable as fuck, with nothing to add as the outlier.

"Anyone need a refill?" I pointed to Rex and Richard's empty glasses, falling into the comfort of my bartender role. They handed them over and I meandered to the keg. I read a text while there, half tempted to ignore it. Everyone I cared about was right here, so why bother? But I quickly peeked. It was Cassandra from the show.

Cassandra: I'm looking forward to seeing you again in Vegas.

Keaton: You could have seen more of me, but you chose Anthony over me.

Ah, Cassandra, the buxom blonde that I'd wished I'd ended up with instead of Starla on the show. I regretted nothing of my time on the show, but now and then I wondered if Cassandra and I should have ended up together.

Some time ago, we reconnected and texted flirty exchanges for weeks—until she went to Denver and hooked up with my buddy Anthony like I never existed.

Some friend. Some woman.

Cassandra: Only because it made sense. He lives in Denver. You're far away.

Keaton: I could have moved if there was hope for us.

Cassandra: There still could be. I can't wait to see you at the wedding in Vegas.

I quickly scanned her Instagram to find photos of her and Anthony, even one from this morning where they were kissing and holding each other, both profiles claiming they were in a relationship.

I wanted to text back, 'what about Anthony?' For that matter, I should text Anthony and tell him what his girlfriend was up to, but screw them. Considering he knew I was into Cassandra, but put the moves on her in Denver anyway, showed me the type of friend he was.

Tired of the games, I ended the texts there and turned off my phone. I would not fall for it. Not when Sophie was across the way, catching my eyes. Real and right here. But for how long?

Leave it to Vivian to notice, suddenly at my elbow, checking on the meat at the grill. "You've got it bad."

"No, I don't." Deny and deny again helped me cope with the rising levels of lust in my bloodstream.

"You're gazing at Sophie exactly like you did at Naomi in the band during high school. Dare me to break out the yearbook to prove it?"

As a scrawny, pimple-faced guy with braces and glasses, my photos back then were the last thing I wanted Sophie to see.

"What's not to like? She's funny, easy to talk to, and she's great for my business. Doesn't mean I want to fuck her," I admitted.

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Vivian cocked an eyebrow at me in that way she always did when calling me on my bullshit. “I think the looks you send her way are more than lust.”

“Stop it,” I grumbled.

“I’m just saying you could have more with Sophie,” she insisted on continuing to irritate me. “Have you tried asking her out or talking about it to see if the feeling is mutual?”

Paris startled both of us when she popped up from nowhere and exclaimed, “Uncle Keaton, are you and Sophie dating?”

I rolled my eyes. This was how rumors got started in a small town. “No, Paris. Just friends.”

“Oh, you’ve been friend-zoned, like how my bestie Emmie just friend-zoned our bestie Xavier?”

“Paris, you’re going on eleven. You and your friends cannot have boyfriends yet.” Vivian had a handful to work with there. I left mom and daughter to figure it out.

I crossed the yard and caught Sophie’s eye again and nodded with a smoldering smile back at her. Was I doomed to face life alone? Everyone else had love figured out. While I was one Vegas weekend away from either winning something real... or screwing it all up for good.

“Let me give you the grand tour of the barn,” Richard offered to Brooks, and I

followed the guys out, happy for a distraction.

9

THE PREVIEW

SOPHIE

Alone at last with my bestie, I brought Maisy a lemonade, and we sat under the shade on the porch together. I missed her terribly. Her surprise arrival landed like a sunbeam on fresh linen, instantly brightening my life after her trip to Buchanan Island with Brooks. Together, they radiated the kind of forever energy I'd longed for with a man someday.

The usual worry nagged at me. I grew up with a mother unable to sustain long-term situations, currently on marriage number three. Not exactly the healthiest example for how to do relationships. That, along with five years of bad dating, might mean I'm not meant for long-term relationships, either.

Music started up in the yard, and my attention diverted. Keaton danced with Paris to the tune of Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree. I melted, watching the pair of them. The green polo shirt he wore showed off his biceps, perfectly flexing in the golden sun. With his niece giggling, his infectious laughter with her had me grinning, too, especially when he swung her high in the air and flipped her around.

They were having a great time. I recalled exactly how his hands felt on me when we danced that one night at Hops?—

Maisy cleared her throat and caught me ogling him. "You look good, Soph... so does a certain brewery-owner."

I snapped out of my daze. “Oh, well, he’s a stud in a beard with his own business and partially famous. He catches every woman’s eye everywhere he goes.” I turned the tables on her. “But look at you. Like you stepped out of a romance novel after finding your happily ever after.”

“It’s the island glow. I can’t recall ever feeling this happy before.” She tilted her head back into the cushion of the Adirondack chair. I envied her relaxed state, a far cry from the stress she’d been under when she was working at the Orion Mind Institute, and managing a major project as one of their newest neuroscientists. “So. Catch me up. Chelsea said you’ve been spending a lot of time with Keaton?”

My cheeks flushed instantly. “Yep, but it’s not what you think. I’m his marketing consultant.”

“Is marketing the only thing you lend your expertise to?” She teased and sipped her drink.

“I admit, we get a little flirty.” I let out a sigh. “It’s complicated.”

“Doesn’t have to be. Do you like him?”

“It’s hard not to.”

“I remember all the nights of you watching his TV show. Then, when you first met him, you were instantly smitten.” She nudged my side. “I can only imagine how you feel now.”

I laughed softly. “We’re good friends, that’s it. But... we will soon be fake dating in Vegas.”

Maisy’s brows flew up. “Wait. Back the eff up, girlfriend. Tell me everything right

now.”

I spilled the entire story in a low voice, all about the branding deal, the Vegas wedding of his friends from the show, being his plus one for the weekend. By the time I got to that part, her jaw hit the floor.

“This is pure genius. You get him all to yourself for an entire weekend. A lot can happen in Vegas.” Her brows wiggled.

“Don’t get overly excited. This is just a work thing. I’m there to make sure he takes advantage of every opportunity to promote his brand.”

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“Why not let him take advantage of you while you’re at it? Admit it, you’re attracted to him as more than a friend, aren’t you?”

God, she knew me well. I didn’t answer right away. My fingers curled around my drink glass, washing in the condensation.

“Yes, you are.” Maisy gave me a soft smile. “Then I can’t wait to see if what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

“You’re naughty. Nothing is going to happen,” I chuckled.

“Never know.” Her confidence in me, while impressive, didn’t resonate. “I’m entering a new phase of my life, Soph. A husband and kids? How did this happen to me? I’d love nothing more than my best friend by my side going through the same things with me.”

“I will be by your side, more than likely very single, though.” I reached over and patted her hand, taking a long look at the rock on her finger. “Brooks must be good for you, but I missed you. How did I survive these months without you?”

“I don’t know, but I guarantee if I’d been here, I would have made you fuck around and found out with Keaton long before now.” She winked, the playful tone of her words making me chortle.

“Maisy! We work together.”

“So did me and Brooks.”

Before she could persist down this line of thinking any further, her pleading eyes too much to bear, I called over to Flora to cut Maisy's fascination with Keaton and me short. I interrupted her huddle with Chelsea and Vivian. "Wait until Colt hears Maisy's news. Have you heard anything from him lately, Flora?"

"His communications are slow and spread out these days. I'm anxious about him." She shook her head and drew in closer to where we were on the porch.

"He'll be out of the Navy this fall. We'll see him soon, Mom." Chelsea hugged her to her side.

"He's not coming home," Flora said, her voice heavy. "He wants to hike the Pacific Trail. Find himself."

Chelsea frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means he needs space," I offered a calming opinion. "I think that's really brave of him. He's faced something difficult on the ship that he won't tell us about. Spending time in nature could be really cleansing for his soul."

"His soul?" Keaton leaned an arm on the porch railing beside my chair. "Didn't realize you two were close enough to know his soul," he muttered under his breath, so likely only I heard. But of course, Maisy did, and she jabbed me with her elbow.

"If only we could all convince him to come home. I could hug him and assure him. He could talk to me and we'd all help him best we could, right?" Flora glanced around the group, each of us nodding and speaking assurances. "Here I was, thinking of selling my house. But maybe I should hold off for a while in case he comes back."

Chelsea choked. "What? Our family home?"

“Well, with you kids gone, it feels less like a home. I’m getting older, and taking care of the house is harder. I want more time with my grandkids and less time cleaning a big old place full of memories. Besides, the roof needs repairing soon, and the yard has driven me absolutely crazy this summer.”

Chelsea chewed her cheek. “I see. Let me talk to Rex. We could hire someone to take care of these things for you.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t want you spending money on little old me like that?—”

“Mom, we’re fine, and I know Rex would agree with me.”

“If you end up selling, I’ve got a couple of spare rooms above the Hops. He could rent one of those. I could even give him a job until he lands on his feet,” Keaton offered. His kindness brought a curve to my lips, but before I could thank him, Richard yelled from the barbecue.

“Time to eat.” He proudly carried over a huge metal tray of ribs.

We all shuffled over to the table. I tugged at Keaton’s arm and we lingered toward the back of the group.

“That was really nice of you to offer to help Colt,” I said.

“He’s my cousin,” he intoned, like it meant something I didn’t get.

“Oh, shoot. I left the plates inside.” Vivian rushed toward the house again, but I was closest.

“I’ll get them,” I called.

“Great. Thanks. They’re in the pantry.”

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Keaton followed me. "I'll help."

It wasn't exactly a two-person job and the pantry, while well-stocked, wasn't huge.

Keaton entered behind me anyway and closed the door, trapping us inside in the dimly lit space.

"Kind of intimate quarters here," I chuckled nervously, searching for the plates.

"Are you close with Colt?" he asked, voice low.

"We're friends," I shrugged. "We email and text sometimes. I kissed him goodbye when he left a few years ago for the Navy, but it was only meant as a friendly goodbye sort of thing. Why do you ask?"

Forgetting the plates for a moment, I crossed my arms and leaned on the shelves across from him. He leaned, too, leaving only a couple feet of space between us. The heat of the day must have warmed up his after shave because the spicy minty scent of it permeated the room.

"Just wondered if there was something between you two I didn't know about." He shrugged it off as nothing, like when he asked me if I intended to go out with Declan a couple of weeks ago when the hockey player made another visit from Canada.

As cute as Declan was, I'd resisted his charms, especially after seeing his Instagram full of photos with him dating a Canadian pop star off and on over the past year. I've been a rebound date before and never intended to repeat that experience.

“Like I said, just friends. I found Colt to be funny?—”

Keaton’s jaw flexed. “Funny? Funnier than me?”

I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “Jealousy doesn’t look good on you.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Mm-hmm. I suppose you think you have some claim on me since we’re about to go on this date in Vegas?”

He hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and took a step closer. I couldn’t back up.

“I just know that Colt is not your type.”

“How about Declan? Is he my type?”

“Absolutely not.” His growly voice gave him away.

“Oh? And you think you know my type now?” I challenged.

“I’ve been observing. Purely information gathering. You know, out of concern because you say you haven’t had a decent date in so long.”

My heart beat faster. That explained the way I’d catch him staring at me sometimes.

“And what have you concluded, Kingston?” I enjoyed using his last name whenever I skipped into flirting territory with him.

“That you need someone more grounded. Someone who builds things instead of running from them. A solid man who knows what he’s about and where he’s headed.”

“Someone like you?” I arched a brow.

“Maybe.” He took another step, so close now I could feel his breath on my skin.

“Are you saying our date in Vegas could be the date to beat all the others?” I swallowed hard. I’d love nothing more than to see what Keaton was capable of when he went all out for a woman. Er, not that he’d be doing that for me, but in a pretend dating situation, I’d let him show me an example of a great date.

I fluttered my lashes up at him, staring straight into the blue depths of his eyes. His gaze dropped to my mouth as I licked my lips.

He leaned in, brushing my arms as his palms came to rest against the counter on each side of my waist. Closer still. Goosebumps rippled across my skin.

“I’m saying I could definitely show you a good time in Vegas, if you let me, city girl.”

If he leaned in a little more, we could kiss. I could finally stop fantasizing about his lips and know exactly how panty-melting things could be with him.

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“Guess it’s time to revisit our discussion of the?—”

“—Terms and conditions for Vegas? Yeah, it is. And here’s a preview,” he whispered. “Something I’ve been wanting to do to you for some time.”

His lips brushed mine. A test. A tease. My heart thumped, dancing away with itself.

I whimpered as he pulled away. But I reached for his belt loops and tugged him to me, not letting him go. “Can I get another preview?”

The corner of his lips turned up slyly. Then he delivered a full, delicious kiss. My knees almost gave out. His mouth moved against mine with such deliberate hunger it captured my breath, taking it away. His mouth tasted of spice and swagger, a little danger and a whole lot of confidence, and I kissed him back like I’d been waiting my whole life for this one precious moment.

His hands slid up my waist, gripping at the curve there. He moaned into it and dammit, he could kiss. I never wanted it to end. This wasn’t just a casual attraction, but something deeper. I could fall into things with him—so fast and hard—and never recover. If there was a chance...

“Need help in there?” Vivian’s voice called out, entering the kitchen.

We broke apart, both of us breathing hard.

I turned, throat dry. “J-just grabbing plates,” I stuttered.

My hands trembled as I grabbed a stack, the china chattering. When I turned, Keaton still hadn't moved.

"Coming?" I asked, my voice far too breathy.

He cocked his head, eyes dark, smirking like he knew exactly what he'd just done to me. "Definitely."

We exited like nothing had happened.

Vivian questioned us with her eyes and brows, but said nothing.

Oh, but something had transpired in that tiny room.

With our journey to Vegas just days away, I had no idea how I was going to survive playing pretend. If this interaction was any indication, then our time in the desert could be a hell of a lot hotter, er, harder—more complicated than I'd ever imagined.

Because nothing about this kiss felt fake.

10

IN TERMS OF TURBULENCE

SOPHIE

We hadn't even hit cruising altitude, and already I was in love with Richard Buchanan's private jet. The magnificent luxury aircraft impressed me, not easy given I'd traveled on luxurious crafts growing up, often accompanying Mom and my stepfather on his business trips around the world. But I seldom admitted my true family connections to anyone—not even to Maisy, who knew me better than most.

Keaton stretched out all the way with his seat reclined like a bed. “I could get used to this kind of comfort.”

Plush cream leather with velvet navy pillows and gold cords as accents surrounded us. A staff member smiled nearby, dedicated to our every whim in the air. A bedroom in back for... well, I doubted Keaton and I would make use of it.

Not that a little fun in the bedroom hadn't tempted every corner of my mind since our first kiss in Vivian's pantry.

My eyes scanned the decor, only serving as a momentary distraction to the man lounging beside me, his long legs sprawled, while tapping something on his phone. His casual dark jeans, fitted rock band T-shirt, and trimmed beard with a baseball cap on his head backwards were more suited for a concert.

Out of this entire aircraft fitted for sixteen passengers, he had to sit in a seat directly next to me? Worth it for the view, not to mention his enticing spicy cologne.

Mm. I needed to stop ogling him, or my body would have a mild in-flight meltdown. This trip was all business, not pleasure. No matter how soft and persuasive Keaton's lips were, I could remain a boss babe and keep my urges at bay.

Speaking of, we had yet to talk about the kiss in the closet at all. I'd been at Hops each morning, per usual, taking care of last-minute arrangements for Vegas, between talks with the producers, finalizing interviews with local media, and such. So he had ample time to say something like, Hey, about that kiss...

He never did, and I didn't bring it up for fear I'd open my mouth and admit every lust and desire-filled thing my soul wanted with him.

“You're staring, Soph,” he observed without taking his thumbs or eyes off of his

phone.

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“Nope. Just wondering what you brought to wear to the different functions this weekend.” Good cover up. I scanned again over the itinerary the show producer, Melanie, had emailed.

I hadn’t realized how many events Keaton was expected to appear in, focused solely on his branding relaunch celebration as I was. Keaton had made all the arrangements to get the newly labeled beer cans shipped to Vegas, while I handled all the party details, and even managed to land a few product placements at the wedding reception thanks to my friendliness and negotiation with the producers.

If everything went as planned, Brewed for Love’s eight million viewers would go wild for Keaton’s brand. Even more, I had Keaton’s fan club of social media influencers at the ready to post and created a buzz the minute the show aired.

Yes, he had a fan club online, and if anyone asked, I may or may not deny that I had started it back when I became hooked on his season with the show.

My entire plan fell into place, exactly as I liked it.

Just a few... minor details remained to sort out.

“Okay, Kingston,” I said, closing my laptop down and preparing for this important conversation. I laced my fingers in front of me with all the seriousness of a lawyer entering negotiations. “Terms and conditions. What are you thinking?”

Keaton smirked without looking up, his mouth snapping his gum. “About?”

“If we’re going to sell this?—”

“Sell what, exactly?” He cocked a brow and dragged a glance across my face.

“The idea that we’re dating. You wouldn’t take a random woman to Vegas. That’s an expensive trip, an entire weekend thing.”

“I think you are pretty random. No one knows I was seeing anyone.”

His minty breath enveloped me and I resisted the urge to toss something at him. Like, say, the throw pillow wrapped in blue velvet with a B monogrammed in gold braiding perched invitingly on the arm of my seat.

“I mean that, obviously, we should act like we know each other. We have to be convincing,” I explained.

“But we do know each other. You’ve invaded my brewery every morning, and we’ve talked. Hell, we even danced and kissed.” He set his phone aside and pushed the button to sit back up, as if he finally took an interest in this conversation. “I know more intimate details about you than I knew about my last girlfriend.”

“Like what?”

“Like how you take your coffee. How we have similar tastes in pie. And that nervous tic you have when you wear your glasses and push them up your nose.”

I resisted doing that now. After crossing an ankle on his knee, he leaned into me, over the armrest between us, taking up the outer boundaries of my seat space.

“About that kiss...” My voice got breathy.

“Admit it was good.” The corner of his mouth lifted in a tease. I guess we were getting close, as he’d adopted my word lately.

“I wish we’d have talked about it.”

“What was there to say? ‘Gee, Sophie, the next time I want you to give me a little more tongue?’” He chuckled.

My mouth went dry. “We might have to—be expected to, in certain situations—kiss again in front of people.”

The idea of kissing him again, anytime, anywhere, already undid me. And what was the difference between fake and real? I wasn’t sure I’d be able to tell once my lips were attached to his.

“I’m counting on it. You should be prepared for plenty of them. Should we practice now?” He questioned casually, another tempting offer.

“Here?” I croaked, eying how far away the attendants were.

He shrugged a shoulder with a tilt of his head. “Why not? I’m game if you are.”

The cabin heated from the exchange of looks between us.

Another kiss or two? I didn’t need to arrive in Vegas with my panties any wetter before we landed.

“No.” I forced a laugh. “It has to be spontaneous. More natural that way.”

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He looked amused. “Spontaneous, huh?”

“Yep.” I crossed my arms, trying to look professional and not at all like I was imagining exactly what his lips would feel like again. And because my nipples decided to play a game of peek-a-boo through the thin fabric of my blouse.

“I like that,” his voice changed to husky. “You’ve given me a blank slate. You may be powerless to stop how often I decide we need to kiss. Of course, feel free to lay one on me anytime, Soph. I’d never turn one down.”

The plane suddenly suffered from a bout of turbulence. I grabbed the armrest between us, but landed on his hand instead. He flipped his so our fingers laced. “I got you. If we go down, we do it together,” he said.

My breath caught, shocked by the kinetic energy between us. I swallowed hard, mind racing for a switch of topics. “I meant to call ahead and have a cot brought into the hotel room.”

“A cot? Bad idea. Once the hotel personnel puts two and two together, rumors will spread like wildfire that we aren’t sleeping together.”

“So? Just because we’re supposedly dating doesn’t mean we’re doing anything more.”

“Doesn’t it? People will be skeptical we’re together if we’re not actually together. Besides, those cots are uncomfortable and I don’t need to throw my back out and make our weekend miserable. I get enough of that hauling beer kegs

around, and I'll be damned if I brought you into this weekend just to have you sleep on a cot. We can handle sleeping in the same bed, can't we?"

"With a line of pillows between us, maybe."

Then he broke out into a chortle. "You're not accounting for those certain acts of spontaneous shared combustion taking place, beyond kissing?"

"No, I'm being practical. Leaving things open can lead to certain things happening. And I'd hate for either of us to have any regrets later."

"Regrets? " Why did his question skitter out like gravel, sexy and sly. "You think being with me would be a mistake?"

"Regret might be the wrong word. A lot can happen in one weekend."

"Well, you know the saying... what happens in Vegas?" He winked at me, then yawned and stretched his arms overhead. "I'm taking a nap. But feel free to snuggle up to me and nap, too, if you'd like."

Oh, I'd like. "But the terms and conditions?—"

"Are covered under the spontaneous clause. Let's see what happens and go with it." He was much more laid back about this than I felt at the moment.

Not tired, I ran through the details of the weekend one more time. He slept the rest of the way. When we landed in Vegas, it was early evening. The desert heat hit us like a brick wall, refusing to budge as we stepped out of the jet. A shiny black car whisked us from the private airport hangar to the massive resort hotel hosting the wedding and the entire production.

Inside, the lobby sparkled with chandeliers and brass. The sound of activity in the casino reached us, with reels spinning, bells and whistles, and payout celebrations.

I kept pace beside Keaton, trying to look as cool and casual as he was, as his date.

We checked into our room, where in the middle there stood a plush king size bed. Which I ignored for now. After a quick freshen up, taking turns in the bathroom, we headed down to the welcome reception. I fidgeted in the elevator.

“Hey, relax. You’ll do great,” he assured me, reaching out and giving my hand a squeeze. “And you look gorgeous tonight, by the way.”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach from his attention, multiplying my nerves. I stepped out of the elevator car on shaking legs and held onto his arm for dear life.

The event space gleamed in polished gold and champagne towers. A string quartet played near a giant floral arch where couples posed for professional photos.

Keaton had changed into navy suit pants and a crisp blue button-down shirt. He’d combed his hair back in a way I hadn’t seen before, and it totally gave him a cool vibe as if he wasn’t cool enough before.

I’d chosen a little black dress, sleeveless with a plunging back, convenient, for his hand found the small of my back as we walked in. Casual. Natural. Devastatingly familiar, like he’d been doing it our entire lives.

“Smile,” he murmured.

I let out a breath I’d been holding. “I feel like I’m walking into the lion’s den, having to meet all your friends.”

“They’ll love you,” he assured me, as if we really were a couple and I had to pass the friend test.

Not once since meeting the reality star crush of my dreams did I ever imagine walking right into his reality show hand in hand. People stared at us, or should I say, women glared at me like I had no right taking Keaton off the market for the weekend.

We made it to the open bar where Vanessa and Ben stood. The winning couple from Brewed for Love and now bride and groom greeting people, all smiles.

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“Keaton!” Vanessa hugged him on sight. With her tall and willowy frame and pale blonde hair, her smile beamed so perfectly and white it looked photoshopped, even in person.

Ben had the debonair and handsome, charming way about him that made you think he should be acting in spy movies. They made a gorgeously sweet couple. No wonder they won, although my fan club had a certain percentage of comments about these two being way too perfect. Many believed they had to have skeletons in the closet, and flaws that they were very good at hiding.

I plastered a grin on my face as introductions were made.

“This is Sophie,” Keaton said, pulling me closer and kissing the back of my hand. “My girlfriend.”

Girlfriend... my stomach performed a somersault.

“So nice to meet you,” Vanessa said with a gleam in her eye. She seemed so authentic. I really wanted to believe she and Ben had found true love.

“You two look amazing together,” Ben added warmly. A part of me wanted to uncover cracks underneath all of their sparkle. But something at the open bar caught my eye—product placement number one.

“Keaton, look. Here it is. Happy Couple Ale by H.C. Hops, a little surprise placement that I arranged for you,” I proudly announced.

“I didn’t expect to see this here.” Keaton smiled from ear to ear. Suddenly, a guy with a camera nearby zoomed in as Keaton held up the can to admire it. He handed it to Ben, who performed as if on cue.

“We have a lot to celebrate this weekend. Here’s to my bride, of course, but also to Keaton and his great tasting brews. Nice work, my friend.”

“We’re so proud of you, Keaton,” Vanessa admired.

“Thanks. The new branding looks great, doesn’t it? Sophie designed it.”

My breath caught. That was never part of the plan. This was his big weekend to shine, not mine. My accolades would come after, when my job was done. When he’d hopefully write me a glowing referral letter, and I’d have clients lining up ready to work with me.

But part of me thrilled at the recognition. The way he said it, like I was someone who mattered.

The guys clinked cans and drank, and then I caught the eye of Melanie, giving her a nod. I’m sure she appreciated howmuch Richard Buchanan paid to sponsor this entire weekend in the name of Keaton’s craft beer business.

“You must be so excited about your big wedding day,” I exclaimed to Vanessa.

“I am. The biggest day of my life, even bigger than the day I became a Dallas Cheerleader,” her Texas accent drawled, thick and lovely. Her beauty radiated, as one would expect of any Cowboys cheerleader. What else could I say? She lived in a completely different world than me.

I only had to keep up appearances another minute before Melanie insisted they had to

move on to greet others for the cameras. Then another couple joined us.

“Hey, you big idiot,” a guy said, clapping Keaton on the back.

I recognized Anthony, Keaton’s best friend from the show. I remembered him clearly. Always the life of the party.

If there’d been no Keaton on the show, I’d probably have crushed on bad boy Anthony.

His date, Cassandra, hung back a step, giving Keaton a slow, sultry once-over that made me suspicious.

“You clean up nice,” she purred, stepping forward and leaning into him a little too close, holding onto him in a hug a little too long.

Keaton chuckled, clearly used to her antics, and tossed back some flirtatious comment I didn’t catch because I was too busy grinding my teeth.

Anthony didn’t seem to notice—or didn’t care.

“You must be Sophie,” he said, turning to me. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

“All lies,” I said smoothly.

Anthony laughed. Cassandra didn’t and tossed her hair, glancing away. I smiled sweetly anyway.

Before I could decide whether to trip her with my heel, another familiar voice cut through the crowd.

“Well, well, well.”

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I turned, and there she was. The one woman I worried I'd have an issue with all weekend—Starla, the show villain herself.

How she and Keaton even ended up together was beyond me. I saw through her from the beginning, but I'd wanted Keaton to win so badly, and Starla was a superb actress, playing the role of his love interest well, at least on screen.

Stunning, of course, she tossed her glossy blonde locks too often. In a dress cut to show off exactly the right amount of everything, her ice-cold eyes zeroed in on Keaton like a heat-seeking missile.

“So you showed up. Thanks for letting me know. And with this on your arm,” she said, voice syrupy sarcastic.

Keaton stiffened.

“Contractual obligation to be here, you know that. Didn't mean I had to bring you,” he said coolly.

Starla's gaze slid to me, assessing, calculating. “And you are?”

“Sophie,” Keaton said shortly. “My girlfriend.”

His lips were suddenly on mine, in a swift move I hadn't expected, sending prickles of heat down my spine. We were on display for the world to see. I relaxed into it after the initial shock wore off.

He kissed me like he meant it. The heat, the pressure, the ownership in it rocked me to my core. Pretending got a whole lot harder.

Starla's mouth twisted, but she covered it quickly. "Charming," she said, tone dripping with insincerity.

Keaton's hand tightened at my waist, warning me and reminding me. This weekend would be a challenge, but we'd get through it together.

11

GAME ON

KEATON

The door to our suite clicked shut behind us, and for a second, the quietness blissfully surrounded me. No Melanie with cameras sticking mics into our faces. No more fake smiles, and no Starla lurking around corners.

Just Sophie and me. And whatever the night ahead might bring.

"We survived that. So far." She tossed her clutch onto the desk, kicked off her heels, and surveyed the room with her hands on her hips.

"Glad it's behind us." I came up behind her and kissed her bare shoulder on a small freckle that appeared there. I'd eyed it all night, the sexy little spot, and I reserved that kiss just for us in private.

"No one's watching, Keaton. You don't have to do that," she lowered her voice as if someone was lurking nearby, like Starla did all night, watching us with her evil eyes.

“That was me spontaneously thanking you for showing up tonight.”

“You flew me all the way across the country. Figured I might as well join you in the fun. That was our deal, wasn’t it?” She swiveled to face me, chuckling.

“No, I meant being there forme. You made sure Hops shined tonight.” I held her gaze as long as she’d let me, hearing her breath hitch.

“So mission accomplished so far in leveraging all the opportunities here?” Her beautiful blues gleamed.

“In terms of Hops, yes.” But for me and the hard cock I tried to control in my pants, we hadn’t even begun to leverage anything.

I added a touch to her arms, testing the waters. The simple brush of my knuckles brought a wave of goosebumps across her skin. I liked this effect I was having on her.

“You dazzled people tonight, Soph. Definitely dazzled me.” My voice dipped husky and low.

“Are you saying I’m in the wrong profession? I could have gone into acting like you?” She teased, and I knew it, but I took it to mean she was performing this weekend, that was all.

What a wake up call, and a reminder that all I might get out of this would be a few good laughs. I asked her to pose as my date, nothing real. What did I expect?

It wouldn’t stop me from pushing the boundaries though. After all, I’d be in this room for the next two nights with her, bathing in her flowery scent, captivated by her every move. I wanted to press my mouth to hers again and chase this heat until it burned out. But I knew if I started something tonight, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

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“I was right about Starla.” I stepped away and sat on the couch. I sighed and took off my shoes. “She will not make it easy on us, with the way she was glaring at me all night.”

“I felt like her number one enemy, like she held back for recon, plotting her next move. What the hell will tomorrow bring with her?” She crossed the room to her suitcase, the skirt of her black dress sashaying with her sweet hips, her every move tracked by my eyes.

“Don’t you worry. If she gives us any crap, I’ll put her in her place.”

“Well, it’s been a long day. We should probably rest. The schedule looks pretty grueling tomorrow. I like to shower at night. You?”

“Morning. Looks like we complement each other nicely that way.”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll brush my teeth and hair first?” She disappeared with a handful of her things into the bathroom. The click of the lock warned me not to follow.

I smirked at the bed, wishing now we had that cot. All night lying next to her, I’d be painfully hard. That’s a given. A glance at the small couch didn’t make the entire situation any better. It would squish me, even curled up.

“Pillow wall it is.” I grabbed everything I could find, all the extra pillows and blankets around the room and closet, and built a rather fine barrier, in my opinion.

After she exited the bathroom, she sided up to the bed and grinned. “You actually built us a pillow wall?”

“Obviously. Wasn’t that the terms of our agreement?”

“I’m impressed.” She climbed in, then pulled her hair up into a scrunchie, bringing her creamy neck on full display. A neck begging to be explored by my lips.

“You’re still wearing your dress from this evening?” I flopped onto my side of the bed, arms behind my head.

She sat cross-legged on her side and awkwardly peered down at herself. “I brought nothing remotely close to pajamas.”

“Personally, I’ve always thought they were overrated.”

She snorted. “Me, too.” We stared at each other for a long beat while my brain stuttered over the possibility she could sleep in the nude every night. “But we should probably wear something. Do you have a t-shirt I could borrow?”

“If you insist.” I laughed and got up. I rummaged through my suitcase. About the only thing suitable I found was my beloved Denver Aspens hockey t-shirt, my favorite team. I tossed it over. “What self-respecting pretend boyfriend wouldn’t let his pretend girlfriend wear his shirt?”

“Thanks.” She giggled and pulled the shirt over her head, then wiggled and squirmed until she pulled her dress out from under the shirt. My mouth went dry.

“Neat party trick,” I quipped through gritted teeth, trying to maintain control. I’d like to see her do that again, but I wouldn’t push my luck tonight. I left her there and practically ran to the shower to take care of my twitching cock.

When we finally settled under the covers, the pillow wall between us from the neck down, I turned onto my side, propping my head on my hand. “You want to know why I really hate Starla?”

She set down her phone and shifted to her side, facing me as well.

“Behind the scenes,” I said, voice low, “she was ruthless. I signed an NDA, so I’m not supposed to share specifics of what went down behind the cameras, but I think it was obvious to the fans how she manipulated everything. Stirred up drama between couples. Fed lies to Melanie to get people kicked off. She and Vanessa were thick as thieves. Cassandra too, a little.”

“Believe me, I was Camp Keaton all the way. I hated Starla cost you the win. By the time America had to vote on either you two or Vanessa and Ben, I think everyone was tired of Starla, but felt bad for you.”

I glanced up at the ceiling. “I thought maybe I could find love on that show. Stupid, right?”

“Not stupid,” she whispered.

“Starla made sure I didn’t win. Made sure no one did but Vanessa and Ben. She was there to play a game with no actual intentions for anything else.”

Silence stretched between us, heavy with old wounds. It brought down my mood.

“I noticed,” Sophie said after a beat, “how Cassandra was looking at you tonight.”

“Case in point.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before Anthony locked her down, she used to text me. A lot.”

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Her nose scrunched in distaste. It was adorable.

“She actually texted me recently, wanting to catch up this weekend and implying there could be something more between us. Anthony was conveniently forgotten while trying to appeal to me,” I added.

“Charming,” Sophie said, voice tight.

“I’m not interested,” I confirmed. “I see right through her, still playing games. Starla too.”

“Then... what do you want?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper.

I looked at her across our pillows, the soft light on the nightstand catching the curve of her cheek.

“I’m thinking about it,” I said. “When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.” But I probably knew. She resided not more than two feet away from me in my oversized T-shirt.

The morning came too early, but the scent of strong coffee delivered by room service helped wake me up.

Sophie groaned as I set a steaming cup on her nightstand, made just the way she liked it. Two stevia packets, a splash of cream, and milk froth on top.

“You’re an angel,” she mumbled, blinking up at me like I’d just offered her the

moon, her blue eyes bright already at this hour. “Why’d you keep me up so late last night watching that movie?”

Neither of us could sleep, so we did the next best thing, streamed a funny movie, talked about music, and shared our favorites. If it were an actual date, I’d call it a winner.

“No one forced you.” I grinned and scratched my beard. It needed a trim and oils to keep it soft. I was half-tempted to shave it all off in this dry desert heat.

She sat up, hair tangled like a halo around her head. She smiled—soft, sleepy, unguarded—and I had to look away before I jumped on top of her.

“I’m hitting the gym,” I growled. “You good for breakfast in an hour?”

“Perfect. I’ll be ready.”

“Big day ahead. Production has the poolside game scheduled this morning for the reunion. You’re taking part, by the way.”

“Bring it on.” She sipped her coffee, eyes closing as if in bliss.

“Then we have those media interviews you set up.”

“And don’t forget the cast party tonight.”

I nodded and confirmed. “Should be a wild day.”

“I can handle it.”

“Why do you think I asked you to be my date? I knew you could.” I checked her out,

all morning messy and confident, and wondered how the hell I was going to get through this weekend without losing my mind.

The pool deckswarmed with people by the time we arrived. The reunion fully underway, my cast mates wore bright and skimpy swimsuits and showed as much tanned skin as possible. Everywhere I turned, people were flirting way too hard with each other like a meat market on steroids.

I adjusted my sunglasses to block it all out while remaining cool. Hard to believe I once loved this shit. But having grown up a lot since the show first aired, Holly Creek called to me. My quiet hometown life suited me, where right now I could work in my brewery, inching my way to my life goals, instead of here.

Only Sophie wasn't in Holly Creek, but by my side. We reached an empty lounge, waved over by Anthony, and set our things down.

Then—holy fuck—Sophie removed her cover up, revealing a sexy turquoise bikini. Her curves, legs, and sly smile wrecked me, and as I tore my eyes away, I realized many other men stared as well.

“Careful, Kingston,” she said, hip-bumping me. “You’re drooling.”

“I’m keeping it together,” I lied.

“Glad you both made it. Sophie, you’re looking hot today. Ouch,” Anthony finished on a slap of his arm by Cassandra. “What? You know you do, too, babe.”

“That is such a pretty suit, Cassandra.” Sophie laid it on thick.

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I barely warned Anthony with my eyes to keep his off of my date, when a couple of unattached guys from the show came slinking over, dripping cockiness introducing themselves to her.

Sophie handled it with grace, but I wasn't about to let it ride.

I grabbed her waist, spun her into me, and kissed her.

Hard.

She gasped against my mouth, but then her hands were in my hair, pulling me closer. Her body molded to mine like we were born for this.

No doubt, the kiss screamed loud and clear for anyone within earshot that Sophie's mine.

At least for this weekend.

When we finally broke apart, her eyelashes fluttered up at me, breathless.

"Wow," she whispered. "We're really selling it."

"Gotta make it believable," I said, voice low.

She licked her lips, and I held back a groan. I quickly sat on the lounge with a towel over my lap as soon as she left my embrace. Until she sat beside me, holding out the bottle of sunscreen, and my heart jumped into my throat.

This unplanned slathering of lotion over every inch of her became the highlight of my day. I opened my legs, and she sat between them, her back to me, and I gave the best performance of my life. As if I played the role of a Swedish massage specialist, big and beefy, I dug deep to get her knots out.

Sophie moaned just as Melanie hopped on a megaphone and announced the game plan. She had split the entire cast into four teams for a tournament-style game of pool volleyball.

Sophie's eyes lit up. "Yes. That's my sport," she informed. "I was captain of the championship girls' volleyball team in high school."

"Damn. Have I told you how lucky I am to have brought you as my date this weekend? Bring it on, baby." My chest puffed proudly as we prepared. In the pool, we maneuvered until she was on my shoulders. Her thighs gripped my neck with every move. I'd never been so grateful for the water hiding exactly how turned on I was.

I carried her around, taunting the other team, with Sophie like my queen. Let the games begin.

We battled it out, team against team, until in the end we faced Starla's team head-on. Her smug glare dared me to slip and fall.

I held up my hand to Sophie for a high five and a little pep talk before the first serve. "You good? We got this, baby."

"I'm ready to spike the ball in her face," came her eager reply. I laughed at her competitive side. We were a team and determined not to lose.

Of course, I should know by now not to count Starla out. She and her partner—a dude who got kicked off the show in the second episode and who probably did not know

the true extent of her exploits—proved scrappy and tenacious.

We matched point for point, until the end, needing one more to win, the ball soared toward us. Sophie surged up, spiked it hard, and sent it crashing into the water behind Starla.

The pool turned into a chaotic mess of bodies—splashing, shouting, and cheering.

I grabbed Sophie by the waist, brought her down, and spun her in my arms. Never more happy to see Starla flipping us off and splashing water our way.

With water sluicing down our bodies, I kissed Sophie like we'd already won more than just the game.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, her body arching into mine like she couldn't help it. My cock twitched against her stomach and I moaned into her mouth.

“Are we still putting on a good show for everyone?” she parted and whispered, catching her breath.

I kissed her again before answering, and nipped at her lower lip. Too damn good.

If this was all fake, then why did it feel like the realest damn thing I'd ever had?

12

STAGED

SOPHIE

The nightclub was pure chaos for the cast party.

Strobe lights stabbed through the dark like lightning strikes, and a bass-heavy beat thudded so hard under my feet I could almost taste its vibration. Sweat and sprayed perfume permeated the air.

The Brewed for Love production crew and cast, complete with a velvet-roped VIP section, had taken the entire place over, branded cocktails, and cameras poised to catch every scandalous second.

I squeezed Keaton's arm until my knuckles went white. He glanced down, amusement flickering in his eyes. "You good?" he asked, leaning in past the roar of the music.

"This place is insane."

He grinned with the worldly charm of a guy who'd weathered more than one of these parties. "Welcome to real-time, reality-TV nightlife."

My pulse spiked. I'd watched these parties on my laptop back home—so glossy, so staged—but being here, shoulder-to-shoulder with the players, turned out way more emotionally dangerous than it appeared on screen.

I spied Starla holding court, her hair a platinum halo, pointed fingernails slicing through the air as she argued with that girl from season one who she ended up mud

wrestling to fight to keep Keaton. I'd have done the same. He's worth it.

Melanie hovered nearby with a hand on her hip and an eager smile, her camera crew poised like sharks.

Keaton must've caught my stiff posture, because he urged us on. "Let's keep moving."

He guided us in the opposite direction, away from the spotlight. The casual press of his hand on my lower back so possessive and welcomed now, but I reminded myself it was just friendly. All for show, nothing more, as we traveled through the throngs of people.

A neon-lit cooler caught my eye, and so did the rows of Holly Creek Hops cans stacked beneath a crisp banner. I tugged on his sleeve. "Look at that placement. Right by the bar. And see that couple? The bartender just handed them two cans."

He followed my gaze, nodding, happy. "Guess my new marketing expert knows her stuff."

"Damn right she does." I laughed, relief mingling with pride, my brain buzzing with strategies: foot traffic, brand visibility, on-camera product placements.

We ordered two cans and settled into a corner, the bass still rumbling. Then, as if the universe were trying to kill me with good timing, my favorite song from the brewery back home came on, the one we'd danced to at the Hops.

Keaton's brow quirked. "Did you plan this?"

I sipped, trying to act blasé. "Maybe."

“Uh-huh.” He let the words hang, playful doubt in his voice. “Come on. Let’s dance.”

He pulled me out onto the dance floor. The lights spun, the beat hooked me by the ribs, and before I knew it, my shoulders were loose, getting into it. Keaton’s arms drifted around my waist, pulling me closer as the song built. Then he spun me once—light as a feather—bringing us chest to chest. He nuzzled my neck, his warm breath tickling my ear, although the music muted his words

He swept me up in his arms, twirling me like I weighed nothing, and I clung to him, breathless. He kissed me in full view of flashing cameras, onlookers, and a dozen Instagram live streams.

The room spun for a whole new reason. The world was watching. Maybe that’s what wrecked me most—that I didn’t care if they were.

His mouth pursued me, warm and unhurried, insistent but gentle, like he used every second to burn the memory into my bones. My knees weakened. The situation blurred into something sweeter, sharper.

Our reality and my dreamworld collided.

When we finally parted, the air felt thin. My chest fluttered so hard I thought I might pass out.

“That was...” I couldn’t finish. Good for the cameras? Unbelievably real?

He brushed a stray hair from my face. “Yeah, it was.”

He offered his hand, steady and sure, leading me back toward the VIP lounge.

Every nerve ending tingled. I needed space to sort out this rush of something

dangerously like hope, suddenly more raw and real than pretending. I slipped away into the ladies' room, where gold-plated faucets gleamed under a chandelier, and velvet couches begged for a moment's rest, so I collapsed onto one of them, remembering to breathe normally.

Before I could collect myself, I heard, "Sophie, right?"

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Vanessa and Cassandra stood by the mirrored counter, retouching their makeup. Impossibly polished, they'd stepped off a glossy ad in a magazine.

"That's me," I said, forcing a smile.

"You and Keaton are adorable," she exclaimed with a fake-syrupy tone while eyes flicked over me in judgement.

Cassandra tossed her hair. "Seriously, he's a catch. Sexy, genuine, and all."

I pressed my lips together, fighting a sudden flare of irritation. I wasn't here to be a prop. "Thanks."

Vanessa's grin widened. "He's the guy every girl hopes won't settle down, so they'll get a chance at him."

Cassandra sighed, flicking at her smoky eyeshadow. "We still text all the time. If only he lived closer to me. Pretty sure we'd be married by now."

They floated out without a backward glance, leaving me with a storm of jealousy and self-doubt. I pressed my palm to my chest. I should've known better. Of course a guy like Keaton still had ties to women like her from the show.

Emerging into the hallway, I nearly collided with Starla. She crossed her arms, voice low and wicked. "How convenient that Keaton shows up with you just in time for the reunion weekend."

I said nothing. Partly because I was too busy reminding myself not to let her get to me. And partly because of the camera operator discreetly zooming in.

Starla's lips curved. "I don't think this little act will last. Keaton and I have history. If he wants to deny it, fine, but if I get him alone, I'll make sure he remembers."

She swept off, leaving my anger flared, but so did a fresh wave of doubt. What the hell was I doing here? I watched reality TV, not starred in it. I marched through the crowd, hunting for Keaton.

I found him at the edge of the dance floor—but not alone. Cassandra's hands were on his lapels, and his hands rested lightly at her waist. The sight was a punch to the gut.

My voice went icicle-cold. "Excuse me. Am I interrupting something?"

They jumped apart as I stormed forward. A cameraman caught how Keaton's face went chalk white. "Sophie, wait?—"

But I whirled away, heart hammering. What a fool I'd been, thinking I was here to help him, but maybe I was just his pawn in his effort to make Cassandra jealous. Every moment of doubt those women had planted had sprung roots.

Keaton caught up with me outside, where the air suffocated me. "That wasn't what it looked like."

"It sure looked like she was all over you," I snapped. "And you didn't push her away until I showed up."

"You're reading this all wrong. She was drunk. I was stepping back, but she kept leaning in."

I folded my arms, raising one eyebrow. “Do you still have feelings for her? Wonder what could’ve been if you’d moved to Denver?”

He stared at me like I’d broken his heart. “No. There’s only one place I want to live—Holly Creek.”

“What am I even doing here, Keaton?” I exhaled, the leftover tension rolling out on my ribs. I wanted to believe him. But everything about this night felt staged. Every kiss, every glance. How could I know what was real anymore?

He softened, lowering his voice. “You’re my date, not to mention you’re also in charge of making sure my brand is visible this weekend.”

I flinched. “I didn’t sign up for all this drama.”

“Most of it’s manufactured,” he said, eyes earnest. “Mel loves stirring the pot. Starla’s scorn, the Cassandra mess—it’s ratings. It doesn’t mean I like it. The only woman I care about is standing in front of me.”

Then he kissed me again—urgent, electric, leaving no room for doubt. My knees buckled as he pulled me close. Until?—

A dry cough cracked the air.

Melanie. Camera rolling. Grinning wolfishly. “You two are magic,” she purred. “The audience is going to devour this.”

She swept away, leaving us alone.

Breathing hard, I looked into Keaton’s eyes. The adrenaline ebbed, leaving a pool of raw emotion in my chest. My head spun with images of flashing lights, laughing

onlookers, my reflection staring back from cameras I couldn't switch off.

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I stepped back, voice shaking. “Did you know she was here? That they were filming? Grabbed me for another kiss to make it look good?”

He reached for my hand, but I dodged it. “No. Of course not.”

“Forget this.” I stalked off only he came up behind me. His arms encircled me, caging me to him. I didn’t fight his closeness.

His whisper, like a desperate plea in my ear, said, “I kissed you because I wanted to. Because I want you, Soph. Not the show. Not the cameras. You.”

My heart twanged between longing and fear. Finally, I whispered, “Do you have to go back in there?”

“No. Why? Would you rather we go find our own party? This is Vegas, and not the only party in town, you know.”

“You’d do that for me? Leave all this behind tonight and just hang with me?” I turned in his arms to face him.

“Hell yeah I would, Soph. You’re the only woman I want to be with tonight. In fact, I know a great place, way off the strip. You’d love it.”

We took a car ride to a brewery—of course—where Keaton and I tested several flavors of their brews, critiquing each and laughing at their names while soaking up the atmosphere. The more we talked and joked around and played pool, the more my heart filled, the more I knew it’d be harder and harder to walk away from him when

my consultancy finished. Could I make it out with my heart intact?

In the back seat of the car on the ride to the hotel, we kissed and my world narrowed to the taste of him and the thrum of my heartbeat.

“Mm. Keaton,” I purred. “Your kisses are even better when we’re alone.”

“Sophie, you need to know how much I fucking want you.”

“Spontaneously, or is this something we should negotiate?”

“Let’s leave it open, see what happens, and find out.” His thumb brushed my lips as he stared deeply into my eyes.

Only once we hit the elevator, exhaustion hit me like a tidal wave. My eyelids fluttered shut against the swirl of the world, spinning. I sagged against his chest, and he ended up carrying me to our room. My last coherent thought was relief that I’d survived reality-TV initiation—before sleep claimed me completely.

13

ONE AND DONE

KEATON

I woke up to a quiet room. The pillow wall was half toppled over, Sophie’s side of the bed empty.

I lay there for a moment, chest rising and falling, head throbbing. Last night, we drank way too much. At least I thought we did. Why was I the only one here suffering?

The first shafts of Vegas sunlight snuck around the edges of the blackout curtains.

My temples matched the dull ache in my shoulder where I'd apparently fallen asleep half on, half off the bed.

Panic lanced through me. I flung the covers aside and sat up—still fully dressed, everything buttoned and zipped. No naked shenanigans, bummer. But where was Sophie?

I snagged my chiming phone and blinked at her message.

Sophie: Went ahead to set up by the pool. Filming starts soon. You up yet?

A moment later, a photo arrived. It showed the hotel's sapphire-blue pool deck, wallpapered with a Holly Creek Hops banner and the branded cabana, the surfaces gleaming like a beer commercial ready for prime time. My heart eased a fraction at the sight of our chilled cans arranged on crushed ice in a crystal bowl.

I replied as I peeled myself out of bed.

Keaton: Be right down.

Fifteen minutes later, I emerged, showered and with a towel slung over my shoulder. I headed toward the elevator in board shorts that just matched the Holly Creek Hops brand palette. Sophie had chosen them. She'd insisted they "worked with the vibe."

I didn't argue. I just wore them. She was the snooty expert. I grinned at the memory of the day I walked into my office and there she was, far from snooty. Beautiful, and unbeknownst to her, setting my world on fire.

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In the elevator, I rehearsed my half-forgotten lines under my breath. The familiar thrill of nerves and excitement hit me as they always did before a performance.

The crew worked around the pool when I arrived, tuning cameras, lighting rigs, and positioning boom mics. The sun glinted off the water like diamonds, nearly blinding.

Anthony and Ben lounged in the pool, elbows resting on the slick tile, laughing at something one of the lighting techs said. They were shirtless and casual, ready to do their part to help me on my quest.

Melanie stood under an umbrella with a headset looping around her ear, mid-rant about framing some perfectly wide shot.

Then I spotted Sophie at last. She'd piled her hair high in her signature messy bun, tendrils escaping with a brush along her collarbone.

A sleeveless red sundress fluttered around her thighs like she walked in a breeze even when the air stood still. One hand clutched a clipboard stuffed with pages of shot lists and whatever else she needed to keep her day in order. The other cradled her phone as she squinted through her glasses at it. She looked resourceful, brilliant, like an orchestra conductor, making sure every note sounded immaculate.

I wove through the crew and tugged her aside, heart flipping as I dodged a boom mic.

"Why didn't you wake me, Soph?" I asked, voice low, pulling her in.

"After last night, I figured you needed a little extra sleep. And I needed to get here

early and oversee things,” she said, not shifting away. Warmth rolled through me. “The makeup artist is waiting for you, and Melanie’s already losing her mind. Do you remember your lines? Because if not, we could run through?—”

I brought a hand to her cheek. “Hey, boss babe. Good morning.”

Her gaze softened. The sun caught the gold flecks of her eyes, and I saw something fierce in them that made my chest tighten. She wanted this for me as badly as I did.

“The sun is shining,” I went on, voice low and earnest, “the pool looks amazing, and you’ve done all this work to make me—and Holly Creek Hops—shine. So stop worrying.” I leaned in and kissed her, right there in the middle of her nervous spiral.

Her body froze for a heartbeat, then her arms curled around me. She kissed me back with a swirl of warmth and need that sent a hum of electricity straight to my groin. A small mewl slipped from her throat—impossible to ignore. I pressed my forehead to hers, breathing her in, a hint of something sweet.

I pulled back just enough to hold her gaze. “Now trust me to do my thing, okay? I won’t let you—or Richard—or my company down.”

She exhaled, lips forming a tight grin. “Okay.”

After makeup and a quick production brief, I reached the pool with Anthony and Ben. We rested our elbows along the pool’s edge, each of us holding a can of Holly Creek Hops.

“Action!” Melanie barked.

Anthony turned, water beading on his shoulders. “So, how are things at the brewery, man?”

I cradled my can label facing out, pretending nonchalance. In reality, my heart thrummed through every detail. “Really well. We’re expanding nationwide. This weekend we debut special brews for the bride and groom—like this one I call the ‘It Takes Two Brew.’”

Ben lifted his can in salute. “I’ll drink to that. Good stuff.”

“Looks like its groom approved.” I laughed and took a long pull. The beer tasted of crisp barley and a dream I’d worked for since my first experimental batch.

Anthony grinned. “If I ask Cassandra to marry me, think you’ll name a brew after us, too?”

His question came completely off script, and I almost spit out the beer. My chest tightened considering I once hoped for Cassandra and me to get together.

I half-joked to keep the mood light. “I’d need a stronger beer for that.”

As if fate had queued her entrance, Cassandra burst onto the deck. “Are you going to ask me?” she shrieked. “Because the answer is yes!” Before anyone could blink, she flung herself into the pool, arms winding around Anthony’s neck as they sank beneath the surface.

Ben raised his can in triumph. “Now that’s brewedwithlove!”

“Cut!” Melanie shouted, clapping her hands. “That’s a wrap! One and done—I don’t think we can get more perfect than that.”

The guys and Cassandra moved on as I climbed out, droplets pearling down my chest. Sophie handed me a towel, her eyes bright with pride. My heart surged—her approval felt like victory.

“Good work,” she murmured as we stood shoulder to shoulder, watching footage on the monitor. Her warmth pressed into me. “You’re pretty cool on camera, Keaton.”

I leaned in, voice low. “Know what I’d really like to do? Dive in again. With you. No cameras. No Cassandra. Just us.”

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She shot me a playful smile, but before she could answer, Starla charged across the set. She swung her oversized pool bag into our meticulous beer display and sent cans flying like dominoes, ice clattering everywhere.

“Oops!” she cackled, tossing her hair.

Sophie’s jaw dropped. Melanie’s laughter rang over the headset. I felt Sophie’s tension spike next to me, hot and jagged.

“That was on purpose,” she hissed in my ear.

I spotted the red recording light on the camera before Melanie stepped forward, like a dog with a nose for TV gold. “How does that make you feel? After everything you set up, Sophie?” Her voice dripped with spite.

I stepped between them, anger humming in my veins. “You knew Starla would do something like this and you planned on capturing it.”

Melanie shrugged. “Drama sells. Mr. and Mrs. Perfect Bride and Groom don’t move the needle of the ratings. I need fireworks or I’m unemployed. You, of all people, should know by now that it’s all about the ratings.” She spun on her heel. “Everyone head down to the ceremony site for the rehearsal! Bikini-ready, people! I want skin!”

Sophie’s face twisted. She grabbed my hand. “Don’t let her draw you in.”

I guided her away from the chaos. As we picked up the beer cans and erected the display again, I urged her to pay Starla no mind. “Show her we’re stronger than her

pettiness.”

A sly smile curved Sophie’s lips. Her shoulders uncurled, determination lighting her eyes. “I have my own plan.”

I swallowed hard. She peeled her sundress down her arms, the fabric whispered against her skin. She undid each button inch by inch, revealing a fiery red string bikini that seemed made just for her. My pulse thundered. She stepped out of the dress and tossed it aside.

Her long legs gleamed smooth in the sun. The cheeky bottoms cut high on her hips. Every inch of her pleased my eyes.

I whistled low. “I’ve got the best-looking date here.”

She tossed a glance over her shoulder at Starla, glaring across the way. “Good. Keep your eyes and hands on me, handsome, and we won’t have a problem. We’ll steal this show together.”

“Now who is the boss babe causing drama?” I chuckled and swept her into my arms. She yelped as I carried her toward the steps of the ceremony site. No one could drown our momentum now.

14

HOT MESS

SOPHIE

The wedding rehearsal was about as atypical of a walk-down-the-aisle moment as possible. The hot weather and sunshine only made matters worse. Who held an

outdoor wedding in Vegas in the summer heat with no shade over our heads? The bride would probably melt by the time she reached her groom. If she survived that walk, the groom would probably keel over from heat stroke.

The outdoor Vegas venue sparkled, though, beautiful in bright silk flowers of pinks and yellows, and lit up in a way that only Sin City could pull off—from the arch at the front to the runway-style lights pointed down the aisle.

Melanie had insisted on the theme of the rehearsal segment: “Love, Light, and a lot of Skin.” All for the cameras and ratings, of course. The women outdid each other in the tiniest bikinis ever, only rivaled by the low riding board shorts on all the men. Of course, Keaton’s torso was the only one I cared to gaze upon, dying to tease my fingertips along every ridge, and trace his tattoos with my tongue.

If I thought middle school girls had horribly bullied me for what was—back then—my big front teeth, they had nothing compared on these adult women here today with the way they peered down their noses at me.

Judging by the jealous faces as I held my head high, my hand on Keaton’s elbow, as we walked in, I realized the target on my back. My cheeky red bikini, while flattering, held the envy of women as they practically snarled at me when we passed by. Keaton was one of the most well-loved bachelors in the show. But it’s their loss for not chasing him since then.

He’s at my side now. Mine.

Only for this weekend. But... why couldn’t it be more? Last night, he all but admitted he wanted me. What did that mean for us?

Starla strutted past, stealing my thoughts away. She stopped in front of us, and I rolled my eyes. What was she up to now?

She reached down to her hem and slowly dragged her swimsuit cover over her head. Her white sequined swimsuit showed so much skin she might as well have gone without.

She looked down at me like I was no better than the ground under her feet. Then she winked at Keaton, grabbed her bag and carried on. My head snapped to his, immediately pleased to see his eyes were closed.

“Is she gone now? You said to keep my eyes on you. I saw her coming and shut ‘em,” he muttered.

I giggled. “Yes, you can open them. And thanks for taking me seriously. You just avoided World War III between us.”

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“You said to keep my eyes and hands on you. When you tell me what you need from me, I’m going to deliver, every single time. And then some.” He nuzzled into my neck, kissing and sucking there.

Oof. My heart. My body. Keaton hardly had to do more to prove he could be excellent boyfriend material—exactly what I’d want. If I was looking for a guy in my life, that is. Wait... was I looking for one?

The wedding march began, the perfect distraction from dwelling on things. Vanessa floated in first on white studded stilettos, lovely and smiling, her makeup perfect, her platinum hair swept up and held in place with a short veil—except she wore the exact white sequined two-piece Starla had on.

Instead of turning up the aisle to Ben, Vanessa detoured, continuing straight to Starla. Her face morphed from sweet, innocent bride to bridezilla in two seconds flat.

“You fucking bitch,” she yelled. “I’m the bride. How dare you dress like me?”

The camera people sprinted to follow and adjust, hoping to get it all on film.

“I cannot believe Starla’s audacity,” I whispered.

“I can. This was what the TV show was like. Nonstop.” Keaton didn’t have to watch, continuing to plant tiny kisses across my back and shoulders, tickling with his beard. I wasn’t complaining. My skin broke out in goosebumps, dying to know the feel of him everywhere else.

But I watched the tense scene before us intently. Melanie circled nearby, giddy like a kid in a candy store.

Cassandra entered then, as the Maid of Honor, like a B-list celebrity. Not to be outdone in the spotlight, her black bikini was only strings. She gave me a once-over and a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"Hope you brought your A-game, Sophie. These girls play rough," she snickered.

"I can handle whatever you or they dish out," I snarled back. Keaton squeezed my arm as if reminding me I didn't have to prove anything to them.

Cassandra coaxed Vanessa away from Starla, and they finally made their way up the aisle. A man and woman who I could only imagine must have been the parents of the bride stood to see if she was okay.

Vanessa gave assurances, then reached for Ben, who greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, taking both of her hands in his. As if they were Ken and Barbie, never had there been a more perfect pair.

If anyone thought that'd be the end of Starla's interruptions, though, they were wrong. She reared her head again at the point of the rehearsal ceremony where the officiant mentioned the part about 'If there is anyone present who knows of any reason that this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace.'

Starla ran up the aisle, screaming, "Wait! You can't marry the father of my baby." She threw herself into Ben's arms in hysterics.

Vanessa's shriek could've shattered glass. "You? I knew you'd pull something like this. How dare you? Get your claws off my fiancé!"

“No. It’s true,” Starla insisted, complete with her hand on her belly. “I’m having our love child.”

“You promised me you wouldn’t do this,” Ben seethed at her.

Vanessa gaped at him, shocked. “What are you talking about?”

“You know those little work trips he takes for business to L.A.? Well, let’s just say that I’ve kept him warm and satisfied in my bed for the past year. Especially since he says you’re nothing but a cold fish,” Starla gloated.

“This cannot be happening to me,” Vanessa cried, alligator-sized tears streaming down her face. “I don’t believe you. Ben? Talk to me. Tell me she’s insane.”

“I’m sorry. It’s true.” Ben hung his head. She openly wailed at the altar. A part of me felt for her situation, another part of me couldn’t believe what I was watching, as if this were simply another unbelievable, zany reality episode of *Brewed for Love*. If I worked in an office, this would be the type of scene that would be all anyone talked about at the water cooler.

“I love you Bennie. Our baby is going to be the best baby ever,” Starla wrapped her arms around the very stoic groom. He hardly acknowledged her, red faced. The curtain had finally exposed him to be far from the perfect bachelor, after all.

“No. He was my Bennie, not yours.” Vanessa cried, “You’ve wanted him all along though, always texting and flirting with him, playing it off like you two are just friends. You probably got him drunk and threw yourself at him in L.A.”

Starla blinked innocently with a haughty laugh. “Oh please. He’s been fooling around on you from day one, even undressing everyone here with his eyes all afternoon. I’m doing you a favor, sweetie. You can’t handle a man like Ben and all of his many...

tastes and desires.”

Ben looked like a deer caught in headlights. “Vanessa, babe, I swear she’s lying about other women. I don’t even like her.” He thrashed his hands around desperately, like a man whose days were numbered as America’s perfect bachelor.

“How could you say that when I’m carrying our child?” Starla insisted.

“You know what?” Vanessa snapped, sniffled, and straightened to her full height, and practically glowed with rage. “I don’t deserve this. I’m done. You can marry the next swimsuit that walks by. This wedding is off.” She stormed away, flipping the bird at the camera as she passed. Her parents followed quickly behind her.

“Oh, Bennie. Now you and I can get married.” Starla seemed genuinely hopeful—and oblivious. Was this all a ruse for drama’s sake or real?

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“What? I can’t marry you. Vanessa? Vanessa!” Ben ran off the set, with Starla chasing after him.

“Cut!” Melanie danced in place like Christmas had come early. “We got it all, right? Please, for the love of God and all things reality show holy, tell me we caught all of that on camera,” she shouted at the crew, practically salivating.

My stomach twisted. I’d had enough. I stormed over to where she was reviewing the playback on a monitor, every inch of me vibrating with disbelief. “Hope you’re happy.”

She barely glanced up. “Don’t worry. Drama drives the big payoff. The couple will fight, makeup, and get back together. Happens every season and makes for great TV.”

Keaton joined me, arms crossed, jaw tight. “I wouldn’t be so sure. Vanessa is a pastor’s girl from Texas and her daddy didn’t look too pleased running out of here. If Starla really is pregnant with Ben’s baby, I don’t think Vanessa’s family would approve of this marriage proceeding ahead.”

Melanie’s smile faded. “What do you care? You got your product placements, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I snapped. “But without a bride and groom to marry, it doesn’t do you or Keaton’s brewery any good.”

That one landed. Her fake smile slipped. “Shit,” she muttered and grabbed her radio,

calling for her assistant to send chocolates and flowers and teddy bears to Vanessa's room immediately with a card signed From Ben with love.

Keaton snorted, clearly enjoying watching her sweat for once. He turned to me, that devilish glint back in his eyes. "I doubt there'll be a bachelor or bachelorette party tonight. We might as well go enjoy our time in Vegas. What do you say, Sophie? I've been dying to hit the craps table."

I took his arm without hesitation and let him lead me away. But as a former fan of this show with a never-ending hope that two people could find true love on *Brewed for Love*, a part of me left the venue sad about the turn of events. Like saying goodbye to a good book I've read, I left a friend behind.

On the way out, Anthony and Cassandra were mid-argument as well, and we avoided them. It was as a little too much reality had tainted if the entire day, hell, the whole weekend. I was ready to escape it.

Back at the suite, I dropped my bag by the door and flopped onto the couch with a groan.

"I'm going to need therapy," I muttered. "Or a very large cocktail."

Keaton locked the door behind him with a guffaw and tossed aside his shoes. "Skip the therapy. We'll get room service and get drunk on overpriced bourbon instead."

I lifted a brow. "Thought you needed a night out at the craps table?"

He smirked and plopped down on the cushion beside me. "We'll do it all. We have time to enjoy ourselves now."

I leaned my head back and sighed. "I don't think I could handle being on a show like

that, if today was any sign of what it's like."

"You understand why I didn't want to attend now? I entered the show originally so naïve about the experience."

I nodded and took in his gorgeous profile. Such a nice guy who didn't need to be wrapped up in this. "Why did you get involved? What, the dating pool was too small for you in Holly Creek?"

"Sounded like fun, at the time. I don't regret most of it. Guess I'm just ready to move on from it."

"Melanie's going to spin this whole thing and come out smelling like a rose, isn't she? Meanwhile, poor Vanessa. She did not know any of this was coming."

He snorted. "I wouldn't count on it. Vanessa probably discovered Ben and Starla's relationship a month ago, after mailing the invitations. Then Melanie talked them all into having this big blowout on camera. It's all a big mind fuck if you ask me."

"Really? Either way, I can't help but feel a little sad for Vanessa."

He reached an arm over my head, landing behind my shoulders. "You're being way too nice, considering they weren't exactly pleasant to you." He pulled me closer, into his side. "Now, enough about them. Where does that leave us?"

"Us?" My voice turned breathy. "Well, I supposed my obligation as your wedding date is over since there's no wedding."

"You don't know that. We could arrive at the wedding tomorrow, and there'll be some bride and groom getting married. Who knows?"

“So I’m not off the hook? Still your weekend date?” My stomach twisted. Not at all ready for this weekend with him to end. I should’ve played it cool. I should’ve laughed and tossed back another snarky line. Instead, I fluttered my lashes at him.

“Still mine,” he confirmed with a sly smile. My breath caught in his last word. His fingertips drew figure eights on my shoulder. “So why don’t you let me take you out for a night on the town?”

“I’d like that.”

He stood, and I let him pull me up. He tugged a little too hard, and I fell into his arms and the comfort of his hug.

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“By the way, thanks for not looking at Starla.” I gazed up into his face. “That meant more to me than I expected.”

“Told you,” he murmured, “my eyes are only on you.”

His hand slid up my back, and tangled in my hair, holding me in place while his mouth moved over mine with slow and greedy purpose. My body melted into his, every nerve ending ignited. I relished in his possessiveness, which took us far beyond pretend. A kiss like this had to mean more.

His whiskers softly tickled my chin, the scent of cedar and lime beard balm titillating. Our tongues and breaths tangled to a feverish pitch, like we depended on each other for survival. With no cameras, no one else around, this wasn't for anyone but us. And when it broke, I wasn't sure I could play pretend with him anymore.

15

THE GOOD DATE

KEATON

Vegas at night lit up like daytime, which to the two of us, buzzed and feeling good, became a hilarious joke. Sophie let loose, laughing and shouting out the moon window, “Good Morning!” to people on the street at midnight. I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

To make things more interesting tonight, we got all dressed up in the clothes we'd

intended to wear to the wedding—because, by her way of thinking, what if there wasn't a wedding the next day? It would have been a waste of space in our luggage, having brought the garments all this way.

I agreed with her. How'd I get so lucky to end up with her? And why couldn't she have been a bachelorette on *Brewed for Love*? Partnering with our brains and her beauty and my brawn, we could have won the show. There was no comparison at all between Sophie and Vanessa. Or Sophie and Cassandra. Or Starla or Melanie—the entire lot of them. Sophie reigned far superior.

But I was entirely biased after consuming so many drinks tonight.

So I wore my suit, the one Richard bought for me to wear to important meetings, and she wore a silver strapless mini dress in a shiny fabric that I couldn't keep my hands off of all night. Her black stockings had seams up the back, teasing me like landing strips under her dress anytime she walked in front of me.

I vowed to myself to that by the end of the night, my hands would take a trip up those seams, under her dress...

We took full advantage of Richard's black card status, not that I couldn't have treated Sophie to a night on the town myself. But throwing around the Buchanan name got us into certain places.

Grand Cru seated us for a 5-star French Cuisine dinner for two without a reservation. At an intimate table, we split a pricey bottle of champagne. I learned Sophie liked to share meals. And by share, that meant sneaking her fork to my plate for a bite of my Beef Bourguignon, although she was generous to do the same for me from her plate of Confit de Canard.

The Omnia Nightclub let us in ahead of the long line. We danced song after song, or

rather I often stood there scowling at every other man who dared come near her. To end our night there, we splurged and tried a Gold Standard Cosmo together.

One sip and I knew. “Not for me. I’ll stick with my brews, thank you.” Although the taste reminded me of a Tequila Sunrise, I preferred malt and hops over sweetened liquor.

“Then you leave me no choice but to drink this entire thing all on my own. Although it’s almost too pretty to drink. Look at the gold flecks floating inside of it. Like little fishes,” her words slurred. It mesmerized her like a tropical fish tank.

I realized my mistake. She was almost drunk. And if I wanted to continue our party for two in our room, if Lady Luck would be on my side, then I needed Sophie fully aware, senses not dulled. To take advantage of her while intoxicated wasn’t my thing.

“You know what? I think you’re right. We don’t drink the rest. We let the gold flake fishes live. But I can take a few photos of you holding it like you own it,” I suggested and held up my phone.

“Yes, yes, please.” Her three words shot right to my groin.

“There you go, boss babe. Work it. Own it.” I snapped multiple photos as she posed and giggled. We agreed unanimously to post the one I took of us, the best of the bunch, onto our social media accounts.

She labeled hers, “Having fun with this man.” I labeled mine, “A night to remember with her.”

We said goodbye to the pretty drink, and we left.

I had our driver stop at a cheap diner on the way back to the hotel. It reminded me of

Flora's at home, but filthier. Didn't seem to faze Sophie. We sat in a corner booth and ordered cups of black coffee. At the last minute, she begged the server for a cinnamon roll.

"Hm, I think the batch just came in for tomorrow morning. I suppose I could snag you one, hun," the server drawled. Arguably, this would be the cheapest part of our night.

"The one with the most icing would be fabulous," Sophie batted her long lashes to get what she wanted. Pretty sure that works on me, too. "When I was little, on rare special occasions, my mom would bring me to a tiny diner like this and we'd split a roll."

"Is your mom still around?" I asked. She rarely talked of her family and shifted in her seat.

"Yep. At some Italian Villa with husband number three."

"I see."

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She got quiet, perusing the dessert menu, so I didn't want to probe further.

"Hey, Soph..." I got her attention and waited until the beautiful brown-eyed woman locked eyes with me. Then I stretched my arm across the table and laced my fingers with hers, like I didn't get enough of touching her every chance I could. "Tonight was pretty amazing."

She nodded. A slow smile spreading across her face. "If this was an actual date, it'd be the best one I've ever had."

Just stab me in the heart now. My brow furrowed. "Seemed pretty real to me."

She tilted her head. "You know what I mean. You asked me to be your fake date to the wedding..."

I licked my lips and took my time to respond. "Maybe at the start, this was all intended to be one way. Would it be such a bad thing if it changed to another way?"

"As in?"

"As in, tonight really counts. Nothing fake about it."

"Keaton." Her pretty little mouth formed softly around my name. "I had a great time tonight. If it was real, then it was the best ever."

"I know I wasn't faking a thing, Soph. Were you?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but the server arrived. “Here you are. Coffees, roll, cream. Need anything else, folks?” She set everything down. I thanked her, and she left.

“Mm, sogood,” Sophie moaned at her first bite, and used her word for anything that made her insanely happy with the cheap cinnamon roll piled high with icing. Her moans didn’t stop until the entire roll was gone. Each bite of her lips wrapped around the fork spoke right to my cock. “Little diners like this make the best food, and this coffee hits the spot.”

I enjoyed hearing that. I didn’t see Sophie as the money-grabbing woman who demanded the finer things in life. With Hops, I made good money over the years. Through smart budgeting and investments, I’d saved as much as I could, building an impressive nest egg for my age. With a nationwide distribution deal, my income would skyrocket, and my investments could rise into the millions. I could treat her to nice things more often.

What the hell was I thinking? My goal tonight consisted of getting her to forget the pillow wall, not anything permanent.

“Sometime if you’re ever in New York City, I’ll take you to my favorite hole in the wall for pie. It’s almost as good as Flora’s,” she said, savoring her last bite.

See? She also knew there could be an end to us soon.

A return to our lives before we met.

What even was my life before her? Before she invaded my office at Hops, my hometown, my every thought, and my life. I wouldn’t be able to work at my brewery without thinking of her.

I failed to understand why men would pass her up, treat her badly, or not show her a good time. Their loss, my gain, unless there's something big I haven't uncovered about her yet.

"Tell me about some of these horrible dates you've been on," I press.

"You don't want to hear about those." She added more cream to her cup.

"I do. You heard about Starla and Cassandra. Those are my stories. Share two of yours with me."

She scoffed and shook her head. "Okay. Fine. Two truths and a lie."

"This again? Considering I won the last time, lay it on me."

She nodded. "Number one. When I was a senior in high school, I was on a date with a college student I'd met, only to find the guy actually intended to kidnap me and demand ransom from my family."

I smirked. "You made it way too easy. I already think that's the lie."

"Number two. My date had to stop for cash on the way, but ended up being overdrawn, so I had to pay for the date. Surprisingly, that has happened on about fifty percent of the dates I've been on."

"Hm. Big red flags there, huh? I can assure you neither of those have I ever done on a date. And number three?"

"One date was a definite no for me, only he turned into a stalker and continued to follow me everywhere for a year, to where I had to have a bodyguard."

I jerked back. “Soph? That’s terrible. Now I’m stumped. I’d like to think oneandthree are lies.”

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“Most of my dates are just a pleasant chat over drinks. Not a big deal, but then somehow the ones I like, they ghost me. I never heard from or see them again. I think I’m too much for the average man. Too driven in my career. Too passionate about what I do. I used to think it was a me-problem, but now I realize it’s their problem. I am who I am and I like me.”

“To be very clear, I’m not your average guy. And your passion? Bring it on. I’m way too impressed with you to be put off by it. You know how highly I regard you, right?”

Her smile flatlined. “The world needs more men like you, Keaton. No wonder all the women from the show want you. Why couldn’t we have met before?”

“Because we’re meeting now. Things happen for a reason.” This was it. Time to lay my cards on the table, right here in Vegas, at a cheap corner diner. So romantic. “Soph, these past several weeks, if you can’t tell, I’ve gotten really into you. Yes, this weekend started out as a favor to me, you pretending to be my date. But somewhere along the way, I think I started falling for you.”

I caught the fear in her eyes as, once again, the server had the worst timing in the world. “Here’s your bill. Pay up at the register. Have a good night, folks.”

“I’ll pay. It’s getting late. We should go.” Sophie grabbed it and jumped out of the booth, rushing to the front. Faster on my feet, I reached her side and plucked the bill from her hand.

“I’ll be paying.” I already had a twenty in my hand and handed it over to the server.

“Keep the change. There, Soph. Now you can say I’m at least better than fifty percent of the dates you’ve been on because I had cash.”

Her bottom lip trembled as if about to cry when she stepped outside and I followed, worried, right as thunder rumbled. Rain poured down, and we huddled under the awning of the diner, waiting for our car to return.

Drops still hit us. I had my jacket on my arm, so I draped it over our heads to keep us dry, bringing us closer. She couldn’t run from me now.

I leaned in and called her out. “Must be so scary. You finally find a decent man like me and you don’t know what to do, being treated so well.”

“You’re right. It scares the hell out of me.”

“Then you know what we do?” I cupped her chin, tilting it up to meet mine. “We take it one day at a time together. See where this leads.” My lips landed on hers in a sweet and sensual kiss, careful not to push too hard. But now that I almost have her, I couldn’t lose her.

“Maisy would call it fucking around and finding out,” she purred.

“We can do that, too. I’m all for a little fucking around. So is that a yes? We can make this thing between us real?”

She searched my eyes as if riding a fence, unsure which side to land on.

“Don’t overthink it, Soph. Just go with it.”

“Yes, Keaton,” she whispered on my lips, the answer I wanted.

I deepened the kiss, slipping my hand behind her neck possessively, anchoring her to me beneath the shelter of my jacket. Rain? What rain? I only focused on the heat of her mouth, the cinnamon swirl on her tongue, and the way her body melded to mine.

This wasn't pretend. Not even close.

Her hands ran up my shirt, balling at my collar. She clung to me like she had to in order to believe in how real this was.

When we finally broke apart, her cheeks flushed, her lashes dampened from the rain, and her mouth kiss-swollen—the most beautiful woman in the world to me, inside and out. I'd do just about anything for her.

“How do you feel now?” I asked.

“Terrified,” she breathed and chuckled. “But I'm here with you. Right where I want to be.”

“Good girl. Now let's get back to the hotel. Quickly,” I growled, anticipating giving her a night that no other man in the past five years could do.

16

LUCKY STREAK

KEATON

The casino floor buzzed with noise and light as we passed through—neon slot machines chiming, chips clinking, people yelling at blackjack tables like they'd just won the lottery. But none of it compared to the way Sophie kept smiling at me.

We paused by a cluster of cast members and talked about the situation. We were all waiting to learn if tomorrow's wedding was still on. Their voices were anxious: no word from the bride or groom, no sign of Starla, and not a single instruction from Melanie.

All oddly quiet.

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As much I wanted to get back to our room and remove those sexy stockings of hers, how could we not pass through the casino on the way to the elevators without having a little more fun?

Sophie claimed poker as her game. We drifted to a table. She lost at one game, won at another, doubling her initial investment, then quietly scooped her chips into her purse.

“Always quit while ahead.” She winked at me.

I caught her up and spun her around, dancing through the slot machines. She laughed, her face glowing, and I felt it down to my bones. I wanted her. Not only because of this amazing date. I wanted to wake up to that laugh. I wanted to hold onto the version of myself that existed only when she was near.

By the time we stumbled upon the craps table, we were both flushed, glassy-eyed, and riding that Vegas high.

I threw my last few chips down, grinning.

“I’m feeling lucky tonight,” I said, tossing an arm around her shoulder. “This is the one.”

The dealer passed the dice to me with his stick. I held them out for her. “Blow on them for luck.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned in, lips pursed.

But at the last second, I changed my mind.

I wrenched her closer and kissed her instead—deep, unfiltered, shameless.

The table erupted.

Whooping. Applause. A couple of drunken cheers. One jeer to throw the damn dice already.

She pulled back, breathless. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe," I murmured, brushing my lips just beneath it. "But if I win this roll... no pillow wall tonight."

Her pupils dilated, eyes dark.

I rolled, praying, and focusing on the dice.

Seven.

The table lost its mind, urging me to roll again.

"Let it ride." I slid my new chips on the same bet.

"Keaton, you can't tempt fate twice." She tensed beside me.

I laughed in the face of fate, and lifted the dice. The heat in my blood had nothing to do with the neon lights or the game. I was buzzing again—from her by my side.

With eyes gleaming, I claimed, "If I win again, we both sleep in the nude."

She gasped, half-laughing, half-shrieking. "You're not serious."

"Dead serious." I cupped the ice and offered them. She shoved my hand away.

"I'm not blowing."

"Then kiss me again. For luck."

She folded her arms, fighting a smile, but the twitch was there.

I pressed a soft kiss to her lips and let the dice roll. The table erupted in cheers so loud I felt them rumble in my throat.

Another win. One guy fist-bumped like he was part of the team.

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Sophie's cheeks blushed bright. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I'd never felt like this happy and grounded at the same time. Like I couldn't stop my fall off of a cliff, but trusted I'd stick the landing when I hit the ground.

The dealer slid the dice to me again. The other players urged me on.

"Okay, last one." I stacked my chips on the same bet.

"Shouldn't you stop while you're ahead?" She arched a brow, saying the sensible thing, although her eyes danced mischievously, like she'd flipped my world upside down since the day she walked into it. No stopping now.

"If I win again, we throw the rulebook out the window and have some... spontaneous fun tonight."

Her mouth fell open. "Wasn't this entire night spontaneous and fun?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about." I winked and tossed the dice before she could stop me. I didn't want to give myself a second to overthink things. How this had started out fake. Temporary. How my gut was screaming to lead us into unknown territory.

For a third time in a row, the dice landed on my side of luck. Another win.

My jaw went slack and I stared at the table. Then like an earthquake hit the casino, everyone roared around us, stomping feet, clapping and yelling, like I'd hit the big jackpot.

I had, with her.

I seized Sophie, dipped her and claimed her lips in triumph. When we parted I growled into her ear. “To our room. Now.”

I gathered the chips into the bottom of my T-shirt like a makeshift basket.

"Sophie?" She'd suddenly vacated my side, already striding off toward the elevators like she was upset.

Panic stabbed my chest. Had I pushed too far?

I caught up to her right as she hit the up arrow. “Are you upset about something?”

She glanced up at me, cheeks flushed, lips parted and shook her head. She grabbed the front of my shirt and yanked me into the elevator just as the doors slid shut—and crashed her lips on mine.

Hot. Wet. Mind-blowing.

The chips didn't matter anymore. They scattered to the floor as I dropped them, freeing my hands to lift her up. I pressed her into the wall of the elevator. Her legs locked around my waist like it was the most natural thing in the world. Her fingers tangled through my hair, and every bone in my body screamed for more of her.

I was seconds from stopping the elevator and doing it right here. But the elevator dinged. Doors opened.

“Fuck the chips,” I breathed, and carried her to our door, mouths and tongues tangled the entire way. Whatever came next behind that door, I only knew this: I wasn't faking anything with Sophie anymore.

THINGS GOT REAL

SOPHIE

Keaton barely waited for the latch on the door to snap shut before he his body pressed me against it. His mouth crashing on mine, all my thoughts and worries vaporized.

Electricity crackled where our lips met, and I melted into him, my palms flattened against his broad chest, the hard thrum of his heartbeat strong under his skin.

I finally had the best night of my life with a man. It wasn't over. My core clenched and vibrated with need for him to satisfy me. My pulse raced to keep up with his pace.

His kisses seared me—hot, and demanding. Like he couldn't bear another second of pretending, about to explode with real desire and need. He dipped his mouth along my earlobe, teeth grazing there, his beard sparking goosebumps down my neck.

I wasn't sure who needed this more, me or him?

“You're so fucking beautiful,” Keaton breathed against my mouth, carrying me further into the room. “Nothing about what I'm going to do to you tonight is fake. Not a single part.”

His words sent a shiver down my spine. I desired for every bit of this to be most real thing I'd done in some time.

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My skin vibrated as his hands gripped my hips and pulled me flush against the hard heat of his body. Every part of me pressed to every part of him. His arousal pulsed against my stomach. I'd never felt so exposed, so wanted, and so ready for spontaneous combustion with a man.

No more pretending. No more rules. No pillow wall.

Just us.

He lifted me and set me on the desk in the room. He kissed me like a man who had every intention of undoing me, tongue sweeping past my lips, claiming and coaxing at once. We were on a complete free for all and I didn't care if I crashed—if he was the one I landed on.

My fingers fumbled at his buttons, hungry to feel him—his skin, his heat, his strength. A guttural sound escaped low in his throat when I pushed his shirt off his shoulders.

“Finally, your tattoos. I’ve want to run my hands along them all weekend each time you were shirtless.” My fingertips traced the outline of each one. God, his skin heated like a furnace. Every inch of him formed solidly, like he'd been carrying beer kegs all year, preparing for the pleasure of only me, only for tonight.

He gathered my hands in his. “Since the first day at Hops,” he confessed, jaw brushing the back of them as he spoke, “I’ve dreamed of this.”

My stomach knotted. “First day?”

“The moment I saw you behind my desk, I wanted to take you on it. Wasn’t exactly something I could admit to you at that point.”

“Not to the snooty new marketing specialist?” I teased.

“You would probably have gone running to Richard, begging to be free of this job and me.”

I bit my lip, tilting my chin up. “Exactly how much have you been thinking of me?”

He grinned, wicked and slow. “Let me show you now.”

He leaned in, his mouth closing over my neck, just beneath my ear. I gasped at the sharp jolt of pleasure, my knees weak. My brain short-circuited with the way his tongue moved against my skin, the scrape of soft beard against my collarbone, the way he growled my name like he was already halfway gone.

His hands skimmed up my stockings and under my hem, gathering my dress at my waist.

He pulled back just enough to look at my black lace there with flushed skin, eyes wide.

“Garter belt and stockings? Classic. Sexy. Jesus, Soph, you’re a damn wet dream.”

His words tripped my pulse. My heart thundered like it wanted out of my chest. I couldn’t remember the last time someone looked at me with smoldering eyes like that.

Like I was. Like I was more than just a fun fling or a good time. Like I was the storm and the calm that came after.

I leaned into him, craving him, at risk of losing myself for him. “Keaton...”

His fingers ghosted over the edge of my panties, knuckles running along them. I arched into him, needing more, every nerve ending screaming for him to touch me, claim me, take me.

“Tell me you want me,” his hoarse voice commanded.

“I want you, Keaton. I’ve wanted you longer than you’ll ever know.”

He hesitated. “I told you my moment. Tell me yours.”

I bit my lip, worried about admitting everything to him. Weighing the pros and cons of it. Ultimately, what’s the harm? So I went from a crazy fan to being in his arms. I landed here with him now, that’s all that mattered. I hoped.

“Well, basically, from the first Brewed for Love show, I’ve admired you. Like your millions of raving fans, I was glued to the TV, hoping that you’d win. Even started a fan page about you on social media, gaining thousands of followers fast. So when I met you in person I knew right away who you were. When I visited your brewery with Maisy and we flirted, I couldn’t believe how you seemed interested in me. I pitched Richard, never knowing if anything would come of it. And when I got the job, it was all I could do to keep things professional and friendly with you, and not let it get to my head or heart that I was spending time with Keaton Kingston.” I ended chewing my cheek, watching him absorb all of this.

He leaned his knuckles on his desk and squinted eyes at me. “So you’ve been stalking me?”

“What? No. I wouldn’t call it that. N-not exactly. More like I’m your biggest fan? A hobby? Oh God. I do sound like a stalker.” I attempted to push off the desk, but he

held me in place with a wicked laugh and grin. “I’m no better than that jerk who stalked me long ago.”

“Relax, Sophie. I’m flattered. I’ve never had a stalker.” He slyly smiled, laughing more.

“Do you know how hard it has been all these weeks to hide my fan girl away so I wouldn’t gush all over you?”

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“Yeah? Well what do you say we unleash the crazy? I’d love to see how you gush all over me.” He kissed me, still chuckling. “My little stalker.”

“You’re going to tease me about this often, aren’t you?”

His chortle the only response, he picked me up and carried me to the bed. I stood, hardly believing he’d taken that so well, while he shoved the wall of pillows away. The bed like a blank slate, we were freed to do anything we pleased.

I turned, flipping my hair over my shoulder and meeting his eyes. “Unzip me,” I whispered.

He tossed his shirt off to the side first. Then his fingertips found my zipper and slowly brought it down, skimming my skin. Warmth spread across my back and I hitched my breath.

The gown fell to the floor. He took my hand and helped me step out of it. The entire black lace set visible for him, his eyes blazed a trail up and down.

“You’re a fucking vision. Come here.” He kissed along the edge of my bra, knuckles grazing my nipple through the lace. He growled low, deeper, his hands sliding around to unclasp it and toss it aside. His tongue traced circles around my nipple before sucking it into the heat of his mouth.

“Oh, Keaton.” My cry felt torn from some deeper place inside of me.

“That’s it, my little stalker, my number one fan,” he murmured. “You’re with me

now. Let me take good care of you."

He laid me down on the bed and I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. I was undone by this man's mouth. Every time he spoke, every stroke of his tongue, tickle of his beard, and caress of his hands chipped away at any wall I had remaining.

I completely forgot about this weekend, about Hops and our marketing campaign and his goals. I forgot that anything existed beyond this bed because if I did I'd plummet into the unknown. Was this a one-time thing? What would happen once I wasn't useful to him and Hops anymore? Was there anything in the future for us?

He kissed his way down my stomach, slow and thorough, his hands gripping my thighs, spreading me open. I should've been self-conscious, but Keaton regarded me like I was a fancy feast he planned to savor every minute of.

He glanced up at me, eyes dark with lust. "Now tell me you want me."

"More than anything in the world," my voice, husky and low, gave him permission to do anything he pleased.

He stripped the last of my lace away and lowered his mouth to me, tongue searching through my folds. The first stroke of it flat along my clit undid me.

I should've been scared to tell him, kept my fan-girl past locked away. But here he was, worshipping my body, not pulling back.

My hips bucked, my hands threading through his hair as he licked and sucked and teased me until I was panting his name, begging.

"Keaton—please—I need?—"

He rose over me, eyes hungry. "What do you need, my little stalker?"

"You. Inside me. Now."

He straightened, unfastening his belt with deliberate slowness, every click and slide of metal matching my heartbeat. My throat went dry watching him, eyes widened at the sight of him—thick, hard, utterly gorgeous.

He caught my look and smirked. "Speechless?"

"Impressed," I managed. "Excited. Good."

He reached for a condom from his wallet, and took care of the practicalities, sheathing himself. I whimpered, wanting to know the full feel of him someday. Someday... whatever that meant for us. If there even was the possibility of anusbeyond this weekend.

I didn't know that was what I wanted until now.

He settled between my thighs, his weight anchoring me. His mouth found mine, claiming me, slower, deeper, as if memorizing my taste.

When he pushed inside me, one long, deliberate stroke, I saw fireworks behind my eyelids. Full, warm, perfect. We both gasped.

He moved, controlling every stroke at first, rolling his hips in a rhythm that drove me wild with slick friction. So intense, my sense multiplied, hearing the soft rustle of sheets and the moans we offered one another, our sex scented the room, my tongue and lips sucked saltiness along his neck.

"You feel so damn good," he rasped, his lips brushing my ear. "So tight, so wet, made

for me."

He added a hand, fingers finding my clit. I yelped at first touch. My nails scored his back as I coiled tightly, seeking release. My hips rose to meet every thrust and movement. The pleasure built fast until I was close.

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"I got you. Don't hold back," he whispered. "Let go for me."

One more stroke, and my body clenched around him. Relief coming in waves, but not for long.

He buried his face between my thighs. "Want to taste you. Come for me again. This time scream my name."

My world narrowed to the feel of him and everything he was doing to me. He groaned and picked up the pace, flicking his tongue like it forked, driving fingers into me harder, deeper. Never stopping until I became a trembling mess.

"Oh, Keaton. Fuck Keaton."

He groaned, lifting back up and sliding himself deep inside of me again until our cries tangled in the dark competing with the sound of our skin meeting, the slick friction, the hotel headboard knocking on the wall. My nails raked his back, needing to hold onto something as he drove us both over the edge.

He stilled, growling, "Soph, fuck, so good."

We collapsed together, sweaty and tangled, heartbeats racing, chests rising and falling. He brushed the damp hair from my face and kissed me—soft and sweet. Not rushed.

Gazing into his eyes was almost too much.

I'd exposed parts of myself—physically, yes, but something deeper too. The fan girl. The woman who wanted more but was terrified to ask for it.

And there were still things he didn't know about me.

That scared me.

Because this wasn't just about sex.

I wanted him to see all of me—more than I'd ever shown any man.

I needed him to want more than my body, more than the sounds he pulled from my throat, but to want my forever, too.

Only then could I give him everything.

His eyes searched mine—quiet, unreadable.

"You okay?" he asked, voice husky, hand still cradling my cheek.

I nodded, breathless. "Better than okay."

He grinned. "That's good. 'Cause I'm not done with you yet."

I chuckled. "Give a stalker a minute to catch up, why don't you."

"Gladly."

We curled into each other, the sheets warm and messy around us.

No cameras.

No beer branding.

Just us.

He'd awakened a possibility between us I never expected, and now, I wanted it all.

18

PROPOSAL OF SORTS

SOPHIE

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:11 am

My heart pounded like a drum in my chest when I awoke in Keaton's warm arms.

Or was that someone actually pounding on our hotel door?

"What the hell?" Keaton growled awake, voice thick with sleep. He pulled away, his warmth leaving me in bed. He yanked on shorts and stalked to the eyepiece of the door. With brow creased, he groaned. "We're not opening this door."

"Why not? Who is it?" I flung back the covers. The clock on the nightstand glowed 6:00 a.m.

"Nope. Not letting this bullshit ruin our day. Back to bed," he snapped, but I was already sliding into my dress, adrenaline surging.

"Keaton—"

"I can hear you talking," came a familiar voice from the other side.

"Is that Melanie?" I turned the handle and Keaton sighed, stalking away.

Melanie stood there, mascara running, tears in her eyes. A complete mess. "They won't do it," she sobbed, voice cracking. "Vanessa says she's done for good. Ben's trying to coax her out, but she's locked herself in the bridal suite and has booked a morning flight back to L.A."

I blinked, stunned, but couldn't blame Vanessa for her meltdown. "Seriously?"

“I promised my producers a wedding,” she sniffed, looking at me like I could pull a miracle out of my suitcase. “No wedding means no finale. No finale means my contract doesn’t get renewed with the studio.”

“Sorry about your luck. Now, if you don’t mind, we were not ready to wake up yet.” Keaton gestured for her to leave. Instead, she stepped deeper into our room, closing the door behind her. I felt a little sad for her. Last night with Keaton still smoldered beneath my skin. Facing a wrecked reality show was exactly what I didn’t need.

“Too bad there isn’t another couple to could take their place,” I said, only half joking. “That’d be a surprise no one saw coming.”

Melanie’s head shot up. Her eyes sparkled.

Oh no. That sparkle looked dangerous.

“No,” Keaton said instantly, voice like steel. “Absolutely not.”

But it was too late.

Melanie clutched my arm. “You and Keaton. You’re already here and you’re both hot. The audience loves him and would love you, too. And it would be the perfect ending! The fans would get their happily ever after seeing Keaton get married.”

Keaton went rigid, eyes narrowing. He pried me free, guiding me away from Melanie’s frantic pull. “You’ve lost your damn mind.”

His fierce protectiveness warmed me, but Melanie’s words hung between us in the stale morning air.

“Can you believe her? Marry you? For TV?” he shook his head in disbelief.

Should I take offense at his question about marrying me or try to understand his problem with reality TV?

“It wouldn’t have to be real. Look, you both signed NDAs for this weekend, so I feel safe in telling you this.” Melanie pushed her glasses up her nose. “The Vanessa and Ben wedding was going to be fake. The studio needed a huge win after the flop of their last big-budget movie. So when they heard Vanessa and Ben were going to get married, they offered them a million dollar deal to do it on television. Only she wanted a wedding at home in her father’s church. His father didn’t want the cameras there. So this wedding was supposed to be fake, and then they’d marry again quietly for real back home next month.”

We both gawked at her like she’d grown two heads.

“Technically, we already are fake-dating for TV,” I pointed out to Keaton.

“What did you just say?” Melanie’s jaw dropped.

Oh no. I groaned. “Starla was pressuring Keaton to rekindle their relationship this weekend, but he didn’t want that. And because of the opportunities for Hops here, I agreed to be his date.”

“So, the two of you staged all of this? Wow, I totally bought it. You two are good together, like you belong together—married even.” How quickly she was about to turn this around.

Keaton exchanged a glance with me. I nodded, but then he said, “It may have started as an act, but I think we discovered last night there could be more between us.”

He took my hand in his and my heart burst wide open at the smoldering heat in his eyes.

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“Wonderful. If you didn’t mind pretending to date, then it’s just another step to pretend to be married?—”

“I’m not going through with a fake wedding just to save your ass,” Keaton grumbled at her.

Her gaze sharpened. “Okay, but then, without a wedding, the studio pulls the plug. No show, no airing. More specifically, no Holly Creek Hops brews in the spotlight on national TV. What would that do to your plans? Hm?” She cocked her head, knowing she had us there.

All our hard work from the summer for nothing. We’d have to scramble to find another way to shine the light on his beer and gain the attention of the distributors. A thousand details flashed through my mind, trying to piece together an alternative route.

Dammit, this had been such a golden opportunity to blend his brand relaunch with this reunion wedding weekend. It was brilliant, if I say so myself. But now...

I cared about Keaton and his goals for the future. Not to mention how this campaign could help propel my career forward. A lot was at stake here.

“Keaton,” I pressed, voice low, urgent. “You’ve already kissed me like you meant it. We’ve shared an office, now a hotel room. Held hands and acted like a couple. I’ve rebranded your entire company with you.”

The tension in his jaw visible, his fingers curled into fists at his sides, like a war

going on in the man's head.

He scrubbed a hand down his face. "Sophie, it's marriage. Feels like a line we shouldn't cross."

"Just for show. For a few days. Weeks, maybe. It's not like we're joint filing our taxes."

Melanie cut in. "Actually, the studio wants ninety days plus three days of filming along the way to revisit the happy couple. Then you can fake a fight and break things off, pretend to divorce. The whole works. You'll sign a contract."

He scowled, pacing away, but I could see the wheels turning. "This is nuts. Why should we help you? We're not obligated to do this."

"Well then, good luck with Hops. Without this show, you're going to need it." She sauntered toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Melanie. Give us a moment, please." I pulled Keaton into the bathroom and shut her out.

"We need this for Hops—" I began.

He placed his hands on my shoulders and leaned down to look me square in the eyes. "I won't have you do this for me. I'll find another way to reach my goals, but not like this."

"You don't want to marry me?" I fluttered my lashes, staring up into his blues. "Last night you wanted things to be real between us."

"Real, yes. To date. To fuck around and see where things go. Not to get married in

front of millions on TV, only to then call it off ninety days later.”

“The marriage wouldn’t be real, Keaton. But we could still date,” I pleaded. I couldn’t believe I was actually pushing for this.

Questions brewed all over his face. “Why would you even want to? A fake wedding feels so... so beneath of us.”

“And you asking me to pose as your wedding date wasn’t?”

“That was different.”

I snorted. “Not by much. Look, I want Hops to be successful and for all of your dreams to come true. That’s good enough reason for me to do this,” I assured him. “I have a lot riding on it too, you know.”

“Ah. Like your own career getting a boost from this?” Why did he say that with such venom?

My armor went back up, crossing my arms. “We both benefit, yes.”

A soft knock distracted us. “If I could just interject here?” Melanie called through the door. “The studio is offering a million dollars to split between both of you if you get married. Money sent upon the fulfillment of the ninety days when you sign the fake divorce papers. Just say yes. Fast. Because we have a lot to do today to prepare for the wedding switch tonight.”

“That’s a lot of money.” My heart raced. Not that I needed the funds. “Think of what it could do for your expansion. Think of the exposure. Your brewery would be everywhere.”

“What about you and me?” he asked, voice low. “What does that do to you, Sophie?”

I lifted my chin. “Posing as man and wife, we’ll certainly discover more about each other. We’ll learn what it’s like to be so close to someone. After it’s all over, we would either be the greatest couple to emerge from a reality show, or be too sick of each other to carry on.”

He considered me for a long moment, eyes intense. “One or both of us could walk away heartbroken, you know.”

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My throat tightened. “Then we guard our hearts. Just have fun with this.”

Doubt still lingered, but then he leaned closer, his voice all gravel and heat. “If we’re going through with this, then I expect you to be my wife every second of the day... and the night. We’ll do everything a man and woman do when they have rings on their fingers. The only lie between us will be our vows.”

Heat flared through me. His smoldering promise—and the memory of last night—set my blood on fire.

“Define everything,” I whispered.

He let out a low chuckle. “Plenty of spontaneous adventures. No regrets.”

Desire coursed through my veins, especially after last night and knowing how good it was with him. Even if it was just for the brand, or the cameras—I wanted ninety days of being his.

I nodded slowly. “I’m game if you are.”

“This is what you really want?”

“Yes.” I hoped it was.

He scrubbed his beard, his eyes boring into me like he searched my soul. “Fuck it. Then marry me, Soph.”

“Get on your knees at least,” Melanie suggested from behind the door.

“It’s okay. You don’t have a ring or anything. It’s fine.” I shook it off. Was I cheating myself out of the whole experience of marrying someone for real, and all the romanticism that went with it? “I’ll marry you. For pretend. For Hops, and the show.”

“Yeah. Okay. We’ll get through it together, right?” He kissed my temple.

Keaton Kingston and I just agreed to marry in Vegas, of all places. This wasn’t a love story with a neat beginning. It started with pretending, escalated with passion, and landed somewhere between downright chaos and a studio contract.

But as I regarded him with wild attraction, from his beard, to his shirtless chest and torso, to his tattoos—I couldn’t deny the truth landing in my heart.

Fake or not, this thing between us had already taken root. It took hold of me, and I wasn’t sure I could let it go.

19

IT TAKES TWO

KEATON

The air conditioning could not prevent me from sweating. Wearing Ben’s tux, that didn’t quite fit despite quick altering, I paced in the staging area marked off for the Groom and groomsmen. The pre-wedding chaos was in full swing. Cameras ready. Lights glaring. Melanie screeched about floral centerpieces that were blocking the camera views.

Filming had taken place all day, as she worked hard to spin this new show direction

toward my surprise wedding. The crew and cast shot extra scenes that would set up the demise of Vanessa and Ben's relationship, and make way for the blooming romance between me and Sophie.

More drama unfolded when Cassandra found out we were getting married instead of the original couple. She called me out for sexting her, claiming I lead her on and let her down. She ripped a bridal gown to shreds. Whatever she and Melanie could cook up for extra drama, they made it work. Then Starla finally resurfaced and tried flirting with the actor portraying the officiant.

I doubted if she was even pregnant. Who knew what to believe anymore? I'd seen enough of all of them for one lifetime, and we hadn't even started the ceremony.

Vanessa and Ben split. People saw them leaving the hotel separately. Yet there were reports of them flying out on a private jet at the airport together. Many reconciliation rumors swirled. But they must have decided it was too late to take the spotlight back.

So here I sat. Contracts all signed with the producers, basically giving my life over to them and this marriage for ninety days. Ten minutes to showtime, sweating in this suit and thinking about my bride to be, trying not to lose my mind. The payoff at the end of all of this had better be worth it.

Anthony arrived, my only groomsman, holding two beer cans. "Take your pick. It's your day. It Takes Two Brew or the Happy Couple?"

I snorted and popped the tab on the It Takes Two Brew. Because Sophie and I would need to work together to see this through.

"Bold choice. You okay, man?" He asked, clapping me on the back.

"Just Peachy," I said, guzzling it down.

“Sure you wanna go through with this?”

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Did I? Hell if I knew. The cameras were everywhere, and Sophie was probably being pinned into something white and stunning about now, while producers gloated about ratings and last-minute shot lists.

All I knew was... I wanted her, and that scared the hell out of me. Wanting Sophie wasn't part of the plan. The plan for this weekend was: stay far away from the crazy people, have fun with Sophie, show off my brews. But she had this way of unraveling all of my best intentions with just one look.

She wanted this wedding for me. She'd benefit from it, too. A part of me wanted to see her succeed as well. A huge part of me definitely wouldn't mind having her in my bed for ninety days. Then whatever might happen after that remained a mystery.

I couldn't tell Anthony a thing, sworn to secrecy through our nondisclosure agreement, so I did the next best thing. I lied. Which I'd have to get used to doing for the near future.

"Go through with this? Hell, yeah, I do. Have you seen Sophie? She's gorgeous and smart. Creative and funny. We get along better than any woman I've ever been with." None of that was a lie. "Of course I want to marry her."

"Glad to hear it." He gulped down the Happy Couple Ale. "How the fuck did we get wrangled into the show in the first place?"

"You seem to have made out well with Cassandra," I snorted.

"Look, I'm sorry if I took her from you. If I'd known you were texting her..."

Funny how time and Sophie took away any desire I once held for Cassandra. “No need to apologize. Just hope you’ll be happy with her.”

“She’s a handful.”

“You’re the right man for the job to tame her,” I quipped. I didn’t really think he was, but couldn’t think of anything else to say.

I ran a finger between my neck and shirt. The music started. A crew member stopped by to get us and take us to our places.

“Showtime.” Anthony patted my back and took the beer out of my hands.

Up at the altar, sweat gathered at the back of my neck. The desert air cooled off only slightly at dusk, but the nerves? Full blaze. I tried to breathe through the surreal feeling, standing there in front of half-drunk reality stars and too many camera lenses, about to say vows to a woman who could easily make me forget they were supposed to be fake if I let her.

Unless she didn’t show up. The genuine possibility she’d come to her senses and run wrecked me. Until she appeared.

I saw her face. And her gown. My heart squeezed at the perfect image of the woman who was about to become Mrs. Keaton Kingston.

Sophie walked down the aisle like she owned the damn place, with her head held high despite the snickers from catty women as she passed them by.

Soft tendrils fell around her face from her updo like a breeze had kissed her. A white satin dress hugged her slender body, simple string-like straps holding it in place by the shoulders, leaving nothing to the imagination. She held a simple bouquet of lilies

at her midsection.

The minute her eyes landed on me, everyone else disappeared. Even the cameras. I forgot to breath, and I almost forgot what we were doing there.

When she reached the front, I stepped forward, offering my hand as she took the steps. She faltered and reached a hand up to my face. She caressed along my smooth jawline with a horrified look, and she whispered, “What did you do?”

“Oh that? I shaved off my beard. If I’m getting married, then I’m going all the way. Had to present a polished image in this tux.”

“But—but your beautiful beard? That’s part of your brand?—”

“Relax, Soph, it’ll grow back. Don’t tell me you don’t like me now without it?”

“Oh, I like it. It’s hard to say which version of my handsome, I mean husband, I like more,” she giggled under her breath nervously.

I grinned at the way she admired me. “Not your husband yet. We have to get through this first. Don’t jinx it. Nervous?”

“I was until I saw you standing here waiting for me.”

“I was, too, until I saw you gracing the aisle.” Seeing her calmed me. This may be the craziest thing I’d ever done, but at least we were jumping in together. “Hey, beautiful. Let’s get married.”

The officiant cleared his throat and started. He spoke about love and commitment, and legally binding gibberish. All pretend. He knew it, and we knew it. I stole glances at the cast and some of the other people there I didn’t even recognize. They all bought

that it was an actual wedding.

Sophie's hands squeezed mine. I gazed at our connection, the way our hands joined, melting into each other so I couldn't tell where I ended and she began. One thought stung me more than anything else this weekend—What if I wanted this to be real?

I shoved it aside. Buried it under the reminder that this was temporary. We had a contract. A shelf life of ninety days. Nothing more.

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She leaned closer as the officiant asked for the rings. “Last chance to back out, brewmaster.”

“And miss out on calling you my wife for a while? No backing out now.” I adored the way her cheeks bloomed pink. Because that’s what a groom would probably do.

We exchanged rings, and I watched her face light up upon viewing the ring I bought for her. The studio had a jeweler visit me over lunch where I made my selection. Sliding it on her finger, I made the right choice. Simple platinum band, with an ethically lab-grown diamond in a marquis shape. It looked stunning on her.

Wait. Were those tears in the corners of her eyes? I choked up myself. I knew it, today was a mistake.

“Oh, Soph...” I couldn’t stand to see her so sad. We were doing this for all the wrong reasons, and I felt like a total asshole for even allowing things to get so out of control. I reached up, cupped her cheeks, and dabbed at them for her with my thumbs. “If you ran away now, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“But you would chase after me if I did, wouldn’t you?” Her glossy golden brown eyes searched mine for reassurance.

No question. “Hell yes, I would.”

She winked and recovered, smiling again. “That’s all I need to know.” She took my ring from the officiant and, after squeezing the simple platinum band over my knuckle, she teased. “Almost official. Get ready for that kiss.”

“Believe me, I got it covered.” These little things we said to each other throughout were more memorable than anything else.

We repeated vows from the officiant, both of us opting not to create our own, to Melanie’s horror, but she’d get over it.

Then it finally came time, and the officiant pronounced us husband and wife.

Husband and wife.

We actually did this thing.

“Ready for this?” I gathered her in my arms, lips poised to claim.

“Better make it convincing,” she teased. I made sure not to disappoint. Soft at first, then passionate, dipping her with just enough steam to make Melanie happy. Not that I cared about her. Ours was an epic kiss to beat out all others across history and time.

I swung Sophie’s hand in mine high above our heads like we were champs for surviving this ordeal without snapping.

Music blasted, and cheers followed us back down the aisle. Melanie signaled to the crew that the take was finished. And the entire thing was finally over.

The only reason I made it through was because I could stare into Sophie’s sweet face the entire time, her smile radiant, her grip strong and sure in mine.

We walked back down the aisle like we belonged to each other—for now. As she glanced up at me, mischief in her eyes and that soft curve to her lips that always undid me, I didn’t regret saying I do one bit.

CONSUMMATION

KEATON

The reception was a blur inside the ballroom of the hotel. Champagne toasts, more photos, more cameras in our faces, and plenty of spontaneous kissing. I danced with Sophie under twinkle lights while everyone watched and claimed we were so in love.

Guess we had them fooled.

Surprisingly, little drama came our way. Melanie mostly focused on a cake fight between Cassandra and Starla that they'd started out in the hotel lobby, far away from us.

Sophie's bright light shone through it all, the one good thing in all of this. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I yearned to be inside of her again.

"You're staring," she said, smiling up at me during the final dance of the night, even after I stepped on her foot. She'd tossed aside her heels and placed the balls of her feet on the tips of my shoes instead.

"Hard not to. You're radiant. Easily the best-looking bride this resort has ever seen."

"Better than Vanessa would have been?"

I tightened my hold around her. "I mean it. Better than anyone. Ever. Of course, I may be biased since you're mine for ninety days."

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She blinked up at me, surprised. “And you’re mine, Keaton. Don’t forget that.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with all of this?” The sight of her crying during our ceremony still stuck with me, concerning me.

“Little late now to take it all back. And yes, I’m fine, Keaton. I’m choosing to think of this as an adventure, an experiment, if you will.”

“I’m happy to be your test subject. I admit I was a little worried that you might change your mind and not show up at all.”

“I hardly had time to think, between filming and dress fittings. Otherwise, with time on my hands, I’d have been reconsidering this whole plan.”

“When I saw you start down that aisle, walking toward me, and so beautifully...” I had no words to describe that moment in time. I touched my forehead to hers. “Thanks for going through with it.”

“You’re welcome.” She closed her eyes as the song came to a close.

I twirled her out and back into my arms. Everyone clapped and begged to see us kiss once more. If I believed in such things as fairy tales, this might be as close as I could get to one.

Not that I considered myself a charming prince.

Then the lights went up, and I heard Melanie call out, “That’s a wrap. We got

everything we needed here. Now for the final shots as the happy couple proceeds to their suite for the night.”

Three takes of me carrying Sophie over the threshold and to our red rose-petal covered bed was two takes too many in front of the camera crew. I was ready to take my bride to bed, and over my dead body would that show up on national TV.

“You got enough to work with,” I growled when Melanie demanded one more shot. I pretty much shoved them all out the door of our suite.

Finally alone, Sophie and I shared a glance and we both breathed a sigh of relief at the same time.

“We did it,” she said. It was late, my buzz was gone, but my desire for her grew stronger by the minute.

Sophie groaned and kicked off her heels. “My feet are killing me.”

I loosened my tie and sat on the couch. I cracked the knuckles in each hand, wiggling them. “Lucky for you I came prepared. My fingers are ready. Come here. ”

“Perfect,” she chuckled and sat. Her feet landed in my lap and I went to work, easing her suffering thanks to the tall stilettos she wore all night.

“We should probably talk about how we’re going to handle the next ninety days,” she suggested between tiny moans as I kneaded the balls of her feet.

“You want to know what I think?”

She smirked. “You’re all for spontaneous acts of combustion?”

“It’s pretty amazing how much you know me so well already.” A crooked smile smoldered on my lips. Once I felt her feet were satisfied I moved higher, under her dress, up her calves, past her knees and thighs. “My fingers can do even more to please you.”

She stopped my progress. “This gown is so tight, they practically painted it on me. I don’t think I can spread my legs for you while I’m in it.”

“You know the remedy for that. Take it off.” I dipped my voice an octave lower, scanning her body.

She stood and crossed to a mirrored closet door. I watched her reflection in the glass as she twisted and tried unzipping the back of it.

“If you want your husband to help, just ask nicely,” I prodded.

Her response was a husky, seductive purr that sent shivers down my spine. “Please?” She purred. How could I say no?

I stalked up behind her, unable to resist the temptation any longer. Slowly, I dragged the zipper down, revealing more and more of her bare skin with each inch. My pulse thundered in my ears as we locked eyes in the mirror. The heat between us like we were the last man and woman on Earth.

She stepped out of the gown and hung it up before swiveling around to face me in a white lace bustier and thong. Our bodies met in a searing embrace, our skin pressed tight against each other's.

“Guess we’ll never need the pillow wall again,” she chuckled and gathered the red rose petals that had formed a heart shape on the bed.

I circled my arms around her. "No walls between us. From this day forward.

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She crashed her mouth over mine like a starving creature, my lips her only sustenance. I backed her toward the bed. Our tongues danced wildly while her hands fumbled with my buttons. The raw desire coursing through me was undeniable. I couldn't get enough of her.

“I almost forgot about consummating our marriage tonight,” she teased between kisses.

“Believe me, burying myself deep inside of you was the only thing that got me through the reception.”

Finally free from my shirt, she pushed me onto the bed and climbed on top of me. My hands skimmed her back and cupped her full backside. Her soft curves molded perfectly against my hardness; every inch of flesh craved contact.

“What would you like, my wife?” I asked, voice gruff, the word wife becoming my favorite. I watched her pulse beat at the base of her throat, wanting to put my lips there next, but she had other plans.

“To give my husband a ride.” She suggested, her words igniting me further. “For starters.”

My gaze darkened, barely restraining myself. “There’s a condom in my wallet.”

She moved deliberately, her intentions clear, and I groaned as anticipation flooded my body. She ripped the packet with her mouth and sheathed me expertly.

She straddled me slowly, lowering herself onto my throbbing cock until we were completely one. It wouldn't be long before I came undone within her tight walls.

An exchange of power drove us, sparked by carnal desire. Nothing about the way we touched felt forced. Every kiss, and caress quickly became intimate and desired. The moans of my name on her lips only urged me on to finish on a roar.

The countdown began. Ninety days of this could ruin me.

When the morninglight cut through the hotel curtains, I should have woken her, but for a minute, I didn't move, only stared down at the sleeping beauty in my arms. Tangled hair over bare shoulders made for a lovely view of my wife-for-now. My marketing consultant. My friend-turned-bedmate.

I should panic, thinking about how we were going to keep this ruse up for another ninety days without losing our minds. Instead, all I could think about was how perfect she looked in my bed, and how badly I wanted to be inside of her again.

She stirred against me, stretching with a soft, satisfied hum that sent a shot of heat straight to my groin.

"Morning," she mumbled, eyes still half-closed.

"Morning, mywife," I said, my voice rough with sleep—and need.

Her lips curved slowly. "Sounds so strange... say it again."

"Wife." Strange, yes. But a part of me liked it. I leaned in and kissed her shoulder, then lower, and lower still until her breath hitched. I wanted to taste her and hear all her moans again. I wanted to chase every one of her little reactions until I knew them all by heart.

“Keaton,” she warned, breathless. “We should probably talk about?—”

“Later.” I slid on top of her, my weight braced on my forearms. “Right now, I’m busy.”

She grinned up at me. “Oh? Is morning sex your thing?”

I kissed her. “You’re my thing. But yes. Especially this morning-after where the husband—that’s me, in case you forgot—gets to remind his wife—you—exactly how good things will be for the next ninety days.”

“Hm. Bold move,” she murmured as I nudged her thighs open and shifted between. I nipped her bottom lip.

We didn’t last long. The tension had been simmering since last night. Hell, it had been simmering since the first time she walked into my bar and challenged everything I thought I wanted.

It was fast this time—urgent, breathy, full of messy kisses and whispered promises we’d let slip and probably had to unpack later. But it felt good.

After, we lay tangled in each other, legs twisted, hands roaming lazily.

“Do you think Melanie’s going to show up with cameras again today?” Sophie asked, trailing her fingers down my chest.

I groaned. “Don’t even joke. She texted last night. Said she’ll have a copy of the fake marriage license to us by noon. And she wants a ‘recap interview’ before we fly back to Holly Creek.”

“Of course she does. And if I have my way, we’ll be poolside sipping on cans of your

brews while being filmed.” Sophie stretched and rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand.

A corner of my mouth lifted, beguiled by her brilliance. “Good thinking, badass marketing pro.”

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God, she was beautiful like this—playful eyes, tousled hair, naked in my bed. I wanted to lock the door and keep her here for the full ninety days without interruption.

But that wasn't how this worked.

Sophie sat up, pulling the sheet with her. “Melanie said she'll be flying in once a month to check in for film updates. Make sure we're still convincingly blissful. We're supposed to keep up appearances on our social media platforms, too, and they have the right to use anything we post however they see fit. Think you can handle all the attention, much less being married to me that long?”

I dragged a hand down my face, pretending to think. “Hmm. Tough call. You do steal the covers. And you drool a little in your sleep.”

She threw a pillow at me.

I caught it and tossed it aside. “Yeah. I can handle it.”

“And you fart in yours.” She laughed and flopped back beside me. I'd started craving her in a way I hadn't expected.

“Must be the brews. You marry a brew man you get special treatment.” I laughed with her, lacing my fingers with hers, and we quieted down for a minute. “What'll you do with your half of the payday?”

Her smile widened. “Use the momentum to go national. This account with you is

already drawing attention. I have emails from two potential clients in L.A. and another in Chicago. With the money, I can hire a team, take on more accounts, maybe finally get my own office.”

There was the truth. National clients. L.A. and Chicago. A team. A life built far away from Holly Creek—and me.

So that was her plan.

Ninety days, then she was gone. Off to build her empire. I was just the stepping stone. The guy she married for a headline, a campaign, a viral rebrand. She was smart, I’d give her that.

But it still stung.

Because no matter how good her mouth felt on mine or how amazing she looked naked in my sheets or the sound of my name on her moan as I did all kinds of sexy things with her, part of her was already gone. Planning her next move.

Just like Starla. Just like Cassandra. Just like every other woman on the show who sought out the fastest way to fame. The Keaton Kingston Experience was a step ladder for Sophie. That was all.

She noticed my silence. “Hey,” she said, crawling toward me and placing her hands on my shoulders. “You told me that whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together. Right?”

Her eyes held something soft. Something I didn’t want to name. Something I didn’t trust—but God, I wanted to.

She pressed a kiss to my chest, then my jaw, then my lips.

“I’m not going anywhere until the time’s up, and maybe not even then,” she whispered. “If you don’t kick me out, then I might stay.”

“Is that a promise, Mrs. Kingston?” I chuckled at calling her that, even though part of my heart ached. I suppose a little fun was exactly what I needed. Just had to keep my heart out of this.

“Sounds official. Mr. and Mrs. Kingston. Wild. Has a certain ring to it.” She peppered my jaw with kisses. “Just don’t forget I’m also your marketing consultant. In personal and business, I know all your weaknesses now.”

I smirked. “You think? Then what’s my number one weakness?”

She kissed me again. “Me. At least, if it isn’t now, it should be.”

Damn right.

Maybe ninety days wouldn’t be the end.

I could figure out a way to make her want more with me and stay. Forever. And that thought made me hard again—my body wanting to claim her as mine.

“Mm. Why Mr. Kingston. You’re not sick of me yet?” She teased, as she slid down on my cock, rocking on me so good, I quickly lost myself in the pleasure of her. This marriage of ours coming to an end was a problem for the future me to figure out before the expiration date. Right now, buried so deep inside of her, my one job was to convince her I was all she needed.

KEATON

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A car dropped us off at the airport hangar where the Buchanan's private jet stood ready and waiting for us to board. Then I noticed another jet nearby as we took our luggage to the plane.

"Hey look at that. It's the West Games logo on the tail of that jet. Can't mistake the king and queen chess pieces on it. Do you play chess?" I asked my new wife—a word that was becoming easier to let roll off my tongue—but she'd frozen in place, staring at the aircraft with an odd look on her face. "Soph?"

"Oh, uh, no. No chess for me."

"I could teach you. Vivian and I grew up on classic West Games like Tower Trouble and Strategy Summit, among others," I offered.

"I don't like board games, remember? Whew, it's so hot. Let's get inside." She rushed ahead.

"Oh. Kay." I'd have to get to the bottom of that soon, but right now it served as a reminder that we were just beginning this situation. There were probably plenty of things we'd yet to discover about each other, what we both liked, tastes we shared, and some we differed on. It'd make for exciting months ahead.

Once we settled in, with the falsified marriage certificate glaring from the table in front of us, we called Richard from the plane before it took off. Sophie insisted on it before he saw the news of our wedding blasted all over TV and social media. Melanie and her team worked fast, already spreading the teasers for tonight's show—in which it hinted at a surprise bride and groom, while quickly panning over our faces.

As we sat in the luxurious seats inside the Buchanan jet, I looked back on how, just a few days prior, we flew on this thing heading to Las Vegas with only the intention of dating for the weekend.

Now we were leaving bound by fake vows.

Richard answered on the first ring. I put it on speaker.

“What the hell’s going on? I just got a notification that something’s trending with your name and Sophie’s, too. People all over the internet speculate you are the bride and groom on tonight’s show?” He sounded far from pleased.

Sophie and I exchanged glances. We had decided to let Richard in on the deal with the studio since he was just as invested in the success of my business as I was. Because of the NDA, though, he would not know our vows were faked.

She cleared her throat. “Hi, Richard. We wanted to tell you first, before the show airs. We... got married.”

There was a long pause. I could hear the gears turning in his sharp business brain.

“You what?”

“Let’s just say the entire reality show weekend was a mess, and an opportunity arose. Sophie and I leveraged it to our advantage,” I supplied, keeping my tone even and business-like, which I figured would appease the billionaire. “The studio made an offer, and we accepted.”

Sophie continued from there. “There are more interviews coming, showing our life in Holly Creek, and a big payoff too, and of course we’ll feature the brand and brewery, boosting business.”

“Why does this sound like a marketing gimmick and not an actual marriage?”

“Like Keaton said, the opportunity was there, and we took it.”

In my head I picture his eyebrow lifted, the one he used in order to glare directly into someone’s eyes and call bullshit, which probably gained him many favorable negotiations in the past.

“So this is a business arrangement, not love?”

“Well...” Sophie hesitated, eyeing me like she needed some kind of sign.

“Working together like we have, we’ve become really good friends over the summer, then one thing led to another this weekend,” I quickly explained. “Maybe it was the Vegas heat or the excitement of the deal, but we decided to take a chance on love. What better way to find out if we’re suited for each other than to try the real thing? We got married and we’ll see where this thing leads.”

He huffed at that. “Jesus. Being married isn’t a game like craps. You can’t roll the dice and hope it lands on a winner. Not that I don’t think you two can’t make it, but if it’s one thing I’ve realized is marriage takes work and commitment.”

“We’re both ready to take that leap,” I assured him, lacing my fingers with hers.

“Sounds to me like you’ve already jumped ten spaces ahead.” Then he rushed. “Hold on, Vivian and the kids just got home from a play date.”

I could hear the shifting of the phone and kids’ noises in the background. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about what my sister would think.

“Keaton? My phone is blowing up. Did you and Sophie get married in Vegas?”

Vivian's voice strained, high pitched.

"Uh, yeah. We did. Surprise," I replied with a nervous chuckle.

"Surprise indeed. At least when Richard and I married out of the blue in Denmark, I had the decency to call you first before we said our vows." She stabbed me with that. Although I liked Richard, the news he was about to marry my sister in a foreign country had hit me hard. I didn't have a current passport then, so I couldn't jet off to attend their nuptials in the tiny hamlet in Denmark. But no matter. The two of them made sense. Their kids were the light of my life as their uncle, and it all worked out for them.

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But for me and Sophie? We had ninety days to fuck around and find out if this worked.

I covered it up with similar words she told me back then. “What can I say, Viv? When you know, you know. You know?”

“Vivian? Hi, Sophie here. Keaton and I realized we had something special and one thing led to another. Oh, I cannot wait for you to see our wedding tonight on TV. It was beautiful. I cried when he put this beautiful diamond on my finger. I couldn’t be happier, though. Your brother is really special to me.” Sophie gave it a female spin.

Reality tapped me on the shoulder—reminding me this was only the beginning of the performance—this would be the first of many times we’d have to convince the most important people in our lives how our marriage was real. With any hope, we could manage it... and wouldn’t turn around and disappoint any of them.

“Well, congratulations then. I wish we could have been there, but that means we’ll need to have a little celebration for you two here. I’ll get together with Chelsea and we’ll plan something.” The phone jostled again and suddenly Richard’s voice was back on.

“Great idea, hon. Give me a minute? I’ll join you and the kids in a few.” We heard the fading sound of his family moving further away. Then he came back on, voice changed back to gruff. “Hmph. I hope you two know what you’re doing. You’re both adults, but don’t forget our goal here. I invested in the brewery because I believed we had a shot at growing bigger. Don’t screw up the work with any relationship troubles.”

“Understood,” we said in unison.

“We’ve worked well together so far. I don’t see that changing,” I added for good measure.

We finished up with him, and we both leaned back in our seats with a collective sigh.

“Well, that went better than I expected,” I said.

“It felt weird though, didn’t it? People are going to be shocked. We weren’t even really dating before we left Holly Creek.”

“But a lot can happen over a weekend in Vegas.” I shrugged a shoulder. “There are plenty of people in this world who meet and marry right away. I think people will buy our story. Now, we covered telling my side. How about yours? Is there anyone you need to call?”

“No.” She turned her nose out the window.

“Parents or siblings?” Oddly, I realized how little I knew about her family. “No older brother going to corner me at the bar out of the blue one day and kick my ass for marrying you on the fly?”

She shifted in her seat. “My mother is overseas with her third husband right now. I wouldn’t want to disturb their travels, and honestly, I’ve been pretty independent from her since high school. Besides, the last time I saw them was the day I graduated from Columbia.”

My heart twisted hearing this. “That long ago? Sophie?—”

“As for siblings, I have five stepbrothers, but we haven’t spoken in years. Frankly, I

doubt they'd even bat an eye. So, no. Other than Maisy and Chelsea, I really don't have anyone to call. And I'd rather tell the girls tonight in person. We had planned a watch party for the show tonight."

She was essentially all alone in this world without family around? This was something to explore with her at a later time. Right now, I needed to give her assurances and wipe that worried look from her face.

Once the plane took off and we were in the air, I took her hand and brought it to my lips. "You got me now, okay? I hope I'll be the first person you call for anything you need."

"For the next ninety days at least." Her smile registered weak and flat. That bothered me.

"Soph, I don't see us going through this thing and not at least becoming the best of friends or more."

She shot me a glance and a more worry passing through her eyes before they softened again. "Maisy might be jealous hearing you call us best friends."

"She can get in line behind me. I'm your husband, and I come first." I leaned in and nuzzled her neck to the sound of her tiny whimper.

"Fake husband, you mean."

I rolled my eyes and pulled back. "Look, there's only four people who know this certificate isn't legit. I don't care about Melanie and the officiant, I care about us. And I think, if we're going to survive this together, we should go about this as if it is very, very real. Not even bring up how fake this is anymore. Just act like it's the real deal."

“Is that your idea of method acting?” Her lips twitched.

“Absolutely. It’ll work, too, because it puts us into an authentic frame of mind. Less chance of slipping up that way.” More chance to see if what we have could be something more.

She chewed her cheek and eyed me, as if debating the consequences of it all. I broke out into a sweat waiting for her to agree, mentally coming up with more arguments for my side. Until finally, she nodded. “You’re right. We need this to be authentic, for everyone’s sake.”

“Perfect. Seal it with a kiss.” I leaned in close and waited for her lips to join mine. Slow, soft kisses became the promise between us... then ignited into more. With tongues dancing, I unbuckled her seatbelt and pulled her on top of me, straddling my lap. Her moans drove me crazy, and my cock suddenly needed in on the deal.

No way could this fire between us be manufactured, the connection unreal. Things hit differently with her than it had with any other woman before. With Sophie, this had to be something more, deeper, stronger, than I could even understand.

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I kissed down her neck, inhaling her sweet perfume. “Tell me, Mrs. Kingston, how would you like to join me in the bedroom?”

“Here? There’s a bedroom on the plane?”

I unbuckled and slid off the seat with her in my arms, carrying her with me. “The Buchanan’s have the best of everything. And I think it’s time for you and I to take advantage of it. What do you say we join the mile high club?”

To the sound of her laughter, I opened the door at the back of the plane and carried her through it, laying her gently on the bed. I locked the door, then pulled my t-shirt off over my head. The thoughts of what I could do with my new wife at forty thousand feet in the air were far from gentle.

22

MADE THE BED

SOPHIE

“Surprise!” Keaton and I arrived at the Hops just in time for the watch party to begin, only we faced an ambush by all of our friends and family gathered there. Closed to the public for the night, the space had miraculously transformed into a wedding party, complete with a huge banner across the ceiling that read Congratulations Mr. & Mrs. Kingston in large letters.

It was the kind of warm, homegrown party I hadn’t had since my eighth birthday.

Vivian, Chelsea, and Maisy hugged me, squealing congratulations into my ears. Richard, Rex, and Brooks shook Keaton's hands and gave him 'atta boy pats on the back. It was as if we finally joined their club, welcomed with open arms.

Which felt great not to be the odd one out.

Maisy brought my left hand closer to her face, inspecting my diamond. "You did real good, Keaton," came her seal of approval.

I had to admit, he did. I never would have chosen a marquise diamond for myself. Once he placed it on my finger, it became a part of my hand, like it was always meant to be there. Like he knew me better than I knew myself.

"Your approval means the world to me, Maisy." His lips twitched.

"Seeing how I probably know her better than you, call anytime if you need advice," she returned the tease. "Now, if you'll excuse us, my bestie and I have some catching up to do." Maisy hooked her arm through my elbow, about to lead us away to talk.

"Hey, wait a minute. We just got here. Don't take my wife away from me yet," Keaton joked, pulling on my other arm as if in a tug of war over me with his cousin. Then he gave me a peck on the lips and said, "Go on, but hurry back, because I'll miss you."

A chorus of "Aw," came from my friends, and I had to admit he made my heart melt as well. He certainly knew how to play it up for the crowd. In the span of time since we'd first met, he went from grumpy brewer who could also flirt like crazy to a man who could deliver a totally swoon-worthy line like that and look me in the eyes like he meant every syllable.

While I went from infatuation with a reality TV star to... in lust with the man who I

now called husband.

Maisy pulled my dreamy eyes off of him and over to the far corner of the brewery by the fireplace and shelves of Keaton's board games. I eyed them while she hugged me again.

"You're married? Are you kidding me? Oh, Sophie, I couldn't be more happy for you. Although you deprived me of having to buy a Maid of Honor gown someday."

"Yeah, sorry about that. But the whole weekend was... And I don't know, we... We just went for it." I smiled sheepishly and shrugged. Filling in the blanks seemed to be a problem for me. Keaton would probably prove a much better method actor than I would.

"Didn't I tell you to go for it? I knew there was something brewing between you too," she cracked herself up and elbowed me.

"You did tell me. And there definitely is."

"You beat me to the altar though. Ugh, wedding planning is taking up so much of my time. I want to be married tomorrow. Thank God, Brooks is so patient with me."

"I'm so happy for you two, Maisy. It'll be worth it for you to wait." Deep inside of me, there was a tiny green spot envy how she was doing things the right way—engagement, wedding, a future with a man who adored her. My path? A little less conventional. A little more performative. With a clock ticking.

"Tell me. How does it feel to be a wife?" She asked.

I forced my grin wide. "Incredible. Since the ceremony I've been floating on clouds. I stare at my ring and still can't believe we did it." I bit my tongue to keep from saying

more. A part of me wanted so much to share every other detail about Melanie and our deal, and the term limit on this marital bliss, only I couldn't. Maisy had been my best friend for years. There'd hardly been any secrets between us. Well, except for a part of myself I kept hidden away from everyone, and for good reason.

She grabbed her heart. "I had a feeling about you two. My vision is coming true, wanting both of us side by side and married, and even better that it's my cousin you're with. We're family now, Sophie."

"We were family before. I considered you like my sister, even more than a best friend."

"And now it's official. We are family, girl." She grabbed my pinky finger with hers and gave it a shake, a funny little gesture we created back in college to mean we had each other's backs.

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A smile reached my eyes, allowing myself to be warm and happy for this moment. The Calhouns, the Buchanans, the Bellamys were all growing little families and I'd be a part of that. For now. Forever?

Maisy patted her stomach—which had only started to show a tiny bit. “Now you need to hurry up and get pregnant so we can experience motherhood together, too. Of course that could mean you're pregnant in your Maid of Honor's gown this winter at my wedding.”

“Uh...” This entire situation suddenly became a little too real for me. Not that I didn't love babies. There'd been plenty of them around our group between Chelsea and Vivian growing their family tree with Rex and Richard. For a long time, I seriously thought I was jinxed, never going to find the one much less to have children.

“Hey, wife? The show is about to begin,” Keaton called over to me, and again everyone gushed at how good of a husband he was.

Maybe one weekend in Vegas reversed the jinx? Was there hope for me now?

“I better return you to his side. But don't you even think that we're doing away with our Whine and Wine Nights now that we're entering this new phase of our lives. That girl's night tradition will never end.” Maisy ushered me back to Keaton, making a big deal out of returning me to him, teasing him. “Remember, Keaton, as her best friend I have my eyes on you. Cousin or not. Better treat her right.”

“I shouldn't have any problems there. Besides, the guys gave me some tips about keeping the wife happy.” He grinned ear to ear with the men, holding a brew in a

frosted glass. The way he fit in so naturally with the group as a married man tore my heart open. What if at the end of ninety days he wasn't one? It wasn't just my life and future at stake here, but his too.

I packed up my things from Richard's guesthouse and moved in with Keaton, into his charming older Craftsman house tucked near the edge of town.

Just like him, the place was one part rugged, needing to be tamed and remodeled, while the other part played all too easy on the eyes.

With charming curb appeal, the place had wood-framed windows that allowed for morning light and a wraparound porch with a swing big enough for two, stacked with cozy pillows and a quilt. Very inviting. I could see us swinging there in the evenings and having a glass of wine—or a brew, in his case.

"Nice place, Keaton," I commented as he helped get my luggage to the porch.

"Thanks. I've been fixing it up little by little over the years, balancing brewery life and renovations whenever I have time."

"What's that?" I pointed to the opening of his garage revealing a large piece of wooden furniture like a dresser made out of logs.

"My hobby. I make furniture on the side."

I cocked a brow. Another cool thing to discover about him? "Some hobby. Looks really nice. You're talented."

"In more ways than one." His smile smoldered. "I start from cutting down the tree and with no plan, I eventually end up with a piece of unique furniture like this. One of the shops in town displays my pieces and they usually sell faster than I can make

them. Come on inside. I'll show you several I kept for myself."

The house was surprisingly bright, with nooks and character, cool blue accents and clean lines, and the pale wooden furniture he'd built softened the masculinity of the space. Each paint stroke and built-in shelf revealed another part of Keaton's story to me.

It immediately felt comfortable, and I liked it all very much. A stark contrast to the city apartments I'd lived in most of my life, this type of home lived in my dreams.

"Do you cook?" He asked as he showed me around his updated kitchen featuring white cabinets and granite countertops with stainless steel appliances.

"A little? Ask me to create a beautiful charcuterie board and I can win with that."

"Noted. I like to think I'm a master at the barbecue. Somehow we won't starve." He hesitated before continuing on. "I hope this won't be awkward for us. I pushed for you to move in here only because I didn't want anyone questioning us about our living arrangements. It's not just our family and friends to worry about, but people around town, and nosy TV fans. Anyone could go snooping and find out if we weren't cohabitating."

"It makes sense. And awkward? Not in the slightest. We went on one incredible date, spent a weekend in Vegas, got married, and two days later, here we are. It feels completely natural to me." I winked.

"Well, when you put it that way..." He casually leaned against the cabinet, laughing, blue eyes bright and twinkling at me, as if he'd won the contest for cutest guy next door, only he's mine.

"So... sleeping arrangements?" I asked the question we hadn't really discussed yet.

“Our master bedroom is this way.” He led me down the hall, straight to my answer.

There, the contents of the room shocked me. In the middle stood a beautiful four poster bed made from the same blond logs I’d noticed in the garage. Ruffled white linens complimented the wood. And laced across the top, from corner to corner, sheer white fabric draped to the floor.

He turned on the light switch and I gasped when twinkle lights came on, softly visible through the fabric.

“Oh, Keaton.” My hand clutched my heart at the beautiful simplicity of it all. “Did you make this?”

“Yep. I just finished the bed last week. I was planning to sell it, but now that we’re married... The linens I ordered just arrived yesterday and I added the lights today. I thought it’d be a romantic touch.”

“It is. Very romantic. Did someone put you up to this? Maisy or Vivian?”

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“Is it so hard to believe that I put this together on my own? For you. For us. You’re my wife, and I thought it only fitting that we sleep together on a bed that no one else has.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that he might have brought women or girlfriends here in the past. Just because I had no luck on the dating scene, certainly didn’t mean he didn’t.

“It’s beautiful. Really special. And unexpected.” Our eyes locked for a few beats, full of heat and longing. I licked my lips. We hadn’t been together since we returned from Vegas a few days ago. My knees weakened at the thought of sleeping with him again tonight.

He continued the tour by opening a door at the other side of the bed, revealing a tiny adjoining room. One person could walk into it, but too crowded for two. A few of his suits hung there, otherwise it was open.

“I cleared out some closet space for you here, and a few drawers in the dresser there.” He leaned against the doorframe, thumbs in his belt loops. “I moved a lot of my stuff down to the other bedroom, which I used as my office. Figured you’d have more clothes than me, and I wanted you to be comfortable. No sense starting our marriage off with a fight over space.”

“How thoughtful of you.” I grinned and mirrored him, leaning against the other side.

“Actually that was a suggestion Rex had texted me. The guys have been helpful like that, sending random thoughts for how to make our wives happy. They call it ‘husband training.’” With his cap on backwards and sly smile—oof—he made the

best welcoming party ever.

“What else did they tell you?” I cocked my head, letting my eyes wander down his chest and lower.

He snickered and leaned forward, his forearm landing above my head on the door jamb, his face just above mine. “Can’t give away all of the secrets now. How would I ever impress you?”

I bit my lip. “I think I’m already impressed by you.”

“Yeah?” He leaned in close enough to kiss. “Would it impress you if I splay your body out on our bed and take full advantage of the situation now that you’re here?”

“That depends on what full advantage means.” My coy smile encouraged him further. We toyed with each other, angling our heads, seeing how close we could get to each other without touching.

“Should I elaborate, my little stalker?”

“Yes, please,” I whispered, our breaths mingling. My hands reached out to him. My fingertips dragged over his t-shirt, and outlined his abs.

“I’ll set you on my face and bury my tongue inside of you. Dying to taste you again. I’ll lick your clit until you come for me and scream my name. And just when you’ve had enough, I’ll roll you over, tie your hands on the bedpost, enter you from behind, and plant myself deep inside of you.”

“Is that all?” My cheeky response came out breathy, my chest heaving at his sexy talk.

“You tell me,” he dared. His hand squeezed at the smallest part of my waist, and his thumb grazed the underside of my breast.

I liked the challenge. “Maybe at that point, covered with me, you’d untie me, and let me lick you and suck you. I’ll deep throat you so good. And the only name on your lips when you come, my husband, had better be mine.”

His lips finally touched my skin, gliding along my jawline and talking at the same time. “Fuck yes, Sophie. I’ll bet you’ll be a very good girl for me in our new bed.”

I whimpered my answer, letting his lips claim mine. My last coherent thought before he carried me to bed was how much I wanted this to be real. Not just the heat of his mouth or the sinful way he knew my body, but the safety, the surrender, the sense that I’d finally found someone who could appreciate me and still want more. I could so easily bare myself and my soul to him, but if I wasn’t careful, I could lose my heart, too.

After a week, the house became ours, like it had always been meant for two. The kitchen held both our coffee mugs waiting for our beloved liquid gold in the mornings. My makeup sat beside his beard trimmer, and two toothbrushes mingled in a pretty blue stoneware holder Jessa had given us as a wedding gift.

My clothes—at least this batch I had initially brought from New York—fit perfectly in the closet. Little did he know, I had enough clothes and shoes to fill three closets.

We were officially playing house, and the game of being married was afoot. Only if I spent too much time overthinking, I’d worry that one of us might lose in the end.

Every morning, I woke up in his arms and enjoyed our first cup of coffee for the day together. Every night, I tried not to read too much into the way he curled around me like he couldn’t sleep without me in the beautiful bed he’d made for us.

And in between, I pretended I wasn't falling madly fast and hard for him.

23

ACTING OUT

KEATON

Waves of Sophie's dark curls fanned out over my chest, her skin still warm against mine, our limbs entwined.

I didn't dare move or breathe too loud or risk waking her up, because lying here like this made everything else fade away, from the brewery's endless demands, to Melanie and her camera crew arriving today, to the ticking clock on our ninety-day deal.

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Sophie shifted, stretching against me like a lazy kitty. “We have our first interview today, don’t we?”

I offered only a reluctant grunt. “Unfortunately.”

She cracked one eye open. “Don’t sound so thrilled.”

“I’d rather spend the morning driving you wild until my jaw locks than explain to Melanie how blissful we are.”

A slow, wicked smile curved her lips. “We could do both. Multitasking is an excellent management skill to possess.”

Her voice dropped low, teasing, and she looked at me as though she knew I’d bend to her every whim.

I flipped her under me before she could blink, and kissed her until we were both breathless, stopping only because the crew would arrive by ten and Sophie still needed time to choose one of her stunning dresses that always set my pulse racing. As forme, I needed coffee and a prayer—my to-do list was a mile long, and I couldn’t afford to lose time.

Business had surged since our wedding weekend aired. The new logo, the Fall flavors Sophie painstakingly named—The Hoppy Camper and Pumpkin Pleasure—and the slow-burn online attention, all contributed to our success.

I had a brilliant woman in my bed every night and was living exactly the life I’d

always wanted. So why did I still feel on edge, as if it could all slip away at any moment?

Melanie setup the cameras on the brewery's sunlit patio. Jessa had scrubbed every surface until it gleamed, and Sophie—always three steps ahead—handled the PR prep like the pro she was. Today she wore a navy silk dress that hugged every curve; I matched her in a dark blue polo and khakis.

When we had a quiet moment, she straightened my collar, winked, and whispered,

“You’re gorgeous, my handsome husband.”

“You are exquisite,” I replied, my voice rough with want. “I’d like to find a place where I can unzip you out of that dress.”

She fluttered her lashes. “Meet me in your office after this, and I’ll give you a prize.”

“Is this a fun little game you’re playing today?”

“Maybe,” she finished with a coy smile as Melanie called for us.

The segment started light: favorite date nights, how we met, what we admired in each other—all safely PG. I’d perfected my camera smile; she gave me that adoring look that made everyword feel real. Under the table, our fingers laced, and her gentle squeeze felt like thunder in my chest. For a moment, I forgot it was part of the show—it felt undeniably authentic.

Acting, as a former passion of mine, never happened so easily as it did living as a husband to Sophie.

Then Melanie’s grin sharpened, revealing herself as the shark she was. “There’s

chatter online—fans speculating this marriage is purely business. What would you say to those people?”

I tensed. Sophie blinked, then smoothed her expression so fast I nearly missed it.

“I’d say they are partially correct. We met through our work and became friends,” she started.

“We’re still working together toward some pretty lofty goals. But it’s like finding the perfect team. Once you have it, you never let them go. Our lives are a blend of work and romance. It suits us.”

“How sweet. Now, the other day, I came across one of Keaton’s biggest fan clubs online. Looking further into it, I discovered someone we know actually started it,” Melanie said, gaze flicking toward Sophie. “Want to tell Keaton, or shall I?”

Sophie’s breath caught; her grip on my hand tightened. I already knew about it, as she told me in Vegas, but dread pooled in my gut about how devious Melanie was to bring this up on camera.

Slowly, Sophie exhaled. “I admit that I had set up a fan page when *Brewed for Love* first aired. Just like the rest of America, I had a crush on you then, but I haven’t touched the club much in ages—it runs on autopilot now with group moderators.”

“You started a fan club for me?” I played along for the drama Melanie so desperately needed, even though Sophie had already admitted to this. I held her gaze, the rest of the world fading away.

I should’ve been mad when I first heard about it. Hell, I should’ve been worried that she was a serious stalker. But I knew her heart. All I could think about was that this smart, driven, complicated woman had liked me before I even knew she existed.

“You had a crush on me from the beginning?” I insinuated.

She flushed. “Of course I did. You were charming in a broody, bearded kind of way.”

I smirked. “So this wedding, the branding—was it all a long con to get into my pants?”

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Her mouth twitched like she wanted to smile, but wasn't sure if she should. "I didn't plan it, Keaton. None of it. It just happened."

I leaned in close, brushing my lips against hers. "I'm glad it did."

"And cut!" Melanie called. "Perfect mix of sweetness and drama." She praised us for once. Which had me suspicious of her. "Not bad. Now we'll get some photos and B-roll footage of both of you at work, plus some hometown footage from Holly Creek."

"That's it? Do you think she's hiding something else she intends to attack us with later?" Sophie muttered as we stood.

"Probably. But let's focus on the moment—and deal with Melanie's surprises another time," I said. I was more concerned with getting my wife into my office.

Once the crew left, I gave specific instructions to Jessa to leave us alone for at least an hour. She shook her head and muttered how she didn't get paid enough to work while the boss got busy with his wife.

"I'm about due for a raise, you know," she yelled after us and laughed.

I locked us in my office. Her hand curled around my neck, pulling me to her. The kiss became urgent, deep, and hungry. It was all an act in front of the cameras, but the rest of this was very real. I pressed her against the back of the door and kissed her until she forgot her own name.

"Mm. Keaton. Good boy. Now it's time for your reward. Have a peek under my

dress.” She bit her lip and didn’t have to beg.

Without losing eye contact, my hands caressed up her thighs and reached her core and—felt nothing. No scraps of fabric or strings or thongs. “Fuck me. You went into this interview with no panties on?”

“Hm-hmm. Surprised?”

“Pleasantly. Do you know I have a fantasy about taking you on top of my desk?”

“What’s stopping you?”

I cupped the back of her neck, slammed my lips on hers, and backed us up to my desk. “Yes, baby. Lean over. I’m going to give it to you so good.”

When she did, I flipped her skirt up, revealing her perfect, curvaceous ass. I caressed every inch of her creamy skin. My cock pulsed as I stepped in behind her, one hand gripping her hip, the other sliding down to tease where she was already slick and ready for me, moaning and responsive to my touch.

I unzipped, letting my pants fall to the floor, and slid the head of my cock between her folds, coating myself in her heat. Then I froze.

“Dammit, I forgot to replenish the condom in my wallet.”

A funny guffaw escaped her lips. “Good to know you don’t keep any in the office. I’m on the pill, Keaton. We can go without.”

I offered a silent prayer to the hops gods for this woman. “You sure, Mrs. Kingston?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Kingston.” Her voice was thick with want.

“You’re going to ruin me.”

She looked over her shoulder, flushed and breathless, a wicked little smile on her lips.

“That’s the plan.”

That was all I needed.

I sank in, slow and deep, her tight walls welcoming me completely. The way her hands gripped the edge of the desk brought me secret pleasure. Without a barrier between us, we became even more intimately familiar.

The desk creaked beneath us, my hips finding a punishing rhythm that matched the pounding of my heart. Her moans turned raw and ragged.

Every sound she made, every time she gasped my name—it all chipped away at the line between pretend and real.

“So tight. So mine,” I growled, reaching around to circle her clit.

“Yours,” she gasped, rocking back to meet each thrust. “God, Keaton, don’t stop,” she begged.

We burned together like a wildfire, too far gone to let anything snuff us out. No other care in the world but our connection. And when she shattered around me, crying out my name, I followed right after—spilling into her with a groan that shook loose every doubt I’d ever had about us.

For a long moment, we simply clung to each other, breathless and trembling. I’d never been so satisfied—never felt another woman like this. What was Sophie doing to me—consciously or otherwise—ruining me forever from ever wanting another?

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I grabbed a few tissues and gently cleaned her up.

She straightened, smoothing her dress down with her hands, and faced me.

“I think we just made the office a lot more productive,” she teased, cheeks still flushed.

“I’ll never see this desk the same way again.” I cupped her face and kissed her softly. “I have tons of work to do and visionsof you bent over, grabbing onto my desk, will be a distraction all day.”

“Gripe all you want, broody brew master. You know you wouldn’t change a thing.” She playfully swatted my rump as I ushered her to the door.

“Nope. I wouldn’t.” Except one thing. In the momentary quiet space of my mind, I vowed to give her every reason to stay—despite the ticking clock. “I probably won’t be home for dinner.”

“That’s fine. Maisy made me promise to see her tonight and tell her all about our time with Melanie today. Don’t forget, though, you have a rain check to fulfill later tonight in bed,” she reminded me of my earlier promise.

“You be naked in bed waiting for me, and I’ll be there.”

“It’s a deal.” She traced my jaw with her fingertips, playing through the new beard forming there. Something passed between us—an unspoken promise more powerful than words. My body ached for hers, my heart ached for something I wasn’t ready to

name. All I knew was I wanted more: mornings and nights, messy fights, lazy Sunday afternoons.

Only I said nothing. Couldn't speak around my heart filling up. Instead, I kissed her, acting as if she already belonged to me. Maybe in my heart, she already did.

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RIDE THIS WAVE

SOPHIE

We were nearing the sixty-day mark, although neither of us acknowledged it. Not that it was something to celebrate, like an anniversary or special occasion. I didn't relish flipping the calendar and seeing the red circle around the date when we told the studio we'd break up our marriage.

I'd taken to long walks in the mornings through town to clear my head before working. Maisy would sometimes join me and lament about her growing midsection.

Today, I walked alone before a meeting at Richard's office. October brought a crispness to the air that made everything in Holly Creek feel freshly painted in shades of gold, orange, and red. The quiet simplicity of small town living made it difficult to remember what I even liked about city life.

Keaton enjoyed calling me several nicknames, 'city girl' one of them from time to time. When he used that one, it gave me pause. Was that even me anymore?

Who was Sophie Hatchett? Somewhere along the way, I'd changed. No longer did I feel like the woman trying to build her own business and make her own way in life, no matter my ties to the past and a family I tried to forget.

Oh, I still claimed to be a boss babe, still loved what I did for a living, but found myself longing for more. This whole situation with Keaton opened my view to what sharing my life with a man would be like. While the calendar never stopped churning out the days.

With the crunchy leaves under my boots came introspection and clarity. And yet, something inside of me was beginning to fray. At odds with the old me, the new me in this small town demanded I put down roots, stake my claim, and create a new life. Was it possible?

By the time I arrived at Richard's home office, the meeting was underway. Keaton winked at me and patted the seat next to him. I couldn't hide a sly smile. His beard had grown back in, softening his jaw in ways that made it increasingly hard not to stare at his profile. Add to that his daily dose of flannel shirts for the pleasure of my eyes and this city-suddenly-turned-small-town-girl was ready to go on a sexy hayride for two at a moment's notice.

Archer Bellamy stood at the front of the room, clicking through some slides. On the conference table sat blueprints, the lines crisscrossing forming the interior of a new building. "Per your instructions, I've created a modern take on the pub concept. Thinks brews plus full-dining experience with a chef's touch. Seasonal indoor-outdoor seating. An elevated but still approachable aesthetic. Perfect for the next level in dining for this growing small town, if you ask me."

I took my seat, having no idea what this meeting was about to begin with. "Gastropub by the Hops? The name might need some work," I scrunched my nose at it.

"Definitely. I'd value your input as my resident snooty marketing expert," Keaton teased, side-eyeing me with a sly grin.

I tried to focus on the details as Archer expounded upon the concept, showing feature

by feature, but something about the entire conversation crawled under my skin.

"It looks beautiful," I offered, forcing a smile. "But... has anyone thought about Flora's Diner and how a fancy new restaurant might impact her business?"

Flora was the sweetest mother of Chelsea and Maisy, and I couldn't be a part of something that could ruin the way she made a living.

Richard waved a hand. "Already considered. Vivian and Chelsea are helping upgrade the diner. It stays exactly what it is: comfort food, quick service, and the best damn pie in the region. We just need options now what with Rex breaking ground on building luxury homes out at Silverpine Lake, we have to meet demand."

Keaton shifted in his chair beside me, running a hand through his hair. "A full-scale restaurant was on my ten-year business plan, but I didn't think it'd honestly happen, especially this fast."

"Consider me your fairy godfather," Richard said with a chuckle. "Minus the wings, of course."

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They launched into investment structures and payment plans. I nodded along, even asked a few questions, and made notes of the ways my marketing research could assist besides naming the restaurant. Amidst thoughts of demographic research and grand opening campaigns, my phone buzzed in my blazer pocket.

I checked it, and the name flashing across the screen stopped my heart cold.

Griffin.

I glanced quickly at Keaton who saw it, too, and scowled, probably thinking this was some guy he had to compete with, like that hockey player who finally got the hint to stop calling me. A part of me loved seeing him get worked up when another man showed interest though.

But Griffin West was far from a suitor. I hadn't heard from my stepbrother in some time, not since he called after his father died. Not since the reading of the will. Out of all my stepbrothers, Griffin was always the nicest to me. Still, I'd kept my distance from them, for good reason.

My fingers twitched to answer. "Excuse me," I said quickly, standing. "I need to take this."

I slipped into the hallway and answered. "Griff?"

"About time, butterfly," Griffin said, using the old nickname the brothers called me. Skinny with big teeth when we first all became a family, by the time our parents divorced when I was in high school, I'd blossomed and had a glow up—thus butterfly

became my nickname. "I thought I might have to ambush you at that brewery to get your attention."

It figured how he'd know exactly where to find me. Like his father before him, who always kept tabs on me after the attempted kidnapping, even if I didn't want a thing to do with him anymore.

"What do you want?"

"Can't I call and wish you well on your marriage?"

"So you know about that? Were you in Vegas?"

"I happened to be there on business when my security team alerted me to your involvement on that beer show." I could hear the snicker in his voice, considering he had a wine cellar stocked with expensive, rare bottles of French wine. How quickly mystepbrothers forgot their humble beginnings and that, thanks to my mother, they were now able to lead the life of luxury.

"Oh. Thanks, I guess."

"Are you not happy?"

Because of the NDA, I couldn't tell him my nuptials had an expiration date. "I am happy. Very."

"Keaton Michael Kingston. Born in Holly Creek to parents who had little to their name. A self-made man by all accounts. His business seems pretty stable."

"What are you doing?"

“Making sure you’re marrying for all the right reasons. While you're playing house in the countryside, I’m taking care of our family business. You know my father wouldn’t have wanted anything to tarnish our name.”

I closed my eyes, feeling a headache coming on. "I'm aware."

"You need to come see me. Soon. This isn’t something you can ignore."

"I'll check my calendar."

“Or maybe a trip to the country would be a nice change of scenery? It’s Fall and I’ll bet the leaves are turning.”

“No, you don’t need?—”

He hung up without a goodbye.

I exhaled slowly, the pressure in my chest returning like an old unwelcomed friend. When I returned to the boardroom, Archer was rolling up the plans and Richard was practically glowing.

“This project will make yourself a name in the region, Keaton. I’m proud to be a part of it.” Archer held his hand out to shake his. I stood proudly aside, looking upon Keaton and the progress his business had made since I first arrived at the beginning of summer. Being on the ground floor of something growing was so satisfying.

Richard looked up from his phone and fist pumped the air. “Yes!” All eyes turned toward him. "This is it, Keaton. I've just gotten word from my distributor contacts. They want a meeting. You’re on the map. Everything you and Sophie have done is paying off.”

“Are you serious?” Keaton beamed, the glow reaching his eyes. “I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done to help me, Richard.”

“Bask in the glory for now, my friend. But we have a lot of work to do to prepare for the meeting. Hey, Archer, I’ll walk you out.” The minute Richard left the room, Keaton dashed over to me and picked me straight up, spinning us around. I yelped.

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“Can you believe it? I thought this would take a few more months, even a year, but it’s happening, Soph. And I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Elated for him, I laughed and kissed and celebrated with him. I recalled the way he was on the first day in this office at the beginning of summer, all grumpy face when I suggested changing his logo. Today, his eyes crinkled in the corners, his blues shiny.

“Happiness is a good look for you. Sexy even,” I purred.

“We make a great team. Too bad we have to break up soon,” he blurted, probably joking. But my stomach flipped, the moment ruined. It must have registered on my face. My shoulders deflated as he set me back on the floor.

"We knew that going in, right? But a fake divorce doesn’t have to be the end of us, does it?" He cocked his head, his hands caressing my sides. “Or maybe we could talk to Melanie about extending, try to ride this wave a little longer.”

“This wave...” Hurt, I jumped in before I could think better of it and said, “But a divorce could be just as dramatic for marketing implications. Think of the fan reactions. We could fill a restaurant in no time.”

“Divorce?” His lips flatlined. Our celebration of a minute ago vanished. “I guess we have a lot to talk about.”

“We do.”

“I have to head back to the Hops, but we’ll talk tonight, okay?”

I watched him leave, the weight of our conversation pressing on my chest like a heavy storm front of dark clouds thundering in. We'd climbed a mountain of his dreams together, the momentum building like magic. But as soon as we neared the summit, reality crept in, reminding me of the temporary nature of our situation. I told myself not to overthink it.

What did he want? For that matter, what did I want? I held onto the belief that there was still a chance to figure out what came next for us.

A few hours later, the Hops buzzed with its usual after-dinner crowd. I camped out at the cozy corner booth with my laptop open, staring at the wall of Keaton's games. I mentally cataloged the day, between Griffin's reappearance and everything left unsaid between Keaton and me, and tried to work on a few things.

"Hey gorgeous." He suddenly appeared at my side. I scooted over and let him sit next to me. He kissed my temple, then he must have noticed my screen.

"Post-ninety-day career opportunities?" he read aloud, tone unreadable.

I closed the laptop too quickly. "It's nothing. Just brainstorming, after our earlier conversation. Thinking ahead. "

He nodded, but something in his jaw flexed. "Right. Of course."

I hated that he saw it. Hated how his jaw ticked like he was trying not to react. But I couldn't lie. Reality crashed in. This thing we were doing had an expiration date.

Before I could say more, a couple wandered over. Tourists. Early thirties. Matching flannel shirts.

"Oh my God," the woman gushed. "You're Keaton and Sophie, right? From Brewed

for Love? We adore you two. You're like the perfect married couple. Too good to be true!"

Keaton chuckled politely. I smiled through my teeth, without it reaching my eyes. "Thank you," I said.

They asked for a photo. We obliged. They left. Jessa called him over to help with something behind the bar.

"I'll be home late tonight. Don't wait up." He left me there, without a kiss or a smile. He'd said we should talk, but now...?

The illusion we'd built around us as a married couple shook, fragile to the core. Cracks formed at the edges.

My phone buzzed again, notifying of an email incoming.

Subject: Check-In Reminder - Required Filming This Week

Melanie and her camera crew would be here soon, for another round of Keaton and I pretending to be what we weren't.

The perfect married couple?

Too good to be true, the tourists had said. They were right.

With every passing hour, it felt less like a countdown to freedom and more like a time bomb I wasn't sure my heart could survive.

WINDOW TO DOOR

KEATON

I headed to the Hops to receive our weekly delivery and stock the bar, needing something to do with my hands. Something to focus on besides Sophie's voice in my head and the worries that I'd messed things up between us.

Jessa was already there, organizing bottles with a precision that rivaled the military. She'd tied her blonde hair in a bandana, wore her overalls, and looked like she meant business.

After a few minutes of cataloguing the order in our system, she asked, "Are you counting bottles or just brooding again?"

I paused mid-shelf, chest tightening, and forced a chuckle. "What gave me away?"

"The sighing. The pinched face. You're standing like a statue and I'm worried blood flow isn't getting into your legs or your brain. Usually you'd bark orders to wrap this up—especially with the next delivery showing up soon."

I ran my palm down my face. "Yeah. Sorry. Got a lot on my mind," I mumbled.

She snorted. "About Sophie? Who else consumes every stray thought of yours?"

My head jerked up, heat flared in the pit of my stomach. "You can tell?"

Jessa leaned forward, folding her arms on the polished countertop. “Keaton, I might be slinging drinks most nights, but I see everything. I can read lips—another handy talent—so believe me when I say I’ve watched you two very closely. I’ve seen how she looks at you, and how you look at her.”

I shook my head. “What do you actually think you know?”

Her expression softened, with concern in her eyes. “I think I know what’s really going on between you two, but since you’re not telling anyone the truth...” She motioned to her lips as if zipping them shut.

“Dammit. I knew the walls were thin here.”

“And I’m fairly certain of your problem. It’s time you admit it.”

“Admit what, exactly?” I rested my elbows on the bar, shoulders slumped, and pressed my fingertips into my temples. My chest tightened and this conversation with Jessa turned in circles.

She jabbed me in the ribs. “That you love her, dummy. And she’s in love with you, too.”

Love? The word struck me hard, as if a baseball bounced off my skull. Would that explain this heat in my stomach when around her? The bone-deep ache when she wasn’t in the room? The way breathing became easier when she laughed?

Fuck me. “I have it bad,” I croaked.

“Yeah, you do. So tell her.” Jessa grinned like she had won a monumental battle in a court of law.

“You’re right. I have to go before she slips away.” I stepped around the bar, halfway out the door in long strides, but stopped and yelled, “Whatever you think you know about us, please keep it to yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be here keeping your secrets. Not going anywhere, and it’s not like I have a man to run off to,” she shouted.

I couldn’t get my truck home fast enough, with my heart hammering so hard it reverberated throughout my entire body.

When I entered the house, I found Sophie leaning against the sink, peering out the rain-smeared window, her hands curled around the Boss Lady mug I’d bought her. Steam curled in lazy spirals above the dark liquid, but she stared beyond it—at the rolling clouds, or something deeper.

Her hair was piled in a careless knot atop her head, and she wore sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt. Those were her telltale “off-duty” clothes, signifying she had no intention of coming to work with me at Hops this morning.

I had missed seeing her there in my office lately.

“Hey,” I said. A sudden gust rattled the window frame, and my heart thumped in my chest. I felt like a man caught without an umbrella, rain and hail smashing down, soaking me from the inside out.

“Hi,” she clipped, pouring her coffee down the drain and setting her cup in the sink.

We still hadn’t talked about things. Entirely my fault, because I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I didn’t want to end things between us. I liked us. But what if she didn’t and walked away, left me to chase her own dreams elsewhere?

The thought tightened a grip around my ribs.

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She'd been quieter recently, working more, dodging my eyes when I tried to hold her gaze too long. Her body still curled into mine at night, though. We still fucked—but it'd changed, more intense, more tender, chasing something lost in the shadows, like we were craving a deeper connection for each other. But when the kisses ended, and the world went still, she disappeared somewhere I couldn't follow.

Like I'd stolen the sun from her morning.

We couldn't keep living like this. I missed her. I needed to break the ice.

I stepped behind her, pressing my palms on either side of her at the edge of the counter. I bent my head and kissed the nape of her neck.

"I know the other day you were upset. I was too. I made a horrible joke about breaking up. Then you followed it, mentioning divorce. It got out of hand more than it should have."

"Yes, it did. I'm sorry, too. But Keaton, Melanie is on her way back to film soon. She's going to want to see cracks in the surface, and create drama between us. I guess we don't have to fabricate it."

"But what if I don't want us to end, Soph?" Her body melted back against me. My chest swelled with hope. "What if I want more out of this with you?"

"Can you be specific? What do you want, Keaton?"

"You." I threaded my fingers through hers and turned her slowly to face me. "All I

know is, the thought of a day without you in my life is like a day without oxygen. If you left me, I'd perish. You don't want that." I tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm betting that you feel the same way I do. Neither of us has admitted what's really happening here."

A fragile smile tugged at her lips. "Which is?"

"We're in love."

I let the words hang, waiting for her to prove I'm not crazy.

Her brown eyes were warm on me for the first time since Richard's. "Is that what you think?"

"I'm man enough to call it what it is and not walk away. Love, Soph. That's what this is. Now, are you going to boss-lady up and tell me I'm right?" I arched a brow with a cocky grin and challenged her to prove me wrong.

Her palms ran up my chest and circled my neck. "Okay. Let's say this is love. What would be your next move, Mr. Kingston?"

Her phone buzzed in the living room. She tried to slip free, but I caught her wrist.

"Hey—my little stalker isn't escaping that fast. What happened to my number one fan? Who couldn't get enough of me?"

Her lips curled, and those pretty eyelashes fluttered at me. "She's still here."

"Then show me." I closed the gap, one hand at her neck, my thumb at her racing pulse. In this possessive hold, I pressed my mouth to hers, needing her to be mine in every possible way. She heated up to me, our lips pleading without words.

The spark between us flared, alive and well, daring me to fight for it.

Her thigh lifted on mine, and my hands dipped under her sweatshirt, and yanked it overhead, exposing her bare breasts. I captured one pink peak in my mouth, palming the other.

“Mm. Keaton.” She gathered my Hops sweatshirt up my back, and soon that joined hers on the floor. I caressed a hand down her torso, inside her leggings, and parted her seam. Taking pleasure at her, ready, willing, already wet.

“Do you know how much you turn me on?” My voice was low and gravely.

“I think,” she panted as I strummed her clit, “you better show me again.”

I wasted no time. I tugged her leggings off, shed my pants, then lifted her so she could sink onto my hard shaft. In the middle of the kitchen, her gasp and my groan collided, jolting straight through my spine.

“I’m home inside of you, Soph.” Her hot, tight walls clenched around me like her body agreed, welcoming me.

I gripped her hips, standing there, setting a relentless pace, each stroke harder, deeper, the sound of skin on skin echoing off tile and cabinets. I shifted her over to the counter for leverage and it creaked with each thrust, her moans growing louder, messier.

“Keaton,” she whimpered, her knuckles white on the edge of the tile.

“Yeah, baby,” I rasped into her ear, curled over her, driving us both higher. “You love me? Then come for me.”

She answered with a muffled cry in my neck, her whole body trembling in my hold. I followed, burying my seed deep, every pulse of our release shaking loose the truth between us.

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We slumped together over the counter, breathless and tangled. I pressed a kiss to her shoulder, knowing she captured my heart completely.

“I love you, Sophie,” I whispered.

“I love you, too, Keaton.” She pressed her forehead to mine.

“Still think there are cracks beneath the surface for Melanie to find?”

She shook her head, eyes heavy-lidded. Then her phone rang again.

I let her go, for now, and headed to the bathroom to clean up. When I returned, her expression was unreadable.

“Keaton, you’re not going to believe this. I got invited to an interview for Brand You Now. It’s a national marketing show where they makeover a business each week. Live taping happens in New York. And you’ll never guess who referred me. Melanie. Do you know how many doors this could open for me?”

She beamed, so proud of herself, and she deserved it. Only my stomach dropped.

I covered up my concern with a smile plastered on, and words of encouragement. But doors opening for her meant none of them led to me. Each one could take her away, right when we finally admitted we loved each other.

MELEE, MELEE

SOPHIE

The morning started with a false sense of calm on this pretty Halloween day.

I ran a damp cloth across the bar's mahogany top, the grain cool under my fingertips, while Jessa unloaded the dishwasher nearby. Each clink of glassware sounded too loud in the hush. Keaton was holed up in his office, negotiating with the mayor. I should have been relieved—our morning had felt almost peaceful.

"So," Jessa breezed, wiping her hands on her apron, "anything new between you two?" Her eyes danced with curiosity.

Not at all sure what she meant by that, I shrugged and leaned against the bar, sipping my coffee. I scrolled through the latest updates on our shared email with Melanie and the production team.

Then the screen blurred as a message from Melanie popped up—sent to me by mistake.

It indicated that they had apparently been quietly and sneakily in town for two days already. Which meant only one thing: she'd been gathering footage. Stirring the pot. Getting the drama she coveted.

I opened one of her teaser clips posted today on the network's social media, and my stomach knotted. She had done street interviews in Holly Creek? Some locals voiced their frustrations about how Keaton's popularity meant too many tourists clogged up parking. Others complained about traffic. One woman fussed about the wait times at Flora's Diner. Petty things—but when stitched together with moody B-roll and dramatic music? It all added up to a big problem.

“Are you watching the circus?” Keaton’s voice made me jump. “That call was from the mayor who gave me an earful.”

I flipped the phone around so he could see. His jaw clenched, knuckles white on the edge of the bar. “So this is how she wants to play it,” he murmured.

“She’s framing this whole thing like we’re villains bringing the city to the country.”

He glanced sharply at Jessa nearby in earshot, then led me by the elbow to a corner booth. He narrowed his eyes at my screen. The whole time he watched again, his jaw ticked.

“I get it,” I said gently. “She’s doing what she always does. Creating drama for the sake of views. But the majority of the town supports what’s happening around here, you know that. Your restaurant plans are going to be incredible. Flora’s diner is getting a facelift, not a funeral. Rex and Richard are bringing in business and the town council hasn’t said one word about it.”

Keaton rubbed the back of his neck as if unconvinced. “I just don’t want to lose what made this small town special.” Every syllable felt like a plea.

“You won’t,” I said, stepping closer. “You, Vivian, Flora and so many others are what makes it special. One TV show isn’t going to break that.”

He studied me, lips parting as if to say more, but only squeezed my hand. His gaze lingered on my face, weighted with an emotion I couldn’t name. “Your optimism kills me,” he finally whispered.

Before I could answer, the door swung open. Melanie’s smile blasted across the room, her camera crew streaming in like vultures. “Ready to roll?” she chirped.

Keaton's muttered "Let's get it over with" made my stomach flip. We sat on chairs in front of our favorite Victorian fireplace backdrop. Melanie perched on her stool, tapping her clipboard.

"Today, we're diving into what comes next for our favorite couple," she began. "What the future looks like for Sophie and Keaton Kingston."

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Keaton held my hand on his thigh. I managed a smile.

She led us through the basics—how things had been in town, any surprises, our favorite newlywed memory. Easy stuff. Until she pivoted.

“Well, I have good news,” she said breezily, flipping a page in her notes. “The network has decided to hire Sophie for a new show, a business makeover program. Weekly format. L.A. based. Big prime time slot.”

My breath hitched. Keaton’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s... amazing.”

“It’s an exciting opportunity,” Melanie chimed and leaned forward, eyes glinting. “For Sophie, not both of you.”

The words fell like a guillotine. I tasted bitterness, blood-hot on my tongue. He smoothed his collar, gaze distant. “Not me? Of course.”

She smiled. “Nothing personal. The show is about brands. Reinvention. Not hops and brewing. It’ll film over a few month in L.A. How do you feel about that?”

He leaned back slowly. “Would it upset me?” He was looking at her, not me. But his voice had turned cool. Detached. “No. Of course not. I’m very supportive of anything Sophie wants to pursue.”

But I heard it. That hesitation. That slight emphasis on Sophie instead of wife.

Melanie smirked, clearly pleased. She went looking for cracks, and he’d given her a

glimpse.

I suddenly couldn't breathe. The word divorce dropped into my thoughts like a bomb.

We were supposed to break up. Supposed to stage a heartfelt goodbye for the cameras and walk away. It had always been part of the deal.

Only I'd watched my mom navigate divorces after my dad left and again with my stepfather. She tried to hide it both times, but I saw the pain, the bitterness that took hold of her and wouldn't let go. I still wasn't sure she got over them even as she sat comfortably in an Italian Villa with husband number three. I promised myself I'd never end up like that.

Here I was. With one husband. Fake, maybe, but the emotions were still there, raw beneath the surface. Falling. Failing. Risking the same heartbreak as she did.

By the time the Halloween party started, I had all but emotionally retreated. The night windy evening blew the orange lanterns swaying in the Hops' windows. Inside, Jessa had draped cobwebs and strung lights so the bar looked almost magical. We handed candy to tiny ghosts until dusk, then flipped the switch for the adults after dark, featuring a live band, most sexy costume contest, and a DJ.

I wore a little black number—lace, horns, a “sexy devil” costume that felt on brand. Keaton donned a flannel and a cowboy hat, an easy grin never quite reaching his eyes.

We hustled and we worked the bar, the crowd swelling so much he grew concerned about fire safety. But every time I looked at him, my heart clenched. My love for him simmered under the surface, so new and fragile, it'd hurt like hell if something broke us up.

Then I caught sight of Starla drifting toward the bar, arching her back like a cat, casting come-hither glances at Keaton. My blood boiled. And there, camera lens trained like a sniper, was Melanie, soaking up every second.

I stormed over. “What’s she doing here?” I hissed, voice low.

Melanie tilted her head, innocent and predatory. “Adding spice. Your breakup arc needs heat, I think.”

Starla leaned over the counter, flaunting her cleavage like she hadn’t humiliated him on national TV.

Melanie ate it up a few feet away, camera focused like a hawk.

I balked, but I didn’t have time to deal with her when, of all people, Griffin West arrived. He didn’t see me, and stalked to the bar, taking a barstool at the opposite end of Starla and catching Jessa’s eye to order a drink.

I flitted around the tables as long as I could, keeping a close watch on him at the bar, while dealing with the partiers. So consumed I was trying to keep busy that I had lost track of Keaton, and didn’t notice Jessa came out from behind the bar to check on me.

“Are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine. Great. Do you know where Keaton went?” I asked.

“I think I saw Melanie and her crew head toward the kitchen with him and Starla a while ago. But listen, there’s this really handsome man at the bar who is asking for you.” She ran a hand over her hair as if to check every strand was in place. “Do you mind if I ask who he is?”

“Uh. Hang on.” I couldn’t escape the face off any longer and approached Griffin. When I did, his face lit up with the same boyish slanted grin but years older, dressed in an expensive custom suit and Italian leather shoes.

“Hey, Sophie,” he said, calm and unreadable. He finished his drink, probably whatever expensive brand of whiskey Jessa could serve him, and set the glass down. “I thought we could stop wasting time. So I came to find you here to get things settled once and for all.”

“There’s nothing to settle. I can’t talk about it now, Grif, but soon I’ll be able to give you the full details,” I started and forced a smile.

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Jessa had returned, lingering within earshot. I'd spent so long trying to deny my connection with the West family. At any moment it could all come crashing down upon me.

"Can I get you another whiskey, handsome?" Jessa batted her eyelashes. Wait. Was she flirting with him?

"Not right now, sweetheart. Sophie and I have some unfinished business to take care of." He winked with a smoldering smile that should be trademarked, and Jessa giggled, a sound I'd never heard from her before. Interesting.

Out of the corner of my eye, I found Keaton and the group shuffled back out to the bar.

I scurried around to Griffin's side, begging him, leaning in close so I could keep my voice low. "Please leave. I promise I'll call you tomorrow and we'll talk. But I can't tonight."

"Oh no you don't. I came all this way to Honey Falls?—"

"Holly Creek," I corrected him, nervously eyeing Keaton. I could tell by his scrunched forehead and sharp eyes he had concerns about me talking with a man in close proximity like we were.

"Whatever. I won't leave until this gets resolved. Now, why don't you come with me to my car and we can talk this out."

Griffin hooked my elbow and tugged me to the door.

Keaton saw it instantly and almost jumped over the bar to reach us before we got too far.

Cameras turned. Lights shifted. Melanie shouted to her crew, “Follow that drama.”

“What the fuck are you doing with your hand on my wife?” Keaton growled, storming upon us.

Griffin stopped short. “This is family business?—”

“I’m her family, asshole.” Keaton shoved his hand away from me.

“You don’t know who I am?” Grif’s nose turned up.

“I don’t care if you’re the goddamn King of England. You don’t put a finger on her, got that?”

“Your husband is charming,” Griffin smirked at me.

“Hey, asshole. You don’t talk to her either,” Keaton closed the gap, getting up into his face and wouldn’t be deterred.

Griffin shoved him away and it escalated fast. Words turned to fists. Melanie’s crew circled like vultures.

“Stop—please! You’re both being ridiculous,” I cried, getting in the middle of them. But too late, Keaton’s punch landed into Griffin’s eye.

The CEO of West Games fell to the floor, knocked out cold.

But the damage was already done.

Cameras rolled. Hearts broke. Cracks blew wide open between me and my fake husband.

Jessa ran to Griffin's side and fanned him with a towel.

And Melanie cackled off to the side, apparently the only one pleased by the melee.

27

LEGIT

KEATON

The kitchen at the Hops was quiet, but far from calm. The head of West Games sat across the island from me, an ice pack pressed to his eye. I had one on my knuckles, the dull throb pulsing in time with my temper. Sophie stood between us, arms crossed, jaw tight like she was holding back from screaming.

"Do you think you two can be mature enough now?" she snapped. "Let's pretend that fight didn't happen and start over. Keaton, this is Griffin West, my stepbrother. Griffin, this is Keaton Kingston. M-my husband."

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Griffin snorted. “You couldn’t have let me meet him before it came to this?”

“We got married in Vegas, kind of spur of the moment. Believe me, if I didn’t tell my own mother, why would I call you?” She retorted.

“I’ll be damned if I let an outsider have a piece of my family's company. You get nothing, asshole. I had my lawyers draft a contract, and you'll sign it if you know what's good for you,” Griffin spouted off.

I glance sharply at Sophie, jaw clenching. “What the hell is going on here?”

Griffin laughed coldly. "So you didn't tell your own husband all your family secrets? Tsk, tsk. Not a great way to start a marriage, butterfly.”

“Butterfly? Did you just call my wife a nickname?” My other hand, the one not hurting, formed into a fist.

"Stop, Keaton,” Sophie snapped. “Please let me explain."

She let out a breath, eyes darting between us. "My mother married his father, but she had me when she was young. My birth father ran off, and I have no idea where he is. Then she met Philip West—a single father with five boys older than me. They got married, and for a while things were great but money was always tight. My mom was creative, coming up with games for us kids to play. One day Philip saw one of her games that she played with me and decided it would be perfect to create and sell to other families. So they started a business from our kitchen table. The West Games company was born.”

Griffin added, "Those were the days, weren't they? Packing orders after school, helping Mom brainstorm more games."

"You make it sound fun. It wasn't for me, Grif. I remember your dad hovering over us like a little dictator. 'You kids put this pieces in each slot perfectly or else...'"

My eyebrows shot up and I turned to Sophie. "You're related to the West family?"

"Was, and not by blood," she said quickly. "Then in high school, after the kidnapping attempt on me?—"

"Wait. Hold on. You mentioned that when we played two truths and a lie, but I didn't think you were serious. Someone tried to kidnap you?" My stomach churned for the emotional scar that must have put her through. I'd seen documentaries over the years about that, but Sophie's face had always been blurred, out of respect I suppose.

"Yes." She dabbed at her eyes. "As the heiress to part of the West fortune, it was a very scary time. I try not to relive it if I don't have to."

"It was tough on all of us, butterfly," Griffin assured reaching a hand out to her. He retracted it upon my growl.

"Then who is Sophie Hatchett?" I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all.

"Me. I emancipated from my family after that and legally changed my name. It'd just become too much for me. I yearned for a life where none of my friends knew I came from money. Where the threat of kidnappers didn't exist. When Mom and Philip divorced, he'd been pushing harder for more games, more money. It was never enough for him no matter how successful the company became. It took all the fun out of it for Mom. They fought and she walked away from it all with practically nothing."

“Don’t make your mom sound like such a saint. For one thing, she ran off with her filthy rich divorce lawyer. She is not hurting for money at all.” Griffin picked up where she left off. “But there was only one thing your mother required in the divorce, because she cared more about securing your future than hers. Once you marry you get one-sixth of the company.”

My eyes snapped to Sophie’s, loaded with accusations, yet not able to say a damn thing because of the NDA Melanie made us sign.

“I need to know what your intentions are. That’s why I’m here. You can either join the board and claim your shares or, like my brothers, accept my buyout offer. None of them wanted to run the company like I did,” Griffin shook his head and shifted the ice bag.

“I can’t blame them. Your father took the fun out of it, destroying my mother’s creative ideas for profit. By the time I left high school, I wanted nothing more to do with it. Going to Columbia for college offered me a new start, with my new name. I met Maisy Calhoun, a normal girl from a loving family who didn’t have money, and she became my best friend.”

I tried to be understanding considering everything she went through, but she kept so much from all of the people who loved her. Most of all, me. Was there more? Would I wake up tomorrow to find out she’d kept more things from me? How could we go on from here?

“So, you want out then? I’ll have my legal team send you the buyout offer in the morning. Trust me, you’ll be set for life, you and your husband.” Griffin scanned the kitchen, turning up his nose at the business Keaton proudly built from the ground up. “You could start up fifty of these breweries across the nation and still have money to live on easy street.”

A knock on the kitchen door interrupted us. Jessa poked her head in. "Keaton, the band's playing their last set and needs their check."

"I'll be out in a goddamn minute," I griped at her.

Griffin stood. "Of all my siblings, I didn't mind buying the rest of them out. Their hearts weren't in it. But I love West Games, Soph. It's my life. Still... I've been impressed with what you've done with the marketing campaigns here for Hops. If you wanted to stay on, I wouldn't be opposed. You're like your mom. Creative. Visionary. We could work well together."

Then he locked eyes on Jessa. The corner of his mouth lifted as he followed her out. "Can you pour me another scotch, sweetheart?"

"Returning to the bar to flirt with me some more?" She teased.

He gave her a smoldering look. "That's about the only thing I want to do in this town tonight." He paused at the door after she left. "Friendly staff you've got, Keaton. And if I'm ever up in Holly Creek again, I'd definitely enjoy another scotch with her."

I wasn't laughing. "Leave Jessa alone," I warned.

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I turned back to Sophie after the door closed behind him, seething. “If you knew about the marriage clause then marrying me in Vegas takes on an entirely new meaning, doesn’t it? You used me. You’re no better than Starla and all of the other women who see me as a launchpad to something better.”

“No. I’m not. How can you even say that? Besides, I knew our marriage was fake.”

“Exactly. It was all fake.” I tossed the soggy towel onto the counter and headed toward the back door.

“But as soon as we act out our break up for Melanie on camera, I can go to him and explain that we’re not married. He can keep the money and the company. All I care about is you.”

“I’m sorry. I need some space.” I almost reached the door until Melanie’s voice barged in.

“Hold on, Keaton. I have some news you’re going to want to hear.” Her ominous tone should have made me sprint out the door, but I turned back, wondering what more drama could be packed into this night.

“Were you listening at the door this whole time?” Sophie shrieked.

“Anything you heard in here about Sophie’s life is private, do you understand? If a single word about her past ends up on the show, we’ll sue.” As upset as I was, I couldn’t help but defend her. I marched back to her side and crossed my arms, like I couldn’t help myself but be her knight in shining armor.

“Melanie, please leave us alone. Don’t you think Keaton and I have been through enough tonight?” Sophie begged, sobbing, but Melanie wouldn’t be deterred.

She handed Sophie a paper towel. “I know you two must think I’m a monster. I don’t blame you if you did. But it’s all this pressure to succeed as a woman in Hollywood. I’ve been pursuing this career for ten very long years?—”

“If you don’t mind, could you get to the point,” I warned through gritted teeth.

“Oh, sure. It turns out, your wedding wasn’t fake after all.”

Both of our jaws dropped at the same time. I recovered fast. “What game are you playing now?” I scowled.

“No. I’m being honest here. The actor we hired to play your officiant at the wedding, really is an officiant. Only we didn’t know that at the time, I swear it. He signed over a real certificate of marriage after the fact. You have a real license, the ceremony was legit. So... you’re married. Congratulations.” She grinned between us like we owed her the world for this great news, and handed documents over to me. I rifled through them, notarized affidavits from the wedding officiant, and various documents from the studio legal department begging us not to sue them.

“Married? Real?” Sophie could hardly breathe. “That means?—”

“That you can march back out there and tell Griffin West that you’ll take your share of the company and become super rich? Yes.” Melanie gloated.

“I don’t care about that. What about us?” Sophie turned to me, questions filling her eyes.

“A minute ago I was headed out the door, too overwhelmed learning the truth about

you. Now, I learn we've been married this entire time. I—" I stopped and glared at Melanie. I gestured toward the door. "You. Go. While I appreciate you bringing this to our attention, if you don't mind giving us some privacy please? I think you've done enough damage for one night."

She sauntered to the door hands up in surrender. "Okay. Fine. But I want an exclusive interview to wrap this all up. You two don't have to divorce, but share the details on what happens next. I can see the promos now, Lost Heiress Found."

"Leave and please take Starla with you."

"But the interview?—"

"Don't call us. We'll be in touch," I snorted and practically shut the door in her face. I paced the room, breathing deep, trying to calm down and clear my head.

Finally, alone with Sophie, my heart ached for her.

For mywife...

"So your secret legacy caught up to you. Why didn't you just tell me who you were in the first place?"

"I was going to when the time was right. If it makes you feel better, even Maisy doesn't know. It's not something I talk about. The long lost princess of West Games was a part of my life I tried to leave behind."

"Why? What was so bad about it?"

"My stepfather turned into this lunatic. Everything became about the business. Kids used to tease me, then in high school guys only wanted to date me because we were

rich. Then after the kidnapping attempt, I got scared. It was traumatizing. To this day, I avoid white vans if at all possible.”

The documentaries said Sophie had done the right thing, kicking and screaming, biting and pushing, all to get out of the van before they shut her in it. My throat constricted that she had to go through that.

“I hid away, changed schools, changed my name. Anything not to be associated with that family.” She took a shaky breath. "I could have worked for West Games right out of college if I wanted, and have all the money, all the prestige, every good thing a rich woman living in New York City can buy. But there’s a part of me that always wanted to build something that was mine. Not just inherit something I didn’t earn and didn’t want.”

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I rubbed my neck. "And now you've got Melanie's offer for a show. Griffin dangling a job at West Games and money in front of you. The whole world seems to want you, Soph. What's keeping you in Holly Creek after this?"

Her expression shattered. "I thought you were. Was I wrong?"

That broke me, along with the tears streaming down her face. I went to her and cupped her face, swiping away her tears.

"Come here," I went to her and pulled her into me. Then, as if a dam broke, she sobbed into my shoulder. "It's okay, baby. I know so much has happened. But I think everything will be fine now."

"Will it? Am I going to lose you?" She cried. "Because you're all I care about in this big sordid mess."

I shuffled with her to my office and locked the door behind us. I sat on a chair and pulled her onto my lap, stroking her back gently until she calmed down, not caring that the front of my shirt soaked through.

"I'm sorry, Keaton. I should have told you the truth about who I am. Er, was. God, I don't even know who I am anymore." She held onto me tighter, her voice so sad.

"I know exactly who you are and I can say without a doubt. You're my wife. My legitimate wife and all that it implies by the power of the state of Nevada." I kissed her temple, her skin hot and clammy. "You're an amazing woman. Soph, you've been trying to forge your own way in this world since you were sixteen? And considering

the trauma you've been through? Most women would have buckled under the weight of it all long before now. But not you. You're strong. Own it."

"Thank you," her words came out weak, like she didn't believe me, but she would over time. I'd help her recover from all of this—if it took the rest of our lives. "What now?"

"Now? I'm starving. I could really go for some pie from Flora's."

"Me, too." She sputtered and chuckled, lifting her head to gaze up at me. "Seriously though, where do we go from here?"

"I'm pretty sure that tomorrow I'll wake up, still the owner of Hops, and continue to pursue my dream of expanding nationwide. And, if you'll have me, I'd like to still be your husband." I cleared away a few remaining tears from her golden eyes. I caressed her cheek gazing at her. "You're the woman I love. Your inheritance doesn't change that."

A slow smile spread on her face. "Even if I'm a very rich woman by next week, you wouldn't be intimidated by that?"

"What? No. The size of your bank account doesn't change the size of your heart, Soph. That matters more to me." It was a little intimidating, but I'd deal with it, because I didn't see the money changing her much like some people. She was Sophie, my wife, my love.

"You know, with the money we could both retire and never have to work another day in our lives."

"What would be the fun in that?" I joked. "I don't see myself changing much because of it. Although should I be worried you'll trade me in for someone who wears tailored

suits and leather shoes like Griffin?”

“No. I’ll take you in flannels and black jeans any day. But I could invest in Hops. Take Richard out of the equation if you want.”

I shook my head. “Nah. I respect Richard. He’s been solid. I want to build this with good partners, by my side, him and you. But I know you’ve got bigger dreams than brewing beer. I want you to chase those. Even if it means you’re not at the bar every day next to me.”

She grinned. “I don’t want to be part of Melanie’s circus. I want clients I choose. Projects I believe in. And I might even suggest to Griffin that West Games could use a rebrand, bring it into the current century.

I whistled low. “Nepotism much?”

“Maybe. But Griffin trusts me and I think we could do some limited work together. I also have about a dozen emails already from other people wanting to work with me. Apparently, fake-married-to-Keaton-Kingston was a hell of a networking boost.”

I grinned. “Glad I could be of service.”

She kissed my chest. “And I like working from Holly Creek. Kind of addicted to that desk over there and seeing your face here every morning.”

“Sounds like we have everything figured out,” I said.

“We do.”

“Do you? Because I have one question for you. Come with me.”

“What are you up to?” She giggled as she took my hand and followed me back out to Hops.

“I’m doing something I should have done in the first place.”

“Come on, up here.” I patted the bar, lifting her up onto it. I hopped up next to her. We stood there and she had no clue what I was about to do.

I bent a knee, took her hand in mine, and the crowd went crazy. Her hand flew to her mouth, tears starting again.

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“Sophie, would you do me the honor of being my real wife? To have and to hold, from this day forward? Forever and ever? Because I love you, and I know that together we’ll make it through anything life brings our way.”

“Yes!” She cried, wrapping her arm around me.

We were already married, but now she had a true proposal story to keep in her heart.

Griffin had no clue what was going on.

Jessa shouted. “By the power invested in me and the Hops, I now pronounce you two lovebirds husband and wife!”

We stood together on top of my bar, hand in hand. Married.

And hopeful for whatever came next.

EPILOGUE 1

SOPHIE

From my perch at the bar I surveyed the bustling crowd around us. The new restaurant was officially open: Evergreen at The Hops—a name Keaton and I settled on during one of our late-night brainstorming sessions. Classy, warm, rooted in tradition and growth. It was everything we wanted this next chapter to represent.

Locals and out-of-towners packed the place, glasses clinking and laughter ringing out

like music. The wood-paneled walls gleamed with fresh polish, ambient lighting bathed each table in a golden glow, and the smell of sizzling dishes wafted from the open kitchen. And just like the beer, the vibe was smooth and intoxicating.

Keaton leaned next to me, arms crossed, grinning like a man who finally saw his dream unfold. His flannel sleeves were rolled up, forearms flexed, a little sweat from a long day still lingering at his temple. My man had only gotten hotter the longer we were together.

"You staring again, Mrs. Kingston?" he asked without even turning his head.

I sipped my mocktail—heavy emphasis on the mock.

"Just admiring the view. You know, successful brew-master turned restaurateur. Whole town singing your praises. What's not to love?"

He chuckled, leaning closer.

"Could say the same about my marketing genius wife who made it all happen."

I raised a brow.

"Did you just call me a genius?"

"I did."

We bumped shoulders, our flirtation comfortable, familiar, and laced with fire. This was the version of us I loved most—the one that grew from chaos and settled into something solid. And very real.

Behind us, Richard and Vivian shared a toast at a high-top table, dressed to impress

and, for once, child-free. Chelsea and Rex weren't far behind them, taking a rare night off from parenting to enjoy adult conversation and fancy cocktails.

Maisy and Brooks stood by the stone fireplace, fingers intertwined. They looked relaxed. Maisy caught my eye and winked.

"She's looking good," Keaton said, following my gaze.

"Pregnancy suits her." I smiled. "And the wedding plans are coming along. They're thinking next summer, giving them time after the baby comes. Island vows, big family celebration. I think she finally found her happily-ever-after."

Keaton slid a hand along my thigh, sending a jolt of heat through me.

"Funny. I used to think she was ahead of us. But now?" I turned to face him fully. "I wouldn't trade what we have. Our timeline was messy. Unexpected. But I'd do it all again to land right here with you." I leaned in, and brushed a kiss to his jaw, which for this social occasion tonight, he'd shaved clean again. No stubble in sight.

"I used to be jealous of Maisy, you know. The way things happened so neatly for her and Brooks. But now? I wouldn't change a single detour we've taken."

He winked at me. "Not even Vegas?"

I smirked. "Especially not Vegas. No regrets."

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He laughed and reached for his beer. I set my drink down and placed a hand over his.

“I brought a plus one tonight,” I said.

He quirked a brow.

“Pretty sure I’m your date, sweetheart.”

“Nope. You’re my husband. My date’s a little less visible at the moment.”

His brow furrowed, confused—until I let my hand slide down to rest gently on my stomach.

Keaton’s jaw dropped. “Wait. Are you—? Are we?—?”

I nodded. “We’re having a baby.”

The look on his face was everything. Shock. Awe. Wonder. Even about to cry. But then pure, unfiltered joy.

He stood, practically knocking over his barstool, and pulled me into his arms. “Are you serious?”

“Got the confirmation this morning at the doctors. I wanted to wait for the right moment.”

He kissed me full on the mouth, deep and unapologetic.

I turned to the others, calling out with tears in my eyes and a grin on my face.

“Looks like we’ve got another reason to celebrate!”

And there, in the heart of the business we’d built together, surrounded by the people we loved most, Keaton held me tighter than ever.

EPILOGUE 2

GRIFFIN WEST: IT HAPPENED AFTER HOURS

The moment I opened the door of my penthouse, all oxygen seemed to disappear.

Jessa Cole stood there. A vision from Holly Creek. Same warm eyes. Same slightly sassy tilt to her mouth. Same curves I remembered far too vividly.

I recall one wild night with her. The silky flash of her dress hem as she’d walked away from the bar. The husky laugh as she showed up at the doorstep of my vacation rental. The feel of her body under mine.

She looked even better than I remembered.

"Jessa." Her name flew from my lips.

She lifted her brows, a playful glint in her eye.

"Hey there, Mr. West."

"I—uh. Wow." I cleared my throat. "The nanny agency didn’t tell me it was you. If I had known..."

"Would you have canceled the interview?"

"No. I would've spent the entire weekend trying to decide if hiring you was the worst idea or the best damn decision I've ever made."

She chuckled. "Relax. The agency didn't send me. Although I could use a job now that I'm with child."

My gaze dropped—and hit the gentle curve of her stomach.

My breath caught. "What?"