



Just A Chance

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Category: Romance

Description: London

I never thought I'd see Sean again. I certainly never expected him to come crashing through my bakery either. Though that should hardly surprise me. That's the Sean I know, wild enough to capture my teenage heart, and reckless enough to break it.

I know better than to trust he'll stick around. But the man isn't playing fair and proving me wrong at every turn.

How much of my heart will he destroy this time?

Sean

I mess things up alright? Even my relationship with my twin brother is hanging by a thread. But what I did to London in high school hurts me the most.

I wasn't good enough for her then, and honestly, I'm still not enough for her now. But she makes me want to be better. Now that I found her again, I plan to fix things, literally. Because she is everything that is good in this world, my light, happiness, my Sunny.

One chance is all I need to show her I've changed. Life is full of risks, but this is the biggest one I've ever taken.

Just A Chance is a clean, and humorous second-chance romance with all the feels of a Hallmark romance.

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Chapter 1

Sean

SevenYearsAgo

“Freeze right there.”

I come to a standstill, one foot on the cement path, the other stranded in the air like I’m playing an intense game of red-light-green-light.

I glance up to the porch of the house where a red-faced man stands. Is that a knife in his hand? Just a newspaper. Phew.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he barks.

Am I allowed to speak?

“What do you want?” he yells again.

I should probably answer him.

Dropping my foot the rest of the way to the cement, I clear my throat. “I’m here to see Sun—I mean, London, sir.”

My feet resume their trek up the walkway toward the man I assume is London’s dad.

He maneuvers to the top of the porch steps, blocking my way to the door. “Why?”

“I asked her to prom,” I say, still pleased she said yes, and I got a chance to ask her before my twin brother did. For the first time ever, we have a crush on the same girl. But mine runs deeper. Also, I called dibs.

“No.”

Did I ask a question? I’m so confused. Maybe he misunderstood me. People misunderstand me a lot. “Oh, I already asked her,” I say to clarify. “Prom is next week so I came by to finalize plans. And my mom needs to know what color of tie to get me.”

He drops down the porch, thunking with each step.

“I know you asked her. She told me. But I said no. You’re not taking my daughter to prom.”

Now I’m really confused. “I’m not?”

He's taller than me, but I’m not done growing yet. I don’t want to be intimidated by him, but I am. He’s holding my future in his hands right now. I know, I know, I shouldn’t get hung up on a girl at seventeen. But London is not just any girl. I only have one class with her, but it’s the best class of the day. She’s kind and sweet to everyone, she brings light and happiness, spreading her sunshine wherever she goes. One day she had a little sun sticker on her prosthetic arm, so I called her Sunny, and then it stuck. Everyone I know calls her that now. But I liked it better when it was just mine.

He stops two feet away from me and folds his arms. “I know who you are. You’re the punk who embarrassed my daughter on her first day in a new school.”

I cringe. Yes, I did that, but I've talked to London and apologized. We're good now. However, her dad's angry face is making me believe we aren't in fact good. Is she still mad at me?

"It was a mistake, honestly." It had been. A stupid one. I'm good at those.

On London's first day, I got to show her around. There was a class meeting going on at the time in the auditorium, so I decided to introduce her with a bang. I brought her on stage, declaring her the newest member of our class to nothing but cheers and applause. Who doesn't want to be received like that? But London looked ready to vomit all over the green Spokane hoodie she was wearing. Why was she wearing that hoodie anyway? It was nearly a hundred and twenty degrees outside.

That should have been a clue I had misread something. I do that often.

I reached for her hand to comfort her and impart some of my dimwitted courage. That's when things took a turn for the worse because I grabbed a half empty sleeve out of her hoodie pocket.

There was a collective gasp, but it didn't reach my brain's processing center. You know, the thing that's supposed to stop me from making stupid mistakes like this.

"Where's the rest of your arm?"

And that.

"Is it in your jacket?"

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And... that.

London didn't answer as she sprinted from the stage, and I was delivered to the principal's office for a lengthy discussion on acceptance. The term upper limb difference was used no less than fifty times. It was not my finest moment.

"Making fun of my daughter's limitations is pathetic. Don't you think?" he glowers. I still haven't caught his name, but now it's too late to ask.

He's wrong. I didn't make fun of her. I also have never thought of her as being limited in any way. She can do anything. She's stronger in her right arm than half the guys in our school.

"I'm also friends with the principal," London's dad continues. "She's told me some interesting things about you.

I bite my tongue. That's unfortunate. Principal Beatty is not my biggest fan. It may have something to do with me driving her car onto the football field last week. Or when I released fifty chicks in her office two months ago.

"She informed me all about you, and of the girls you date and dump. You will not do that to my daughter."

To be fair, the last girl I dated dumped me. Unless I misread that conversation as well and Alyssa still thinks we are together. I should probably talk to her. "Of course not. I'd never hurt London."

“I know what kind of boy you are.”

That’s interesting because I’m still trying to figure that out myself. I open my mouth to protest, but he’s not done yet.

“You are not good enough for my daughter.”

That one sentence slices through me as if he stabbed me with a knife. That was evident the first day I met Sunny. She’s so different from the girls I regularly date, but that’s one of the reasons I like her so much. She’s genuine with everyone she meets. You don’t have to worry if she’s going to talk about you behind your back because she won’t.

“If you like her and have any respect, you’ll leave her alone. Don’t ever talk to my daughter again.”

That’s a bit harsh.

I furrow my brows. “Just to be clear... I can’t take London to prom?”

His eyes bulge, and his face turns red.

I take that as a no.

“Get off my property!” he hollers.

I sprint away, taking a quicker route to my car by stomping a rose bush and vaulting over a fence. As I run, I realize something truly awful.

He’s right.

There goes my sunshine.

Chapter 2

Lonon

“You look incredible!” Monica squeals. “I can’t believe you’re going to prom.”

I honestly can’t believe it either. And with Sean, no less. He’d been so cute, and almost shy when he’d asked me two weeks ago after English class. I was so shocked I couldn’t say no. Last I heard he was dating Alyssa, the cheer captain.

“You could come too, you know,” I say.

“And be a third wheel? No, thank you.” She screws up her nose and I laugh. “Besides, my mom said she’d give me the money I would have used on a dress for a new laptop, and I really need that laptop for college.”

I nod. I know how passionate she is about school.

“Good idea. It’s kind of sad I’ll only wear this beautiful dress once.” I sigh at the lavender material. It’s got spaghetti straps and a V-neck, both things my dad was not happy about, but the full-length, tulle skirt ends in different layers, giving it a young and fun, but also classy look.

“You definitely need to wear that again. It would be a crime to lock such a beauty in a closet.” Monica pins up my hair on the left side with a beautiful rhinestone celestial sun clip I found online. I’ve got a matching sun sticker on my prosthetic arm. I hope Sean notices.

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“So, when is he picking you up?” she asks.

I frown. “Um, I’m not sure exactly.” He said he was going to stop by and talk to me, but that was over a week ago, and now that I’m thinking about it, I haven’t seen him since. He’s been absent from English all week. I check my phone. But I know for a fact I don’t have his number.

Why didn’t we exchange numbers right when he’d asked me? Is he sick? Surely he would have told me if he was.

“Do you have his number?” I ask Monica.

“Uh, no. But I think I went to his house once when I was little for a birthday party. Aren’t you friends with Trent, too?”

“Class friends, not exchange numbers kind of friends.” I could message him on social media but that would require me creating an account, which my dad doesn’t approve of.

I grab my arm and squeeze the soft skin around my elbow joint where my underdeveloped left arm ends.

Why didn’t he follow up with me?

“Well, the dance starts at nine, it’s only eight now. I’ll just wait. He probably forgot to tell me what time.” My stomach grows queasy. Something isn’t right, but I’m too afraid to admit as much out loud.

“I’m sure.” Monica places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Come on, let’s go watch *Gilmore Girls* until he shows up.”

I lock my prosthetic into place and follow her downstairs, knowing full well that not even a love triangle between Rory, Dean, and Jess can keep me from worrying.

Fifty-five minutes later, I’m practically shaking. My dad has, thankfully, shut himself in his office. Which is good because he wouldn’t know what to say and would just make it worse. Times like this, a girl could use her mom. That also would have been nice during the puberty talk. My dad used a construction analogy including phrases like “tubing systems” and “fluid transport” that should never be repeated. Now I shudder every time I drive by a construction site.

“He doesn’t know where you live,” Monica says, snapping her fingers.

The air whooshes out of my lungs. “Of course.” A reasonable excuse for not showing up somewhere.

“Come on,” Monica stands and grabs her keys. “I’ll drive you to his house, he’s probably sitting there and doesn’t know what to do.”

It feels like a terrible idea, but I agree. Monica tells my dad we are going to her house to finish getting ready since I’m hardly capable of stringing two words together, and we hop in her car.

Thirty minutes later, we park in front of a large home. It’s not quite a mansion, but it’s also not a typical suburban-style home either.

“Are you sure this is it?” I ask. But I know better than to question her directional abilities. If she’s been somewhere once, she can find it again. One time I blindfolded her and drove through town, taking no less than twenty turns. She knew exactly

where we were before I let her take off the blindfold. That's how smart she is.

Monica nods, but I'm frozen in the passenger seat. I can't make myself get out of the car. One knock on that door, and I'll know the truth. I want to believe Sean is waiting for me. But it's so far-fetched I can't even pretend.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Monica asks.

"No," I say quickly. I'd prefer to be embarrassed alone. I know she's my best friend, but I'm already so humiliated.

I push open the car door and step out, careful not to snag my dress on anything. My heels click up the long drive. Has there ever been such a long sidewalk? Each step is more daunting than the last. I'm five feet away from the door when the tears start. I've held them in for so long that I can't stop them. I don't even wipe them away; I know without a doubt that Sean is not in there. Of course, he's not. I'm not the captain of the cheer team. Why did he ask me to begin with?

It was a joke, right? He's the popular guy who asks the girl who's desperately in love with him because he gave her a nickname once that makes her ridiculously happy. But it doesn't mean anything to him.

I knock on the door, harder than planned, and wait. My pounding heart is screaming at me to run away while I still can, but for some reason, I stay put. I need to know my fate.

A moment later the door is opened by a beautiful blonde woman, looking very regal in a white blouse and tan pants. "Oh, hello. My, aren't you beautiful?"

"I'm London," I say, ignoring the compliment.

“Oh, yes, I’ve heard about you from Trent.”

Trent? Sean’s twin brother has talked about me, but Sean hasn’t.

“Is Sean here?” My voice is barely more than a whisper.

“Sean?” she asks. “He’s at prom I believe. Is that where you’re headed?”

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Fresh tears burn down my cheeks. “I thought so.”

“Oh, honey.” She pulls me inside and shuts the door, and I guess I’m so starved for a motherly touch that I let it happen. “Don’t tell me Sean stood you up.”

I wince at the words and the rest of the story falls from my lips.

She hands me a tissue and cookie as I talk; I’m not even sure where she produced either one, but I devour the warm cookie. I almost ask for the recipe, but now’s not a good time.

“I’m going to kill that boy,” she mutters.

“It’s fine,” I stand abruptly. “I’m the one who got the message confused.” The message being, Sean doesn’t care about me. It was another one of his classic pranks or bets. What does he win for breaking my heart?

“No. It’s not fine. But rest assured, I will take care of this.” She stalks out of the room, and without her comforting presence, I feel like an intruder. Do I stay? Does she expect me to?

An older man, who looks exactly like Sean in twenty-five years, walks by and says ‘hi’, like seeing a random girl in his house is no big deal. I wave, and he continues into the living room and flicks on the TV.

What is happening right now?

I'm making a huge mistake, that's what's happening. I dash out of the room.

"London?" Mrs. Bentley calls, stopping me in the foyer. "Great news, Trent's going to take you. He's getting dressed right now."

"Oh." That is not what I had in mind. I don't want to be a pity date. "That's fine, I'm sure he has better things to do. I was going to ask my friend if she would come with me."

"Oh nonsense," she waves her hand and the diamonds on her wrist catch the light. "The girl he wanted to ask was already taken so he was just upstairs sulking. I promise I didn't have to drag him into it. He heard your name and instantly perked up."

Trent is a good friend. I suppose I wouldn't feel too awkward going with him. Even if he'd rather be there with another girl.

"I guess if it's really okay with him."

"It's really okay," Trent says, stepping into the foyer with a grin. "Wow..." he blushes. "You look beautiful."

Mrs. Bentley beams, clearly proud of at least one of her sons' chivalry.

My cheeks warm, and I can almost pretend this was how the night was supposed to go all along. "Thank you. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Are you kidding? I'm officially the luckiest guy in the school." His smile almost makes me think he means that.

Trent escorts me out the door and we inform Monica of the new plan, which she is

very much a fan of. She tells me to have fun and to text her later.

Only when we are in his car on the way to the dance do I let the facade drop. People call me Sunny because I'm always happy. It was interesting at first because I didn't think I was. I was still mourning my mother who died four years ago. But when my dad moved me out of gloomy Washington and dropped me in the middle of the desert, that was apparently all I needed to be happy again. But right now I don't feel happy at all.

"You really don't have to do this. I don't care if I miss prom," I say quickly because it's a complete lie. I would care a lot. This is the first dance I've been asked to and it's not going how I expected at all.

"I would care if you did," Trent says. "You shouldn't have to suffer because my brother is a jerk."

"He's not—" But I can't finish the thought. It's the truth.

"Come on, let's go show my brother what he's missing out on." He parks and hops out, coming to my side.

I accept his help. "No offense, but I don't want to think about your brother."

"None taken. He's the last thing on my mind right now." Trent smiles and extends his hand. I take it, enjoying the warmth of his palm and the tiny flutter of butterflies in my chest.

"Let's get you on the dance floor."

"Fair warning, I'm not a great dancer," I say.

“You don’t need to be to have fun.”

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I could go for some fun.

The fancy building is everything I dreamed it would be, and yes, I dreamed about this once or twice. A day. But I pictured being on the arm of a different Bentley.

Trent leads us right to the dance floor. A slow song has begun, and he wastes no time spinning me out and swaying me to the music beneath the thousands of twinkling lights overhead. It's incredibly romantic, but I can't stop myself from searching for Sean. I want to see if he's having a good time without me. But more than anything, I want him to see me. To see he didn't break me.

Trent and I dance for three more songs, talking about our classes and interests, and laughing about the time he wore chainmail to school for a whole day after a bet gone wrong. It was the only day in history he was sent to the principal's office instead of Sean.

“Thirsty?” Trent asks.

I nod and he scoops up my hand, guiding me through the mass of people.

He stops so suddenly I ram into his back.

“Trent?”

I know that voice. Sean.

My heart pounds in my ears and I'm about to pull away when Trent speaks up. “Oh

hey, brother. Fancy seeing you here... with Alyssa of all people."

I freeze, still hidden behind Trent for the time being. Sean brought Alyssa? My throat closes up, I'm going to cry. No. I won't. Not for him.

"What are you doing here? You didn't ask anyone," Sean says.

"Lucky for me, I found a date just in time." Trent steps to the side, revealing me, but he must not have realized how much I was leaning on him because my legs give out.

He catches me into his side and I hold onto his suit coat for dear life.

Sean's eyes narrow. I've never seen that look before. It's unsettling. So completely not... Sean. He's angry at his brother... no, at me.

"What are you doing here?"

His question sends shards of glass through the protective barrier I'd put around my heart. He didn't expect to see me here after standing me up. Because it was all a joke to him.

I swallow and hold myself straighter. "I came with my friend." I owe him nothing more than that.

I can feel Trent's eyes on the side of my face. "Isn't she beautiful? I can't believe I almost missed the chance to take her."

He's way overplaying this.

Sean's glare turns on his brother. "You shouldn't have."

The implication is clear, and it hurts.

“Come on, let’s go dance,” Alyssa whines beside Sean.

“Okay,” he grunts, but his eyes are back on mine. I can feel the heat of his gaze, I wish he would look anywhere else. “There’s nothing I need over here.”

Ice floods my veins. I knew Sean played girls, but I’d never imagined he could be so mean.

The second they are gone Trent turns to me. “I’m so sorry, London. I was trying to avoid him, but then when I saw him I couldn’t help rubbing in his stupidity. I shouldn’t have dragged you into it. He’s a real jerk sometimes.”

I blink away the tears. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” He scratches his jaw and the slight stubble of hair there. “I shouldn’t have let him talk to you like that. I’m going to go talk to him alone.” He turns to follow Sean but I grab his arm and hold him back.

“No,” I force a smile. “Please don’t say anything. It’s all good. I got the better Bentley.”

Color floods Trent’s cheeks and he chuckles. “I would like that printed on my headstone when I die.”

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I laugh. Grateful for him, for our friendship. No matter how many songs we dance to, I swear I can still feel Sean's gaze on me. But my eyes never stray from Trent again.

I forgave Sean on the first day of school, but this...I don't know if I'll ever forgive him for tonight. One thing is sure. My crush on him is dead.

Chapter 3

Sean

SevenYearsLater

My bets are catching up to me. I just didn't think it would take being chased through a strip mall by twenty members of the Arizona Witches Association for me to finally realize this. Yes, I said witches. As in acovenof witches. The average age is seventy-five, the dress code is black as death, and the facial expressions are, well, witchy? I'm not sure how they are keeping up with me.

I scan the shops ahead looking for one big enough to duck inside, then sneak out the back door.

"I will turn you into a feline you punk!" one of the witchy sisters screeches.

She's been practicing; that was nearly perfect.

"Well go on, give it your best effort."Low blow.

I'm aware of the scene I'm causing. Do I like attention? Yes. Do I seek it out occasionally? For sure. But do I want cameras aimed in my direction while I'm wearing my grandmother's wig and warlock robe?

Oh, did I not mention that part?

I know. I've hit rock bottom to be making desperate bets with my grandmother because all my siblings are happily in love, and my friends deserted me tonight.

This was a mission of justice, though—hardly the same.

I glance behind me to see if they've given up yet. The numbers have dwindled, but there are still five very angry witches hot on my trail, and is that... did that one just steal a moped?

Sh—

“Watch out!”

A stroller is headed for me, and I do the only thing I can think of to avoid a collision. I jump onto a planter—like a freaking ninja—and leap over a fake Santa sleigh, narrowly avoiding a decorative reindeer on my way down. My knee buckles as I land, but I propel myself up.

The strip mall was built along an old dried-up river, which is convenient because the shops farther up are situated twenty feet back from the others. If I can make it to the first one, then I can disappear out the alley entrance. With this new plan, I attempt to speed up but the warlock cape is severely limiting my movements. I need to ditch it, but Grandma will kill me.

Death might be a nice reprieve from my idiocy.

The curve in the building comes, and I make a sharp right through the first door I can find—a bakery. And luckily for me, it's empty. I don't think twice (which my sister Lennox would claim is one of my great faults) before vaulting myself over the serving counter. I'm vaguely aware I knocked something off the top of the counter, but I'm overly aware of whatever I smash on the way down. Pain explodes down my back.

I yelp, then clamp my mouth shut and slide farther behind the counter before the witches are alerted to my presence by their super hearing. But as of yet, I haven't witnessed them do anything supernatural. A disappointment if I'm honest.

“Who are you? Get out!”

A woman emerges from the kitchen wielding a rolling pin in one hand. Now would be a bad time to appreciate the woman's beauty, but my brain does it anyway.

It can't be helped. She's entirely too gorgeous. Dark black hair cascades down her right shoulder, falling into the dip in her waist.

“Wow, I might have to thank Grandma for this beautiful development.”

The woman's eyes turn murderous, the look oddly familiar, and then that rolling pin comes flying into my head.

Perhaps I should have thought twice, for once in my life.

Chapter 4

London

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Did I really just knock out a man with my rolling pin, Tangled-style?

I thought he'd move out of the way. I hadn't meant to make contact, but surely even a hit on the head—no, it was more like a bop, of the dainty variety—wouldn't knock him out.

I study his slumped figure against the counter. Apparently, I wield more strength in my right arm than I'm aware of.

What do I do now? Call the cops? I've never knocked someone out before.

My thoughts are thwarted when an angry mob of...witches?...runs by my front door. I glance at the man again. In his slumped position the white wig has fallen off his head, but the hair is still covering his face.

What is going on? And why isn't he moving?

I killed him!

No, no, no. A new business cannot have this kind of attention, I'll never make it.

Seriously London? The business?

Right. Not the most pressing issue.

I crouch down by the man, reaching for his neck and then yelling at my phone to call 911, but it's in the kitchen so I don't think it registers.

All the stupid hair is in the way. I yank off his wig and reach around again. My fingers shake, but I press them into his neck. I hope he showers regularly.

His pulse practically jumps through his skin at my touch. Or is that my pulse in my fingertips? Why can't I tell?

What's wrong with me? I toss my hair over my shoulder and angle my cheek next to his face. I should be able to hear his breath or feel it. If he's alive.

Oh, please be alive.

I lean closer until my cheek brushes his nose. Was that a rush of warm air? I press a little closer.

"Are we about to kiss?"

I scream and jerk back while simultaneously slapping him across the face.

"Ow," he groans. "On second thought, I don't think this abusive relationship is going to work for me."

The blood slows in my veins. I know that voice. That arrogant teasing lilt and the inability to take anything seriously. And quite frankly, it explains a lot of things.

Primarily the stupidity.

"Sean Bentley?"

His eyes flit to mine, brown and mischievous as the day I met him. He offers me his boyish flirtatious smile. He's grown up. There are harder edges where there used to be soft lines. But the years have been more than kind to him. Even wearing a

women's robe, he's ruggedly handsome enough to make my heart flutter like I'm seventeen again.

"Maybe this day has been magical, after all. You know who I am. Might I have the pleasure of knowing who you are?"

"Oh, you know me."

He tries to sit up but grimaces in pain and decides to stay instead. "I never would have forgotten such beauty."

I roll my eyes and consider hitting him with the rolling pin again. "Well, clearly you did."

"Wait," his eyebrows furrow like he's trying to place me. I'm sure the hit to the head isn't helping the process. He tries to stand again and before I can think better of it, I stand and offer him a hand up.

He grabs my hand and reaches out like he's waiting for the other one.

That's when we both freeze. I can't offer him more than that. But what I've got is enough.

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His mouth falls open and I can see the exact moment it registers in his brain.

“Come on. I don’t have all day.” I yank his arm, and he staggers to his feet, then leans against the counter to steady himself.

Once I’m sure he won’t fall, I let go, dusting myself off like I can get rid of the way he makes my skin shiver.

“Sunny. The one that got away.” He flashes me a playful smirk.

My heart lurches on the tender nickname I never thought I’d hear again. After all these years, how can he still wreck my heart with one little word?

Is it too late to hit him again?

Chapter 5

Sean

Thatwasnotsupposedto sound like a line. I’m not a teenage idiot. I’m a grown idiot. There should be a difference.

I can’t stop myself from drinking her in. Her big brown eyes and long dark hair, both a direct contrast to the bright pink apron dusted with frosting and flour. There’s a splotch of flour on the end of her nose and it’s adorable. She’s not wearing her prosthetic right now which is unfortunate. My favorite part of each day was discovering which new sticker she chose to wear. She must have gone through

thousands. I wonder if she still keeps up that tradition. She's changed so much, yet somehow not at all.

"I mean, London," I say, caressing her name with the gentleness I should have used earlier. "How are you?"

She narrows her eyes and inches toward that rolling pin again.

I shake off my cloak and drop it over the rolling pin on the ground. But as soon as the thick robe is off, the gaping wound on my back catches air.

I clench my teeth, hissing with the pain, and reach for the edge of my shirt, studying the ground instead of the woman I know hates me. I don't blame her. She's only going to hate me more for this mess I caused. How much did I break? There's shattered glass and desserts everywhere, marring the bright pink-and-yellow bakery.

"What are you doing?" London bites out.

I get my shirt over my head, and my hand goes to my back. I don't feel anything sticking out of it but it's hard to tell with all the blood. I drop my hands and look at her.

Her face drains of color.

"Is that blood?" her voice falters, and so does her body.

Her knees buckle, and I rush forward to grab her a split second before she faints. She collapses right into my arms.

Well, this is quite the turn of events. I've always wanted to hold her, never thought it would be like this.

Ding.

The front door opens and a happy couple walks in. Horror fills the woman's face and she screams.

“We’re closed.” I offer halfheartedly.

They scoot toward the door, watching me with wary eyes. A shirtless bleeding man holding a passed-out woman in a pile of glass. What’s to be concerned about?

I watch them go, figuring I’ve got about five minutes until the cops arrive.

My back is killing but that doesn’t matter. I shift until I can pick London up then stagger deeper into the bakery. She must have a chair or something around here. I find an office door propped open. But all that’s inside is a laptop on a pile of boxes.

London is pretty light and the big box is thicker than the average Amazon delivery. I test the sturdiness with my foot before gently laying her on top of it and scooting the laptop onto the floor. Did she just start this business? Despite the fact that this woman is going to wake up and probably hit me again, I find myself wanting to know everything she’s been up to for the last seven years.

Sunny. I still can’t believe it. How has she changed? Is she still the girl I fell for in high school? More importantly, does she still hate me? After she went to that dance with my brother, she never spoke to me again. She purposely avoided me. And I, like a coward, avoided her as well.

Her body jolts, and I grab her before she falls off the makeshift desk.

“Sean?” she mutters, blinking against the harsh fluorescent light.

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I smile down at her. “Hey, beautiful. Come here often?”

“Why am I in my office?” She rubs her head. I rub my own. I’ve got a pounding headache from her wicked knockout.

“I don’t mean to alarm you, but the cops may be on their way.”

“What?” She leaps off the boxes so fast she nearly topples the whole makeshift desk.

“You passed out, and some people saw us.”

“I can’t have cops showing up here. I’m technically not even open. My dad was right, I shouldn’t have done a soft opening, I should have just waited until everything was ready. I’m going to be in so much trouble.” She paces in a frantic circle around the boxes. “Why are you just standing there? You have to get out. Now. ”

“You want me to leave? What are you going to say if they ask about me?”

“That you were some lunatic, and I got rid of you,” she waves her hand in front of my face.

My lips twitch. “When they see the blood and glass, they might take that literally.”

She gulps on the word blood then shoves me toward the main area. “Go get your evil Santa suit and get out.”

I glance at her hand on my bare chest. She’s got to be able to feel my heart racing. I

clear my throat. “Okay, first of all, it’s a warlock costume, not evil Santa. And second, leaving will only be more suspicious. I’ll stay, help you clean up, and explain everything.”

“I don’t need or want your help, Bentley.” When she realizes I’m not going anywhere, she scoots by me and grabs a broom before going to the front. I follow.

“Harsh. But I get it.”

I snatch up my shirt and tug it over my head before she passes out again. A warm stickiness reminds me I should probably take care of my cut before it gets worse, but I have a feeling I’ll need help and London’s not the best person to give it.

London freezes with the broom in her hand. “I changed my mind.” Her body sags, and she turns. “You...” she gags, her dark eyes bulging. “...blood.”

She turns and sprints for the back. I’m about to follow her and tell her about the bloody handprint on her apron, but two seconds later I hear her dry heaving. I think she found it.

This reunion is going well.

I grab a rag and get to work wiping up any traces of blood and then cleaning the glass on the ground. The glass came from a pie shelf. The door must have been open when I jumped over and I destroyed it, the pressure shattering half the trays inside the case as well. I also broke a few cake displays and smashed dozens of cupcakes. A real shame, they looked delicious. By the time London re-emerges I’ve determined I owe her a large sum of money and a few hundred apologies.

And for the first time in my life, I wish I’d listened to my sister more.

“Are the police here?” London asks, rejoining me in the front of the shop, her face pale and her legs still wobbly. Her apron is noticeably missing.

“No. Kind of disappointing.”

“Why?” She shoots me a glare.

“Because if you were in danger, as it appeared, I wish someone would have taken initiative.”

“Well, clearly the situation wasn’t as dire as it seemed.” She squeezes her little arm. “Now if you would please leave, I have baking to do for tomorrow. I think I’ll close up shop today.”

“No,” I say quickly. “I’m sorry. What do you need? I’ll stay and help you. And I’ll order new parts and fix what I broke.” I’m already looking around for a way to prove myself useful.

“No offense, but you’re more of a hazard than help.”

Offense taken. But she’s not wrong. I’ve been making a real mess of things lately. Trent has barely spoken to me since we got back from Vegas last week. My siblings think I’m a joke. And now this.

“Please leave before I call the witches back and let them tie you to a pole in the town square.”

My lips twitch despite her threats. “I think they did away with that tradition.”

“I’ll resurrect it. Now go. Or I’m calling the cops.”

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“Okay, I’m leaving.”

There’s a note of finality in her voice. I know a loss when I see one. And I can walk away. But that doesn’t mean I’ll bestayingaway. Now that I’ve found her, she’s not going to get rid of me that easily. I have a lot of regrets in life, but not being good enough for her is at the top of the list in big red bolded letters.

As I walk out I notice the name of the bakery.Sunny’s Sweets.

I can’t help the ridiculous grin that finds me. She kept the nickname, and that gives me a tiny, unwarranted flicker of hope. I can fix this.

Chapter 6

Sean

BythetimeImake it home, the pain in my back has turned me numb. At this point, I’m not sure if my seat warmer is malfunctioning or if I am just bleeding for fun. I’m too afraid to check. I lean my head against the headrest and close my eyes remembering a night over seven years ago. A beautiful girl, in a purple dress. My brother.

I pry my eyelids open, even though I just want to stay here and sleep.

The stairs to Trent’s and my apartment are steeper than they’ve ever been. I open the door and pull at my shirt. It’s stuck to my skin with all the dried blood and each tug hurts.

Just like a Band-Aid. I rip the shirt off. And a fresh wave of pain blinds me. I grab a wall to steady myself. Fake pine needles poke my arm and I stagger back. I might be hallucinating because that Christmas tree was not there when I left this morning.

“Sean!” Trent yells. “What the heck?”

I lift my head, stars swirl around the room, but I eventually find him on the couch with Karli. “You guys decorated a tree without me? How ru—” The ground swirls beneath me.

What was I saying?

I stumble into the living room. I’m about to fall into a chair when Trent grabs me by both arms and holds me up. “You’re bleeding.”

“Still?” I turn, trying to see my back. It doesn’t work. But it sure makes me nauseous. “I might also have a concussion.”

“Let’s hope not, I’m not sure your brain can afford another one,” Trent mutters and helps me into the kitchen.

Awe, what a sweet brother. He’s going to take care of me.

“Here,” he shoves a towel at my chest. “Put some pressure on it.”

I frown. “Are you still mad I kidnapped you?” I did it out of love. Mostly.

“Trent?” Karli says from behind me. “He needs help.”

Trent doesn’t move.

Karli takes the rag from me and presses it to my back. Her fingernails tickle and I giggle.

Trent scowls, the jealousy rolling off him in waves. But that is one line I will never cross, even if he did once upon a time. With a beautiful girl, in a purple dress. My Sunny.

“I’ll take care of him.” Trent sighs and steps between his girlfriend and me.

“About time, brother.”

He presses the towel to my back with more force than Karli used.

I arch, trying to get away from him.

Karli hands me a glass of water and I drain the whole thing. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

Trent pulls the towel away and what feels like half my skin.

“Ow!”

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Karli gives Trent a stern look.

“It was an accident,” he mutters.

“Where’s your first aid kit?” Karli asks, rummaging through drawers. “Never mind, I found it.” She pops it open and then shoots me a quizzical look. “All that’s in here is a couple of Band-Aids, super glue, and duct tape?”

I nod. “First aid.”

She grabs it all and shakes her head.

“I don’t think superglue is going to cut it. You should go to the doctor, you might need stitches,” Trent says.

“I could stitch you up,” Karli says. The last time she offered to poke through someone’s skin, she was using four-inch sewing needles under the guise of being a tattoo artist to sell a charade our sister Lennox had come up with.

“No thank you. Just cinch me up good with the duct tape.”

“Sean, really?” Trent asks.

I’m used to that pleading tone. It usually accompanies a request for me to just grow up for once. I’m beginning to agree. A knock over the head will do that to a person.

“I’m good, just tape it,” I grunt out.

“Fine. Your back,” Trent says. He’s a good brother like that. Unlike me. I irritate and annoy everyone. Even those who aren’t related to me.

“Do I even want to know what you did this time?” Trent asks.

“I ran into an old friend.” I purposely leave London’s name out of it. She became a no-talking topic between us after that dance.

“An old friend did this to you?” Karli’s eyes widen. “Did you call the cops?”

“He means an old girlfriend,” Trent says.

Technically, London was never that, though I always wanted her to be.

“Who was it?” Trent asks.

I grit my teeth, fighting off the pain spreading up my back. “You wouldn’t remember her.”

“The list is long; I’d be surprised if you remembered her. Before she stabbed you in the back.”

“Funny.” I grimace with whatever torture he’s doing back there. “No. She hit me over the head with a rolling pin.”

He snorts.

I get it. I can appreciate a strong woman.

“What did you do to her this time?”

That's the question, isn't it? "Too much."

Trent pulls the duct tape across my back, cinching the wound closed, and I clench the edge of the countertop until I'm afraid the cheap Formica will crack under the pressure.

"I think it's time to grow up, Sean. You're not in high school anymore."

Don't I know it? Life was so much easier back then. I wasn't cool and I wanted to be. But nobody thinks the kid who can barely read is cool. So I made up for my dyslexia by distracting everyone from my insecurities. And to my surprise, it worked. Everyone liked the wild Sean who did things no one dared to. The Sean who made dumb bets and ended up embarrassing himself in front of the whole school over and over again but laughed it off every time.

Well,almosteveryone liked him.

But I'm older now, and my attention-seeking tactics are no longer desirable. I'm still playing the same old games.

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He's right. It's time for me to stop breaking things and start fixing things. Beginning with London.

Trent puts on the last piece of duct tape, and I stand up straight.

"Thanks for the help, bro." I slap his shoulder and head to my room.

I don't know if it's the lack of blood or the potential brain injury, but I sleep really well.

Chapter 7

London

I couldn't sleep at all. I wish I could say I was worried about the damage Sean created. But instead, my thoughts circled around the man himself. The first time I saw him... and one of the last times I saw him when I promised myself I'd never again give him room in my head, or my heart.

My alarm hasn't gone off yet, and I'm burrowed deep under my comforter, trying to hide from the embarrassment I feel. I never once thought Sean would step foot in my bakery. Otherwise, I would have come up with a new name. Ugh, what must he think? That I'm some pathetic high school girl hung up on him? Which I'm not. I haven't thought about him in years. But with the way my thoughts have revolved around him for the past eighteen hours, you'd never know.

My alarm finally rings, and I pull myself out of bed, get dressed, and head to the

bakery. It looks the same as it did eight hours ago when I left—partially broken.

I don't regret staying that late. I'm a one-woman show, for now. And I'm proud of that. I know I should have waited to open until I had at least one employee. Technically, I did. She promptly quit two hours into opening day claiming "the vibe clashes with my aura." But I was too excited. So, I stayed open just enough to get a feel for the market and start laying out the plans and curating menus. I've got my grand opening set for January first. If I make it. I've already depleted my original budget. And now I'm even more stressed.

What Sean broke is not easily replaced. I'll have to get the display case fixed which will put me more in debt to the bank and more at risk of losing everything. Why didn't I agree when Sean offered to pay to have it fixed? Now I'm never going to see him again. That's so very Sean: walk into my life, break something, and leave again.

I've got the pies halfway out of the broken display case when I change my mind and decide to leave them there instead. The case looks worse without them, and there's no point in ruining good pies.

I have a few minutes left so I run to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. Then I don my apron and clip up my hair.

That's as good as it gets today.

My phone pings with a message.

Dad:I see you're at the shop already. I'll be over after I take Grandma to church and lunch.

Why did I ever agree to let him install a GPS locator on my phone? Only because I know how much he worries. The day Mom crashed was the only day she had taken a

different route home from the store. Ever since then, he's been obsessed with knowing where I am at all times. But he's running himself ragged working full time and worrying about me nonstop.

Me: Why don't you take a nap instead?

Dad: I'll pray about it ;)

I roll my eyes at his ridiculous joke then put my phone away. Time to focus on the day.

I let out a yawn as I flip open the closed sign and unlock the door.

It remains shut. Someday, I'll have a line of people out that door waiting for my baked goods.

That day is not today.

I retreat to the kitchen. Every day I add a new item to the menu, and at the end of the day, I tally up what was sold most and least. I'm hoping by the time I officially open, I'll have a foolproof menu, as well as holiday and weekly specials that keep people coming back for more. Today's new creation is an apple cider donut.

I watch the time as I bake. I've got three potential employees coming in for interviews at noon. Hopefully one of them will be the employee I need. My dad has come in nearly every day, which I am grateful for. Who knew one of the hardest things about running a bakery with one hand would be getting plastic containers open? But I need to be able to do this without his help. I need to prove to myself, and to him, that I can.

Mom was the one who taught me to cook and encouraged my love of baking. We

came up with hundreds of recipes working together. Not all of them were winners.

My eyes mist over and I rub the heel of my hand over them. Twelve years was not enough time. There were more hugs to give and more memories to make. We should be making them now, inventing new recipes for my bakery.

I let out a heavy sigh. Wishing for things to be different is like pouring salt on an open wound.

I balance the jar of baking soda on my hip with my prosthetic and reach for the baking powder.

Ding.

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The sound startles me, and I drop the baking soda onto the work table. The lid pops up, and white dust plumes through the air and straight into my eyes. They instantly burn.

No! Come on.

“I’ll be right with you!” I fumble around until my hand finds the kitchen sink. I turn it on and douse my eyes with the nozzle. It’s the fastest option.

“Did it snow in Phoenix, and I missed it?”

I freeze at the voice, turn off the water, then blink until my vision clears. “You.”

Sean smirks. “Me?”

“What are you doing here? I thought I told you to get lost.” I grab a towel and wipe off my face. Then I move on to cleaning the baking table that indeed looks like a little Christmas frost.

He frowns. “I definitely didn’t hear those words.”

“They were definitely implied.”

“Ah, see, this is why people shouldn’t beat around the bush and should say what they mean.”

I plant my arms across my chest. “Not if it’s going to hurt someone.” A specific

memory of his harsh words on prom night comes to mind, but I push it down where it belongs.

“Agreed.” He stalks toward me.

I don’t like the look in his eyes as he approaches; it’s dangerous, and just a little sexy, and...I grab my trusty rolling pin. “Stay back, buddy. I’m not afraid to use this again.”

A smile dances in his eyes. “I’m not here to hurt you, London. I want to help. Starting with an apology...or several.”

My pulse thrums in my ears. I’m not ready to dive into the past if that’s what he’s about to do, not right now at the beginning of a workday.

“See, I was rescuing something from the witches that had previously been stolen from my family.”

I blink. It takes me a moment to realize he’s talking about yesterday.

That’s what it was—some stupid bet, another prank. Of course, that’s why he’d come tearing through my door destroying things. He’s still up to the same mischief he was in high school.

I roll my eyes. “I don’t care what you do in your free time.”

“I was trying to apologize.” He frowns. “I was an idiot yesterday.”

Can’t argue there.

A timer beeps, and I flip the donuts in the oil, carefully so I don’t burn myself.

“I’m glad you did it,” Sean says.

I turn.

“Opened a bakery, I mean. I remember those brownies you brought for your English presentation senior year. They were amazing.”

Do not read into his compliments. The man likes food, that’s it.

“Yeah well, I’ve worked hard. And now I need to get back to it. Thanks for the apology you never actually gave me.” I try to step around him, but he scoots to the side, blocking my exit.

“I was getting there,” he whispers.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

He smiles, this one isn’t teasing, or arrogant, it’s perfectly Sean. “I’m sorry. I was an attention-seeking child in high school—”

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“Just in high school?” I tilt my head to the side. “I remember seeing a witches' coven run past my shop yesterday.”

“Okay, okay, I am.” He scratches his jaw.

My harsh words from yesterday flit through my mind, and I read the hurt in his eyes. I want to apologize, but my lips clamp shut instead.

“Geez, don’t fight me so hard on it.” He chuckles and holds up a hand. “It’s okay. I won’t deny it. But I’ll fix everything. I promise I will make it up to you.” His eyes linger intently on mine until I break contact. “Do you have a minute? I was wondering if you could write down all the things I damaged, and I’ll pay to replace them.”

I certainly won’t argue with that. It beats the hassle of trying to go through insurance.

The doorbell chimes.

“You can take a seat out front. I’ll get to you when I’m not busy.” I push around him and greet the young mom and her two kids looking for donuts. The awe on each of the kid’s faces as they press their noses to the glass, their eyes wide as they devour the options is one of my favorite parts about owning a bakery. Sugar makes people happy, it’s a proven fact. I think.

After they leave, each with a sprinkled donut in hand, another customer walks in, then two, then five, then eight. It’s a half hour before Sean approaches the counter, looking over the non-damaged displays.

“What’s good?”

Where’s my rolling pin when I need it? “You do realize I’m the baker, so that question is offensive?”

“Okay,” he purses his lips, and his eyes drop from the menu to meet mine. “What’s your favorite?”

“I like everything. Kind of the point of having my own bakery.”

He blows out his cheeks. “Then I’ll take one of everything.”

I lift a brow. “I have twenty items in total today, including a chocolate peanut butter mousse cake and a pink lemonade pie. You’re going to eat all that?”

He shrugs. “I like to eat.”

I’m not sure where he’ll put it. I saw his chiseled chest yesterday—and again in my dreams—and that’s not the kind of chest one gets by consuming this much sugar.

I open the small pastry shelf pull out a cinnamon roll, and hand it to him. “Start with this.”

He takes it to the table, and I grab one for myself. He wolfs the entire thing down before I even take a bite.

“This is amazing.” He grabs the napkin and dabs at his mouth. “Better than my mom’s. But don’t tell her that.”

Sean might not think before he speaks, but that’s how I know I’m getting nothing but honesty.

My cheeks warm, and I can't help a small smile from finding my lips. What kind of messed up universe is this? The guy who broke my heart in high school is here, in my bakery, complimenting me and making my heart flutter with his ridiculous compliments.

No.

I wipe the grin off my face.

"I'm going to need a lot more of that in like five minutes," he says. "But first..." He opens his phone and slides it over so I can see what's on the screen. "I took a picture of that display case while you were busy, and I think I found the same one."

I study the picture. He did find the exact one. Impressive. "That's great but..."

"What?"

"Maybe I should get one with sliding doors so the next time a crazy person jumps over my counter, they aren't impaled."

His hazel eyes dance with intriguing delight. "How considerate."

"How are you by the way?" Many of my thoughts today have revolved around him... I mean his injury. "It's a good thing you were wearing that cloak thingy. That door could have caused serious internal damage."

"Internals all accounted for," he says, but just the reminder of the horror scene from yesterday has the blood draining from my face.

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“Whoa.” Sean’s hand jumps across the table to land on mine. “Stay with me, London.”

I force a smile and slip my hand away from his. It was too warm under there.

“I’d tell you how it really is, but I don’t want you passing out on me again. Next time you want a free ride in my arms, all you have to do is ask.”

I choke on my bite of cinnamon roll. That’s the one part of yesterday’s events I don’t remember and... I wish I did. Because it was probably awful to be cradled against his broad chest, right? And teenage me would feel a small measure of justification that the man who seemed to have everything was lacking in some way. But of course, it wouldn’t be awful to be in his arms.

“There won’t be a next time,” I say.

He smirks but doesn’t push it. “How long have you been here?”

“A couple weeks setting up.” I pull out a napkin and wipe down the already clean table. I keep talking before he has a chance to ask about the name. “I opened last week as a trial run before my grand opening.”

He glances around. “This looks like more than a trial.”

I shrug. “I’m not a marketing genius. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing, but I feel more confident easing into things when I know what to plan for.”

“That makes sense.”

Who is this serious Sean and where is the one who flew in here yesterday on a whim?

“So, you’ve been in Phoenix all this time?” Sean asks.

I nod. “You?”

“Yep.” His eyes are contemplative like he’s trying to figure something out. About me? I’m not sure I want to know.

The bell rings, and I jump up to greet the customers. I assume Sean will leave but instead, he walks around, perusing the kitchen, the office, and the front of the shop, opening cupboards and drawers. He’s so nosy.

After the customer is gone, I find him in the bathroom, slamming the vanity door. The door falls halfway off its hinge.

“Are you trying to break that thing?”

“It’s already half broken,” he mutters. “These are awful cabinets.”

“I’m not a carpenter.”

He pops up with a grin. “Lucky for you, I am.” He jogs, like actually jogs, right out the front door.

Well, I guess he’s gone then.

The door chimes again, and I greet the new customers. I’m almost sold out of cinnamon rolls and donuts. And have two cake orders I need to make by next

Saturday. To anyone else, these things wouldn't mean much, but this is my dream. And to me, this is a success.

The door chimes again while I'm busy writing down another cake order.

"I'll be with you in a moment." But when I look up, the shop is empty. Strange.

I take my three cake orders and head to my office to enter them on the computer. Paper evidence is faulty, subject to water, flour, or egg damage. I've learned the hard way.

I knock the door open with my hip and run right into a wall that's never been there before.

I fly backward, my notebook slipping from my hand.

"London?" Sean screws up his brows.

"Yes, it's me." I right myself. "In my own shop. What on earth are you doing here? And everywhere?"

He holds up a tape measure. "Measuring."

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I place an arm on both of his to force him out, but the short length of my left arm just means I've plastered myself to his chest. "How about you measure the distance from my shop to your own home."

He smiles down at me, not moving a muscle under my sheer force. "Already did. It's 13.3 miles."

That shouldn't cause goosebumps to break out along my skin, but it does. "Then measure something, anything else."

"I measured the kitchen cabinets as well. Some of those are barely holding."

"I know. But this place was already a bakery before I got here, which was the only way I could afford it."

"Don't worry darling, I can fix it."

"Don't call me darling," I glare at him.

"Sunny, then?"

"No." He doesn't get to use that nickname again after all this time.

The doorbell chimes, and I stomp away from him. Clearly, he's not leaving anytime soon.

A pretty redhead is at the counter when I get there.

“Hi, I’m Rachel. I’m here for my interview,” she says.

Is it noon already? “Right! Hi! Sorry, we’ve been a bit busy today.” I don’t know why I said we; it’s only me here and that weirdo in the back.

“Should we take a seat?” I point to one of the five chairs I own out front just as Sean emerges.

“Sean Bentley?” Rachel says, her eyes narrowing to little slits. “What are you doing here?”

Of course, this beautiful woman would know Sean.

He twirls a hammer expertly around his hand. “Working.”

Rachel shakes her head. “Uh uh. No way. I will not workanywherenear that man.” She spins and walks straight out the door.

Andof course, that beautiful woman would hate him.

I scowl at Sean. “Thanks a lot. You just cost me an employee.”

He has the audacity to laugh. “She has a pet snake named Noodles.”

“And?”

“And she tends to lose it.” He crosses his arms, drawing my attention to his bulging biceps. “Trust me, I did you a favor.”

“You haven’t done me any favors since you showed up breaking things yesterday.” He flinches. But I don’t stop. “Please, Sean. Just leave.”

“Okay.” He purses his lips and slips the hammer back into the tool belt hanging loosely around his waist. “But...”

I throw my arms in the air. “But what?”

“I still have eighteen more desserts to try.”

I’m starting to understand why the witches were after him.

Chapter 8

Sean

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I find my grandma in her usual seat in my parents' living room. Family dinner isn't for a little while, but I've already filled up my mom's fridge with all of London's baked goods and raided her first aid stash for Neosporin.

"Grandma, we need to talk," I say.

She flicks off the TV and turns a wicked gleam on me. "Did you get it?"

"Yes. But not without nearly killing myself." I grimace when my wound presses into the couch cushions. After I left the bakery, I went to Lennox to replace my makeshift bandage. I thought she'd be more gentle than Trent, but she nearly threw up right on my back. She says it looks awful and I should go to the doctor. I assured her she was being dramatic and played with my nephew for two hours so she and Grant could have a break.

"What'd you do that for?" Grandma asks.

I frown. "You're not going to ask me how I am?"

"We both know you're fine. Now where is it?"

The sympathy from this woman is astounding.

I hold out the atrocious cat I stole from a group of seventy-year-old witches.

She rips the orange stuffed kitty free of my hand and very nearly cackles. "They said their power came from this thing, ha! I'd like to see what they can do now! They

kicked me out of their little group before I could nab it myself, now look at me.” She holds the kitty up in the sky, its demonic red eyes glowing like the lights on the Christmas tree.

Wait, something isn’t making sense here.

“What do you mean? You said that was yours, and I was retrieving it. You didn’t say I was stealing it.” My own grandmother sent me on a con?

“Tomato tomahto.” She places the cat on the giant Nutcracker's hat to her side that she’s been using as a side table.

“Edith Bentley, I’m not going to jail for a stuffed kitten.”

“What have I said about using my full name?” she scolds and mutters under her breath, “I should have given you kids one of my aliases. No one’s going to send you to jail. You wore the costume, right? Where is it?”

“The costume didn’t make it.” It was also the only reason I wasn't impaled.

“Drat,” she pouts. “That was my favorite bathrobe.”

I rub my forehead. “Let me get this straight, I was running through a strip mall in your bathrobe, with a stolen stuffed cat?”

Grandma kicks her feet in her chair and hoots. “Did someone get that on video?”

“Grandma!”

“Oh, don’t get your panties in a wad, you’ve done worse for less. Here.”

She hands me a hundred-dollar bill. I'm not one to take money from old ladies, but in this case, I feel justified.

I drop my head into the couch. "What am I doing, Grandma?"

"You're looking for your purpose boy, and you haven't found it yet."

"I like my job," I say. Unlike Trent, who is officially quitting our family business. Traitor.

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about your real passion. You haven't found something to challenge you in other ways, and you're bored. Hence, the deal with the seventy-six-year-old."

"That is..." Maybe that's what I'm doing. When did my life become so pathetic? Have I always been this way?

"Sean!" my mom yells. "Why are there a million cake boxes in my fridge?"

I heave myself off the couch and wander to the kitchen, grinning at my mom as I lean against the counter. "Don't be so dramatic. There are clearly only four. I've done far worse things." As my grandmother so kindly reminded me.

My mother, the ever-loving woman she is, doesn't dredge up the past. "The cake boxes?"

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“I bought them from a friend who owns a bakery.” I’m suddenly starving so I pull out a box. Pink lemonade pie. Perfect.

“Which friend is that?”

“London,” I say, cutting out a piece.

“London...Larsen?”

I freeze with a bite of pie halfway to my mouth. “How do you remember her?”

She purses her lips like she’s not going to tell me, but then she seems to change her mind. “Of course I remember that girl, and what you did to her. I’m surprised she’d call you a friend.”

I suppose she doesn’t consider me a friend. Yet. “Oh, come on. It wasn’t that bad.” I pick up my bite, but before the fork can make it to my mouth it’s snatched from my hand. Along with the plate.

“No pie for you,” Mom says, taking the bite for herself.

I fold my arms. “You’re going to spoil your dinner.”

She points the now empty fork at me. “It wasthat bad. That poor girl was in tears when she showed up here.”

“Wait, what?” When did London come to my house?

“You were already at the dance, so I invited her in and—”

“What are you talking about?” There’s a sinking feeling in my gut.

Mom drops the plate to the counter with a clank. “You stood her up. On prom night, Sean.”

Prom? What?

“No, I didn’t.” Her dad made it abundantly clear I wasn’t allowed anywhere near his little girl. So I’d asked someone else instead. Apparently, he didn’t have a problem letting my brother take her. “Trent took her.”

“Yeah, after she showed up here looking for you.”

She was looking for me? Waiting for me? My stomach clenches.

My mind races through that night, but seven years has a way of making things fuzzy. One memory from the dance is very clear, though: I was insanely jealous and brushed her off like she was nothing because I was hurt.

I thought she’d told her dad to get rid of me...but she didn’t.

I slap the counter. “I swear I didn’t mean to.” I quickly tell Mom the whole story.

She is silent, for only a moment. “Well, London still believed you were her date. I grounded you that night, remember?”

I do. But I thought it was because of the other stupid stuff I’d done.

“What did you say to her?” I don’t know why this information is so relevant years

after the fact, but I need to know. I need to know what happened so I can fix it.

“I told her the truth. You cared too much about what other people thought of you and let the attention pull you in a different direction than the one you were meant to follow. Then I told her Trent would take her.”

All this time, I thought he’d swooped in and stole the girl I liked. And I was too embarrassed by it all to question it.

I groan and turn for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to go tell her,” I say.

“Of course you do. But Sean that was years ago. Just because your perception has changed doesn’t mean hers will. She’s had years to think of you in that light, you have to prove that’s not who you are.”

“Does that mean it will take years?”

“It might.” Mom gives me a sad smile. “But if London is someone you want in your life, then she deserves to be the one in control of how that works.”

She’s right. If I told London the truth right now would she even believe me? Would it change anything if she did? I’m still the guy who broke her shop. For the first time in my life, I need to stop and think before I ruin things again. Changing the past isn’t what’s important; I have to change myself. Because there’s nothing more that I want than a second chance with London, but I have to be worthy of that chance. Worthy of her. And the truth is, years later, I’m still not a good enough man for her. Because I’m still not the man I want to be.

That changes now.

“Anyone want a baby?” Lennox asks, breaking the silence in the kitchen. “He just exploded through three different outfits.”

“Way to sell it, sis.”

Trent and Karli come in behind her and they take Emmet from her. The house fills with noise, but for once, I don’t add to it. I’m lost in my thoughts, in my past.

Lost in London.

Chapter 9

London

Thankfully after Sean left on Sunday my next two candidates were perfect for the job. Cassie just started college and will be able to help me out front a couple of days a week, and Grady is an excellent baker. He brought two different desserts for me to try, a salted caramel brownie, and a lemon danish. Each was divine and sold me on him immediately. During the interview he told me he is on the autism spectrum and explained his limitations, then I explained mine. I told him how some things need to be left out on the counter for me to access them, and he adjusted quickly. We are practically besties already.

I slip on my prosthetic and lay out the attachments I'll need for a day of baking. Cassie is up front, and Grady is working his way through the menu. He promised he could make anything with just the recipe. I took that to mean he would work better without my hovering and told him to let me know if he had any questions, which means I have time for something I've been looking forward to for weeks. Creating. I have a few different recipes I need to work on. I've been dying to play with flavors again and combine two of my favorite desserts: ice cream and cupcakes.

When I was young, it never occurred to me that there were things I wouldn't be able to do. And I owe that mentality to my parents. They worked with me until I could do something, or found new ways for me to do them. I never told my parents, but on more than one occasion I found them using only one hand and their elbow, approximately what I was born with, to figure something out. The next day they'd teach me. Some of the simplest things were the hardest to learn, like tying my shoes or doing up buttons. They bought me prosthetics and endless attachments so I could do all the things little girls want to do. Everything from playing basketball to dancing and skating. I even played the violin for a time.

Only after Mom died when I was twelve did I start to feel different. I stopped dancing, stopped skating, stopped smiling. I started hiding. I hate to admit it now, but

the best thing my dad did for me was move us here to be closer to family. It didn't take long for me to remember that brave and happy little girl my parents raised and to want to make them proud. That's why I named the shop Sunny's Sweets. Sean's nickname meant the world to me, because here is where I found happiness, under the Arizona sun. I want others to find it here too.

I'm so in my zone, that I barely notice Dad entering the shop hours later.

"Hey, sweetie." He kisses my cheek, gathering some powdered sugar on his beard with it.

"Hey, Dad. Did you bring it?"

He grins. "Yes, I brought it. Better get that sugar off you, though."

I hurry to wash up then meet him at the back door where he's busy unstrapping a long, skinny box in the bed of his truck.

"It's bigger than I thought," I say, walking around the side to inspect at it.

"The guy almost had to get the forklift to get it up there," he teases.

The box is big, but it's only a canvas print which means it shouldn't be too heavy.

"Good thing I know a super strong man to get it in the shop." I wrap my arms around his middle.

"Did you start dating someone I don't know?"

I roll my eyes. Every so often he drops these hints that he's curious about my private life. But there isn't a private life to share. My shop is my life. I don't have time to

date, nor is it a priority for me right now.

“Should I get Grady to help?” I ask.

“Just prop open the door, I’ve got it.”

Twenty minutes later, the box is inside, leaning against the wall. And so is my dad.

“When did I get so old?” he grunts, holding his spine.

“It happened last year, but I was afraid to tell you.” I pat his arm. “Go rest for a bit, we can put it up after closing.”

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His eyes dart to the serving counter. “Got any eclairs?”

“Not today,” I smile. Dad might not be a baker, but he did bestow upon me an unhealthy love of sugar. “I’ll bring you a new recipe I was working on. Sit tight.”

He walks toward the only table I have right now then settles into the seat with a groan. I’m grateful he took my advice, for once. I’ve been telling him he needs to slow down for years, but he worries too much to ever take a break. Years of physical labor as a construction worker have taken a toll on his body. He is older. And each time I look at those wrinkles, a small worry finds me. Will I lose him too soon also?

I hand him a gluten-free cupcake, and he takes it without a second look. Only after he’s chewed and swallowed does he seem to realize something is different.

He coughs. “I think you left some sugar out, hon.”

“No, just the flour,” I chuckle. “I need to be able to accommodate allergies.”

He frowns at the cupcake. “That’s uh, nice of you, dear, it’s great.” He takes another bite.

I chuckle and go back to the counter, returning a moment later with a cinnamon roll.

He kindly finishes the cupcake before taking the gluten-filled dessert.

“So, have you thought any more about the security cameras?” Dad asks.

I freeze. “Uh.” Ever since I opened he’s been begging me to get some installed. There are some at the front entrance, but none inside or out back. I clear my throat. “I’m still thinking.”

“Honey, what if someone breaks in?”

Judging by that question he clearly hasn’t seen the broken display case or he would already be assuming the worst.

“I could have the feed sent to my phone as well as yours,” he continues.

“No. Dad. That’s not necessary.” I know I need cameras, for lots of reasons, and I know he’s just trying to help, but after all I’ve accomplished, it hurts when he looks at me and still sees a helpless girl.

“Of course it is. What if you collapsed in here and no one knew?”

He’s bringing up things that may never happen. Because he’s stuck in the past and his own failure to protect my mother.

“I’ll let you know,” I sigh. I’ll have to give in eventually. It’s simply not smart to run a business without safety precautions, but I need it to be my decision. How do I help him see that I am capable of protecting myself?

Cassie and Grady leave thirty minutes later. Until we are open for real, I only need them part-time.

It’s almost closing time, and I can finally open the package Dad brought. All the small knives are in the dishwasher, so I grab a long serrated one, take it out to the hallway, and start cutting through the tape.

From the moment I decided to open a bakery, I wanted to honor my mom. I went for a light and airy theme, with touches of yellow and pink, her favorite colors. Then I found this photo of my mom, in our old kitchen, grinning as she put the finishing touches on my seventh birthday cake. Her smile alone could sell an entire bakery's worth of goods. I instantly knew I wanted it in my shop.

I just didn't realize it was going to be so big. I hope I have enough space on the wall.

I cut through the final piece of tape just as the door chimes.

Ugh. So close.

"Sorry, we're closed," I say, walking out to the front.

"Whoa," Sean throws his hands in the air. "I come in peace."

I drop the knife on the counter. "Why are you here?"

"I got your replacement case." He sticks his hands in his pockets and lifts a shoulder.

Is he shy? Is this Sean shy? It's adorable.

Wait... "Already?"

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“It came quick.”

I know for a fact things like that don’t come quick. He must have paid a fortune for expedited shipping. And called people who knew people and so on. How did he do this?

“I brought a work truck so I can take out the old one and get the new one set up.”

“You know how to do that?” I say, suddenly feeling vulnerable. He’d do all this for me? I kind of expected him to drop it and leave.

“Just like installing a cabinet,” he shrugs. It looks so boyish, so innocent. My head knows better, but my heart apparently doesn’t. It’s thumping like it can break down all the walls I erected to keep him out.

“That would be great.”

He nods once then turns out of the shop again, to get tools I’m assuming. I pick up the knife.

“Who was that?”

I scream and swing the knife around, barely missing my dad’s chest. “Dad! I could have killed you.”

He takes a giant step away and rubs a spot on his chest. “Well, that makes me feel better about you being here alone at night.”

I shake my head. “Does that mean you’ll stop worrying about me so much?”

“Never.” He kisses the top of my head. “Who was that?”

“Sean Bentley.”

“I thought he looked familiar.”

I frown. “Why would you know him?”

He walks down the hall where we left the picture. I follow him because now I’m curious.

“Of course I’d remember the guy who ruined my daughter’s prom night.” His eyes narrow. “Why is he here?”

“He broke my display case.”

“He did what?” he growls, his fingers destroying the flap of the box.

“He’s replacing it,” I add quickly.

“Hmm.” He releases his hold on the box. “I think I’ll go help him. That’s more important right now.”

“No!” I knew my dad wasn’t Sean’s biggest fan from the get-go, but clearly, he has a vendetta. The last place he needs to be is out there with him. “Mom’s picture is important,” I try, but I’ve already lost him.

He turns and places a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

Fine. I guess I'll do it. I pull and tug at the box, but can't free the canvas from it. I hate to play the one-hand card, but I legitimately can't do this alone.

Chapter 10

Sean

I'm about to the shop doors when a man comes walking out. I step to the side to let him pass, but he steps to the side as well and stops right in front of me with an imposing frown.

"Sean Bentley?"

"Yes."

"Might I have a word?"

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I grip the mallet in my hand. “Might I have a name?”

He smiles, albeit it looks somewhat forced. I get those kinds of smiles a lot. “Andrew Larsen. London’s dad.”

The confidence slips from my face.

“Do you remember me?” he asks.

“The smile’s throwing me.” I tilt my head to the side. “Can you yell at me instead?”

He only smiles broader. “I’m glad I don’t have to remind you what happens when you hurt my daughter.”

Everything in me wants to correct his not-so-subtle threat. Technically, he hurt his daughter.

“No reminders. Everything about that time is very clear,” I say, clenching my jaw so hard it ticks.

“Look.” He shoves a hand through his graying hair. “London doesn’t know about that.”

“Yeah, I’ve gathered.”

“I never told her. She never saw you at the house, either.”

I guess this is all adding up. I'd planned on talking to London today and asking her about the past. But I'm not about to throw her dad under the bus for my sake. What kind of man does that make me?

"I don't regret overstepping, but I do apologize for yelling at you. You were just a kid. But you know I have to protect her, right? She's my little girl." His voice drops. "I won't let you hurt her, or her business, more than you already have."

I shake off the uncomfortable feelings trying to claw into my chest. He's not the first parent who didn't approve of me; he won't be the last. I get what he's not saying. Yes, he overstepped all those years ago, but he will gladly do it again. Because he still thinks he knows me.

I won't prove him right this time.

"It's been nice chatting with you but I should get started on this." I finally slip around him, and he allows me to pass.

"Let me know when you need help getting that case in here," he says.

I only nod before going inside. He doesn't follow.

London is standing on a chair next to the wall, stretching her arms out in either direction. I smile at the duck stickers on her prosthetic arm. They weren't there yesterday.

"What are you doing?" I ask, a lightness finding me after the uncomfortable talk with her dad.

"Measuring." She stretches her arms out wider, and the motion pulls the hem of her shirt up, exposing a sliver of tan skin.

I stalk over to her, stopping a foot away. “Most people do that with this little thing.” I hold up a measuring tape.

She doesn’t even look down. “No thanks. I have an excellent eye.”

“Okay then, what are you measuring for?”

“A picture.” She plants her hands on her hips, but her eyes remain trained on the wall like she can see the exact measurement up there.

“Do you need help?” My voice comes out lower than expected.

She turns. Because she’s so short, my head is in line with her shoulders. “Bentley, don’t you know better than to ask a woman that?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “Sorry, superwoman.”

“I’m not superwoman.” She shoves my shoulder, and my hands jump up, completely unrestrained to catch her waist. “What are you doing?”

“I thought you were going to fall. And I was going to save you, of course.” Since her feet are still firmly planted on the chair, my reasons for holding her are kind of obsolete. My arms drop to my side.

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“I’m not going to fall off a chair and into a dashing man’s arms right under the mistletoe.”

I wiggle my brows. “You think I’m dashing?”

She rolls her eyes and steps down, without falling into my waiting arms. What a shame. I’m going to have to see about acquiring some mistletoe.

“Actually, you can you help me with thi—”

The door to the shop bangs and I jump in front of London, facing the intruder that’s...her dad?

“Dad!” London screeches. “What are you doing?”

“Just making sure the lock still works. I’d hate to let anyone unsavory in.” Her dad’s focus is on the door but his words are meant for me.

His threats are wasted. I may be reckless, and this time it might work in my favor. Now that I’ve found London, I’m not going anywhere.

Chapter 11

London

Mydadhasbeenstrangely quiet the whole time he helps me hang the picture of Mom. I’m sure he thinks something is going on between Sean and me. It isn’t. I would

know, right? It's just Sean being a flirt. It doesn't mean anything. Just like the casual glances I've been shooting his way while he replaces the case. I'm not checking out his strong shoulders as he heaves the old one out of place. And I definitely don't let my eyes wander in his direction when he lifts the hem of his shirt to rub the sweat from his brow and snag a glimpse of the six-pack he's got under there. I'm simply...admiring my surroundings.

"Is that level?" Dad asks.

I drag my attention away from Sean to the picture.

Dad steps down from the stool, and my mom's smiling face greets me. Instant tears flood my eyes. "It's perfect."

"Hey, no crying." Dad drapes an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into him. "This is a happy occasion."

I sniff. "These are happy tears."

We stand silently, admiring the photo of Mom.

Dad places a kiss on top of my head. "Well, I've gotta go take your grandma to Bingo, don't stay too late baking. Keep your phone next to you and text me when you leave."

"Dad..." I warn.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't love you." He squeezes my shoulder. How can I argue with that? He's protective because he loves me. Seems logical. Also, he should see a therapist.

Which is why I'm surprised that he's willing to leave me alone with Sean. They've barely said two words to each other, that I could witness. Their one and only conversation went something like this: "Need help?" "Nope." "Kay."

But it's Tuesday. And every Tuesday, my dad takes my grandma out for dinner then bingo. He's protective of her, too.

"I'll see you at home," he says before walking out the back.

The knowledge that I am indeed alone with Sean makes my pulse thrum at an unnatural pace. Not because I'm scared, but because I'm... I don't know what I am exactly. Not excited. Right? I haven't forgiven him for high school. Not that I'm holding onto the past like a child clings to a favorite toy. But the past is meant to be learned from. I won't let him break my heart again. Which means I'll have to keep him at arm's length.

Long arm or short arm length?

Stop tempting me brain.

I shake my head. I'll just get started on the pie for tomorrow while he finishes. I look at the picture one more time before I head into the kitchen, and do not, I repeat, do not glance over at Sean to see him wink at me.

It's too quiet in the shop. I can hear every grunt and growl Sean makes as he shoves the new case into place. He curses a couple of times when he slams his finger and I try not to laugh at every sound of frustration coming from him. Every so often I catch a glimpse of him through the serving window and my pulse skitters.

What is wrong with me? I don't have a thing for Sean. I would be reacting this way if any young, attractive man was in my bakery helping me out.

I'm just finishing up the pie filling when Sean steps into the kitchen.

“All done,” he says.

“Really?” I put the filling in the fridge and follow him out front.

“This is even better than the last one,” I say, running my hand along its glass top.

“I figured you needed a better one to hold all the orders you’re going to get.”

I roll my eyes. “If you haven’t noticed, I have leftovers every day.”

He seems to perk up at this. “Like what?”

“Come on,” I motion for him to sit at the bar. He showed up just after four and it’s nearly nine now. “You look hungry.”

“Starving.”

That one word sets my heart racing and I open the small freezer to cool myself down.

“She’s beautiful, your mom,” Sean says. “You look just like her.”

My hand hovers over the tray of ice cream cupcakes but can’t seem to grab any. My dad has told me so on many occasions, but it’s different coming from Sean. My pulse is on fire, reading into his compliments more than I should.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Thanks.” I grab the tray and pull the entire thing out.

“I noticed a sticker on her arm as well.”

He saw that? I busy myself by searching through the cupcakes for the best-looking one. “Yeah, she uh, started that tradition with me.”

“I like it.”

My heart is beating so loud I barely hear him. I place a cupcake I’ve deemed perfect in front of him then wipe my hands on my apron.

“How do you make all this stuff?” Sean says, studying my shop and me like we are part alien.

I lift a shoulder. “How do you make cabinets?”

“Cabinets are easy. These?” He picks up the ice cream cupcake and takes a bite. “Wait, is that ice cream?” He closes his eyes with a groan and takes another bite. I watch him, suddenly very hungry myself. I pick up one and pinch off a small bite, taking time to savor the flavors.

I cringe. “I put too much salt in the cupcake batter.”

His eyes pop open. “Absolutely not. These are heaven.” He grabs another one to prove it and bites half of it. Ice cream is smeared on the corner of his lips. I itch to wipe it away, but I keep my hand pressed to my side. “You could win one of those baking shows.”

This man and his ridiculous compliments. It's getting out of control. I need him to leave.

“Shouldn’t you be out chain-sawing something?”

His head rears back. “What?”

“I feel like you’re trying to turn my life into a Hallmark movie, and if I’m the baker then you must be the bearded mountain man.”

He rubs his chin thoughtfully. “I could grow my beard out.”

“Is that all you got out of that?”

“No, I got the part where you want to create a Hallmark romance with me. Personally, I don’t care for Hallmark, but I could get behind this story, especially because you think I’m a sexy lumberjack—”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Now I’m trying to figure out if a beard will improve my chances.”

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All signs point to yes, but I'm not about to offer him that kind of leverage. Teaching him to bake would mean spending more time together and... I'm not sure I can trust him. I'd rather save us both the heartache now.

"Goodnight, Sean."

He stands, retrieves his tools then pauses at the door, looking back at me. "You're not leaving?"

I shake my head.

"I don't like the idea of you being here alone at night."

Him and the other man in my life.

"And you assume I'd be safer with you here?"

His smile grows into something so tempting it makes my skin break out with goosebumps. Annoyance, that's all it is.

"I didn't say that at all."

His insinuations, whatever they may be, mixed with his deep voice are giving me heart palpitations.

I need to get rid of him. For good this time.

“Thank you for your help. I appreciate it.”

“Does that mean I’ve earned a kiss?” He pumps his brows.

“Don’t push it.” I pick up my rolling pin and wave it in the air.

He saunters backward slowly, his hands in the air.

“Just so you know, when you decide to kiss me, you’re safe with me.”

My face burns and I consider using the ice cream on top of the cupcakes to cool them. Nothing out of his mouth could be farther from the truth. No part of my heart would be safe with Sean.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” I scoff. I’m not planning on seeing him again after tonight. He fixed what he broke. His debt is paid. There is no reason for him to come to my bakery again. That’s what I thought last time, and a small part of me hopes I’m wrong once again.

Chapter 12

Sean

I’m nearly to the shop the next morning. I won’t say it never happens. But ever since my brother Michael became my boss, I’ve made a habit of annoying him with my lack of punctuality. I still get my work done. But a job is more fun if you can annoy your coworkers, right?

Perhaps that’s another area of my life I need to correct.

“Okay, who died?” Grant, my brother-in-law, says the second he sees me in the back

room. We usually keep our personal projects here, which is why it would be strange to see me an hour before work because I don't do personal stuff. Grant is always doing personal stuff. He made my nephew's crib, and dresser, a rocking chair for Lennox, and... I've lost track.

"No one," I grunt. "I just need to work on something."

He lifts a brow but doesn't provoke me. Anyone else would, except Grant. "Okay. What are you working on?"

"Have you made any desks?"

"Yep." He hits a board of wood on the work table. "I'm making one right now for your sister."

"Man, does she ever let you off that leash?"

He raises a single brow. "And who is your desk for?"

"Can't it be for me?"

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He doesn't respond. His silence is effective. Maybe because I hate silence.

"Fine. It's for a girl."

His grin grows but I continue, "I kind of broke some stuff in her shop so I'm trying to make it up to her."

"Better make it nice then," he says, instead of asking me a million questions about what I did wrong. "Grab one of those walnut boards and follow me."

"Hey, Michael, I'm taking off early. I got the Hardy job finished and loaded in the truck. Grant's ready to take it tomorrow."

Michael looks up from the small desk that sits just off the shop we use to input jobs.

"You're leaving early again? That's the third time this week."

"And?"

"It's Wednesday." He deadpans. "Where are you going?"

I rub my stomach. "I have a hankering for a donut."

He arches in his seat and his back pops so loud I can hear it even with the table saw going. The dude's getting old.

“Does this have to do with that girl whose shop you broke into?” he asks.

I scoff, “I did not break into her shop. I broke apart of her shop. Big difference.”

“Does she even like you?”

Ouch. I don’t think Michael intended for the question to hit so hard, but for some reason it does. I’ve dated lots of girls. But none of them were serious, and I think my family knew that before I did. Or I knew but didn’t care. What Michael is really asking is ‘Is she too good for you?’

“I don’t know,” I say honestly.

He folds his arms and engages in a stare-down. I’m not twelve anymore, I won’t fall for—agh, I blinked.

He snickers. “Maybe try harder then.”

That’s the plan. “Oh, do you mind if I raid the odd handle drawer?”

“Go for it,” he waves me away.

I find the ten least atrocious handles and head out with my tool bag.

When I make it to the bakery, I don’t see London anywhere. That’s okay; she would only try to stop me, and I’m a man on a mission.

I say hi to the new girl working the register who introduces herself as Cassie. Then head deeper into the bakery.

“You can’t be back here.” There’s a man in the kitchen. One I’m not familiar with.

And he's a giant.

I stop, extending a hand and a smile. "Hey, I'm Sean."

"You can't be back here," he repeats.

Okay then. "I'm fixing the cabinets." I pat my tool belt then point to the cabinet whose door is halfway off.

He looks at the broken door then at me. "Then fix it."

I kneel by the cabinet and study the hinges. I should replace the whole thing, but I can't today. A simple fix will have to do. I pull out a jar of sugar. Or is it salt?

“Don’t move anything,” the man says.

“Okay.” I replace the jar. He doesn’t like me.

“What’s your name?” I ask him while grabbing tools from my belt.

There’s nothing but the sound of him kneading dough for a full minute. “Grady.”

“Do you like working for London?” I should probably determine if I have competition with him. Though if my humble opinion accounts for anything, he’s way too tall for her. They would be unevenly matched.

“Yes,” he says simply.

“A man of few words,” I say, mostly to myself. But judging by the loudening thud of the dough hitting the table over and over, he heard me as well and didn’t appreciate it.

“Grady? Are you okay?” London’s voice enters the kitchen, a light bright voice to match the aesthetic of the bakery.

“There’s a man on the ground.”

“What?” London shrieks.

Way to sell me out, buddy.

She rounds the table that was keeping me from her view, and I greet her with a smile.

“Hey, beautiful.”

“What are you doing here? Again?”

I hold up the door I just removed. “Fixing the cabinet.”

She puts her hand on her hip and aims her prosthetic at me. “I have told you to leave multiple times.”

“Should I call the cops?” Grady asks.

“No,” both London and I say. “He’s not that kind of nuisance.” London turns and strides out of the kitchen.

I stand and follow her. “What kind of nuisance am I?”

She stops in her office and turns. “The worst kind.”

“Which is?” my brow furrows.

She huffs out a breath. A lock of dark hair billows above her eye. I want to brush it away but she beats me to it.

“The kind I can’t figure out. Troublesome teenagers want attention, but you’ve already paid your dues. Why are you still here?”

I step closer. “Isn’t it obvious? I still want your attention.”

Her dark eyes meet mine like she’s trying to read my sincerity. “No.”

I frown. “No? I didn’t ask a yes or no question.”

“I mean... why?” Her gaze darts between my eyes. “Why would you want my attention?”

That shouldn’t be too complicated to answer. “I like you London.”

“No.”

I shake my head. “Is that your word of the day or something?”

“Sorry if I hesitate to believe that the man who dated the entire female population in high school is genuine right now.”

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Ouch. I guess I haven't done much to prove I'm not that man. I never want to be that man again.

"How do I get you to leave?" she asks.

"That depends." I lean against the doorway and cross my arms to prevent myself from dragging her into me, which is all I can think about with her this close, smelling like cookies. "Do you really want me to leave?"

Her eyes drop down to my chest then back up. "Of course I do."

"Go on a date with me? Let me erase my past mistakes by making it up to you."

"No."

I'm getting awfully sick of that word. I push away from the wall. "Okay, I'll just keep being your personal handyman then. Today, tomorrow, the next day. Every day until you decide to go out with me, I'll be here."

"That's, like, backward coercion."

"I know. You get all the good stuff. And I just do whatever you want."

"Sean," she groans, but until she says the words I'm looking for, she's stuck with me. I'll have to work slower. Eventually I'll run out of things to fix around here and won't have a reason to keep coming back. "You'll get tired of it," she says.

That's where she's wrong. This isn't a game to me. Sunny isn't a game to me. In high school, I gave up too quickly. I believed what her dad said and I didn't fight for her. I won't be making that mistake again. This time, I'm staying.

"No, I won't."

"Want to bet?"

I blink, stunned for a moment. Then my lips curl. A bet? She's speaking my love language.

"No, wait. That's not what I meant," London says, waving her arms in front of her. "It's a phrase, I wasn't being serious."

I drop my chin and step closer. "I take bets very seriously. And I agree, we should make a bet on who gives in first."

She jerks back. "Wha-no! I'm not making a bet with you about...this."

I take the step she placed between us. "Scared you'll lose?"

She stomps a foot and folds her arms. "Fine. You're on. Once you get bored here I'll never have to see you again." She tries to step through the doorway but I place my hand on the wall in front of her and she freezes. Her skin brushes mine.

"I should warn you, I don't often lose. And when I win, I'll let you kiss me."

"I'm not kissing you," she splutters and it's adorable to watch her stumble over the words.

"That's what you say now." I step closer, just enough to test the chemistry between

us. I'm not imagining the way she catches her breath or the faint pink that touches her cheeks. "We can make another bet on it."

Now the red in her cheeks is fury. "Agh!" She pushes past me and I drop my arm, watching her go. I've never been so determined to win a bet in my life.

Chapter 13

London

Initiated a bet with Sean Bentley. What kind of stupid person does that? I should have just agreed to go on a date with him. I'm still kicking myself for that one because it's possible I was a tad over-optimistic about how long I could hold out and allow him to fix my shop for free. It's been a week and he hasn't given up yet.

He shows up every day like clockwork five minutes before I can close my shop door and lock him out. He saunters in with an easy grin on his face and his tool belt around his waist looking like the lumberjack in my very recent dreams. And each time, like clockwork, my heart skips a beat. Which is a complete betrayal. But the worst part of it all is the carvings. Not because they are awful, which to be clear, they are, but because each one tugs at my heart in a way only Sean could. Each cabinet he works on ends up with a new carving. Sometimes on the back of the door or hidden on the top of the cabinet. I noticed the first one five days ago: a duck hiding below the silverware. A daisy in my sugar cabinet. A donut on the edge of a door. Each of his carvings corresponded with the sticker I put on my prosthetic the day before.

So I stopped wearing stickers.

The next day there was a sun. The circle was awful, but I couldn't help loving it anyway. Yesterday he left a bouquet of the most gorgeous pink and yellow flowers in the middle of my worktop and when I picked it up, I found the tiniest heart engraving

with “S + L” inside it.

My heart can't handle any more of that, so today I've got a new sticker in place. A little red devil I've been saving for the perfect opportunity. Let's see him carve that.

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I glance at the time. Ten minutes until closing. My pulse quickens. Every day my heart plays this weird game where it can't decide if it wants Sean to show up, or if it wants to be right.

Grady leaves and I wave him off, he likes to be gone before Sean comes. I can't blame him.

Something dings and my heart takes off in my chest before I realize it's only my phone and my dad with his hourly check-in. I type in a quick response telling him I'll lock up early tonight in hopes he won't make an unwanted stop in. So far he and Sean haven't crossed paths again, but that luck is bound to run out soon.

My phone rings and I roll my eyes, expecting to see my dad calling to double-check what time I'll be home, but it's Monica.

"Hey," I say, swiping open the FaceTime call and propping my phone up on the work table in front of me.

"Have you won yet?" she asks immediately, and again I wonder why I even told her about the dumb bet.

Four minutes. He's late. "I just might." My stomach feels uneasy, but this is a good thing, right?

"Dang. I was rooting for him." She takes off her blue light glasses and cleans them on her sleeve.

“I thought you were on my team.”

“I am. And part of being on your team is recognizing what could be good for you.”

“And you think that’s Sean?” I scoff.

“There’s very little an attractive man cannot fix.”

“You’re telling me.” I look around my nearly updated kitchen while rolling out dough. I figure I owe Sean at least a couple hundred dollars for the labor, a couple more for the new parts, and a...couple thousand for the number of times I’ve checked him out while he works. He’s got the kind of corded forearm muscles that only a man who works a physical job can acquire. And he’s got a small tattoo on his bicep that I’ve caught a glimpse of, but not the full thing.

“Maybe...you should let him fix your dating life now,” Monica interrupts my thoughts.

“Monica!”

“Girl you’ve been glued to that shop since you signed the lease on it.”

I open my mouth to protest but she cuts me off. “Which is not a bad thing. But since I’m not there to remind you to take a break now and then and have fun, who better than a man with a hot bod and zero inhibitions.”

“Agreed.”

I jump at the voice that did not come from my phone and fling a glob of dough at my chest. It tumbles down the gap in my apron as my body turns to fire, the debilitating kind that’s destroying me torturously slow. The fire only burns hotter I see the

electric look in his eyes.

“She’s got a point,” Sean grins. “On both accounts.”

“Is that him?” Monica asks. I forgot she was on the phone and while I’m diving for the dough in my apron Sean scoops up my phone and angles it at his face.

“Hey Monica, how are you?”

“Sean! Long time no see.”

“We’ll have to remedy that after I steal London away for some fun,” Sean says.

Forget about the dough. I lunge for my phone but he rounds the opposite side of the island.

“You have my permission to take her away from all the baking she thinks she needs to do.”

Sean’s eyes fly to mine, mischief in those hazel irises. “Do I have permission to use force?”

“Yes.”

“Excuse me! I can hear you.” I chase after Sean but he’s quicker and keeps the island forever between us.

“So kidnapping is on the table?” Sean stops. And I register the moment he shifts from prey to predator. My heart picks up speed as he walks toward me. Now I’m the one running away.

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“No way!” I grab my trusty rolling pin, brandishing it in front of me. “Stay back.”

I’m not sure if Monica is still on the phone or not, all I can focus on is Sean’s devastating grin. “I think kidnapping will work this time.”

“This time?” I squeak. “Do you make a habit of kidnapping people?”

“Only once. But I think I’ve worked out the kinks.”

I’ve lost the side of the island I was using as a guide and my back hits the fridge. Sean plants a hand on both sides of me, trapping me against the cool stainless steel. There’s an excited gleam in his eyes, one I’m not cut out for. One I don’t stand a chance against.

“What will it be Sunny? Are you coming willingly, or am I taking you captive?” His voice is low, piercing me to my core.

I’m one second from fainting into his very strong arms. When he calls me Sunny, I want to go anywhere with him.

But I remember myself and force away the nerves. Monica is right, I do need a break. And I suppose it wouldn’t hurt anything if I just took a couple of hours off. I’m not doing this for him, I’m doing it for me. “It doesn’t count as a date,” I say quickly.

“Of course not,” he murmurs.

“I’ll give you two hours.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Make it three!” Monica says from the phone still in his hand and we both jump. I take my phone and tell her goodbye before turning back to Sean.

“Uh, Sunny?”

I swallow down all the emotions that nickname drudges up. I love it and hate it coming off his lips.

“Yeah?”

“You should probably get the dough out of there.” His eyes dart down then quickly back up.

Dough? Oh...I look down to see that the glob of dough has made itself a home right above the apron tie on my waist and I look approximately three months pregnant. My skin becomes a roaring fire.

“If your dad sees you like that I might not live to see another day,” he smirks.

“I regret this already.”

Chapter 14

Sean

I thought I liked my truck when I bought it at seventeen. But I’ve never loved it as much as I do right now, with London in the passenger seat, her hair down, her eyes drifting closed as I drive through the city.

I didn't have a plan for anything tonight. But this might be the only non-date date I get with this woman, I intend to make it count.

Her phone rings and she jumps, the contentment flying off her face.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end is deep. If I had to guess, I'd say it's her dad.

"You're at my shop? Sorry. I should have told you, I went out with uh..." She glances over at me. "A friend."

I flick a brow up.

"I'm fine. I'll be back later," she says after a moment. "Yes, I'll be home by nine," she says, quieter this time. "I will. Okay. Bye." She puts her phone away and looks out the window.

"Your dad?" I ask.

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“Always.” She plays with her prosthetic then must decide she’s sick of wearing it because she unhooks it and drops it on the middle console and rubs her arm.

“He loves you.”

“Yeah,” she nods. “A bit too much sometimes.”

“That’s not possible.”

“He blames himself for what happened to my mom,” she says so quietly I think I’ve misheard her. She chews on her bottom lip, clearly unsure if she wants to say anything more. But then she continues. “My mom hadn’t been feeling well that day and asked my dad to stop at the store on his way home from work. He was exhausted and forgot, so my mom went instead. But she never came back.”

I squeeze the steering wheel. My heart physically aches for her. Of all the things I wish I could fix, that one is at the top of the list.

“I know he’s only afraid of losing me like he lost mom, but he can’t protect me forever. Some mistakes I’ve got to make myself.”

It feels like she’s talking more to herself than me at this point. “What mistakes do you want to make?”

“Preferably none.”

“Let me rephrase that. What mistakes would you like to make tonight?”

She finally looks over at me and her eyes widen at the grin on my face. “Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is no.”

“You don’t even know what I’m thinking.” I don’t even know what I’m thinking.

“I’m not driving the principal’s car onto the football field or hoisting the wrestlers’ onesies up the flagpole.”

I throw my head back, laughing. “For the record, the onesies weren’t me, but I don’t regret the car on the football field. Mrs. Beatty had a Tesla, I practically flew there.”

She snorts.

“Let’s make a mistake tonight.” I purse my lips. “Skinny dipping or skydiving?”

She snorts. “Neither.”

“Do you want to drive a fast car?”

“What kinds of options are these?”

She’s right, those are old Sean’s idea of fun. New Sean has a much better idea.

The outdoor ice rink is crowded with dozens of people already skating beneath candy cane archways and around a Christmas tree the size of a two-story building.

“What are you going to make me do? Bungee jump off that skywalk up there?” London asks, already shivering in the spare coat I found in my truck. It practically touches her knees, but she couldn’t be more gorgeous in it.

I look at the skywalk in question. That could be fun. But...“No.”

“Set me up as a goalie and shoot pucks at me?”

It seems I’ve got a ways to go to prove myself. “We are here to skate.”

“For real?” Her brows furrow. “When you were talking about making mistakes I pictured something a little more dangerous?”

“Ice skating is plenty dangerous,” I chuckle. “But believe it or not, I don’t always crash through bakery windows and pull stupid stunts that land me in trouble.”

“So we’re just skating?” she asks again, her body relaxing as she releases the death grip she had on her arm.

“Yes. Unless you’d like to bungee jump off that skywalk. I think they’d kick us out but it would be worth it.”

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I pull the beanie out of my pocket and slip it onto her head. Her breath catches as I spend an extra moment tucking the stray hair out of her face.

Her lips part and she blinks up at me, her eyelashes fluttering adorably. “I’ll pass.”

“Next time then,” I grin, brushing my thumb over her cheek one last time.

The guy in front of us calls us up to pay. I get her shoe size: tiny, and mine: way too big for my body. We locate the only available bench and switch shoes. I’m tempted to ask London if she needs help, but I learned long ago that she doesn’t need it. If she needs it, she’ll ask. And if I respect her, I’ll wait for her to do so.

She gets the last buckle done up and I stand, holding a hand to her. The hand may be more for me than for her, I’m not very good at ice skating.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” she says, placing her hand in mine and pulling herself up. She wobbles slightly, which causes me to wobble even more. Why didn’t I pick something I’m good at?

We trek up the rubber mats. I stop under an archway to twist out my sore ankle and grab onto it, studying each light and decoration above us.

“Are you looking for Santa up there?” London asks. “I don’t think he’s coming for fifteen more days.”

I lift a brow. “Someone’s excited. Care to tell me what you’re asking for this year?”

Her cheeks flush pink. “I just want a successful opening.”

She’s already successful. I hope she knows that. I’m in complete awe of her watching her do what she loves every day. Each person who comes into her bakery leaves with a smile.

“And here I was hoping it was a kiss.” I lean closer to her and point straight up. “Does that look like mistletoe to you?”

She snorts. “Nice try buddy, that’s a green ornament.”

I frown as she starts walking again. “Then I’ve got a complaint to take up with Hallmark because apparently, that stuff doesn’t magically appear.”

She laughs and it’s the sound of my dreams. “I thought you didn’t like Hallmark.”

“That was before you. I’m all in now.” I shoot her a wink.

She laughs again and steps up onto the ice, letting go of me. This proves to be a very good idea because the second I step through, a little speed skater swipes by, knocking my legs out from under me. I hit the ice with a hard thump. There’s a faint shot of pain from the fresh scar on my back.

London’s contagious and unbothered laugh is the only thing making it worth it.

“Having fun?” She beams down at me.

“Always.” I sit up and grab onto the wall, but the second my feet get under me, they slip out once more. “That bungee jumping idea is sounding better all the time,” I

grunt.

London chuckles and reaches out to me. “Come on. It’s good to try things you aren’t good at.”

“Says who?” I breathe when I finally make it upright.

“Do you think you can make it around?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’ll just stick by the wall for a lap, get my legs right.”

“You do that.” She drops my hand and skates away, like a freaking pro. When she makes it to an open space, she does a little spin, then continues around the loop while I just stand there, gripping the wall like a child and gaping at her. She comes to a stop by me, cutting the ice with her blades.

“You can skate,” I say dumbly.

She grins. “I used to figure skate until...” Her voice and smile both disappear into the night.

“Until your mom passed?” I ask quietly. “Have you skated since?”

Her brows furrow. “No. I haven’t. It felt...great.”

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I purse my lips. “Would you go so far as to say it was fun?”

“Yes, okay, it was fun.” She rolls her eyes.

“Well don't let me hold you back. Go do your tricks, I'll catch up to you soon,” I say.

She's gone before the words are out of my mouth. I focus on my feet instead of her this time. By my fourth lap around, I'm off the wall and moving as fast as everyone else. I also keep an eye peeled for some of that darn mistletoe. Is there a national shortage?

“Hey.” London skates up next to me. “You're doing better.”

“I think I'm ready to try those spin things now.” The second the words are out of my mouth I wobble. I use every ounce of muscle in my body to keep myself, and my ego, upright.

She raises a brow. “Really? What about...” she maneuvers in front of me and skates backward.

Show off.

“A race?”

My adrenalin spikes and I nearly trip over nothing. “What does the winner get?”

She flips her hair over her shoulder. “Whatever they want.”

I know what I want, but what does she want? Does she want me to stop coming over, stop fixing things, stop butting into her life? I have no choice but to win.

“Deal.”

We decide on one lap around the rink, the finish line being the blow-up Santa outside the rink wall. London graciously offers to take the outer side. The people are the obstacles. The goal, for me, is her. My skin buzzes.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Go!” she shouts and speeds off. It takes me to the first curve to catch up to her and only because she is slowed down by a small child. She sees me gaining on her and giggles as she dodges around the kid and away from me. She’s fast, but I have something she doesn’t. Reckless stupidity. I push my skates faster, my shins screaming with each stride, but the look on her face when I pass her around the next curve is worth it.

“Keep up, Sunny,” I taunt, zooming up the last straight.

I dodge around an older couple and in and out of families all while pumping my arms like a fool. I’m closing in on the Santa. I still have no idea how to stop so I consider my options. Fall onto my face or catch myself on the wall? Wall it is.

Ten feet.

Five.

One.

I reach for the wall and...smash another person into the wooden panel.

We go down, heads smacking ice, knees smacking...places. I groan and crack open my eyes.

“Why did you do that?” London screeches above me.

She’s the one who just broke me. Cool.

“I can’t believe you body-slammed me to win,” she fumes. But I can’t protest because I can’t find the air to breathe.

“I-ugh,” I try.

“Sean?” She stops her rant long enough to look at me. “What’s wrong?”

“No babies,” I wheeze, finally managing to drag in a breath.

Her brows furrow. “What?”

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“You killed my manhood,” I say, the edges of the pain slowly dulling.

Her eyes widen in alarm. “I’m so sorry,” she says, before bursting out into a fit of laughter.

“It’s not funny,” I grunt. But at this moment, I couldn’t care less. I’m holding London, she’s laughing, all is right in the world. Maybe not for my future as a parent, but for now it's all good.

“I’m sorry, it’s not.” She shakes her head. “But you mentioned making mistakes and I uh—”

I lift a hand to her cheek and her words die off. “Care to make another mistake?” I whisper, our faces inches apart. My thumb brushes her bottom lip.

“I... uh...” Her eyelids seem to be struggling to stay open.

“I think I won the race,” I murmur, tracing another slow stroke along her bottom lip.

“Did you?” She blinks rapidly, her eyes darting between my lips and eyes.

“And I think you know what I want.” My breath mingles with hers against the icy chill. The sounds of laughter and jingle bells fade away until there’s only her.

“Excuse me. You guys are being reckless on the ice and you need to leave.”

And that person apparently.

London clears her throat and gently pushes off of me. I stand, then hold a hand out to her.

“I’m sorry,” I address the woman. “It was my fault. I thought I could beat her, but I should have known not to challenge a beautiful woman like that.”

London looks between us.

“You still need to leave,” the woman says, unimpressed.

“We are,” London says, already skating away from me with the speed of someone embarrassed.

I catch up to her near the hot chocolate truck. I purchase one for both of us before approaching her.

“I’m sorry,” I say, extending the peace offering.

She leans against the half wall, holding the cocoa near her face. “No, it was my idea. I can’t believe I got us kicked out.”

“Well you did it, you made a mistake.”

“That I did.” She shakes her head, the twinkling lights around the rink dancing in her eyes.

“So about my win...”

She turns. “But did you really win? Because technically you slammed me into the wall first.”

“But I was in line with the Santa first because I was coming in from an angle,” I say, using my hands to demonstrate my knowledge of physics and uh...angles? It’s limited, okay?

She sips the hot chocolate. “Fine. What do you want?”

“A date with you. Tomorrow.”

She chews her bottom lip. “Sean I—” Her phone dings and she pulls it out. Her eyes lose some of their glow when she sees who it’s from and she puts it away with a resolute frown.

“Fine. One date. But I’m not kissing you.”

One win at a time.

Chapter 15

London

“I have nothing to wear.” I flop onto my bed with a groan. Then cover my mouth before my dad comes running upstairs to ‘help’ me with something. The last time he busted through that door, I couldn’t get my bra clasped, and let’s just say, we were both traumatized.

I need to move out and get my own place, but every last dime in my bank account is going toward the loan on my bakery, and the other necessities. Like bras that don’t have hooks.

“Nothing? You have to have something.” Monica speaks up over the phone.

“I really don’t.” I switch the camera and face my phone at my closet like she’ll be able to tell from the limited view what options are available.

“Hmm. What about that pink thing?”

“No pockets.”

“Is that your prom dress in the corner?” she asks.

I never could get rid of it. “I’m not wearing that if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“What about the baby blue top and your white jeans?”

I put the phone down to retrieve the top.

“Maybe. Ugh, why am I doing this?”

“Because you had fun last night and you want to do it again,” she says.

I did have fun. That was the problem. I didn’t want to get my heart involved in this, in Sean again, but somehow it already is. So I agreed to the date, to put these feelings to rest once and for all. One date was all he asked for, all I promised. After that, I’ll be free of him.

So why does that thought make my chest ache?

“He didn’t even tell me what we are doing,” I say.

“Maybe he’s taking you to fill the principal’s office with chicks. That was a classic.”

It had been. The student body had had a field day with that little stunt. Until one got run over in the employee parking lot. Then the entire senior class skipped the last period to hold a chick funeral. Sean had officiated of course, and had everyone in tears with his ridiculous speech. By the end of it, we all felt like we knew that poor little chick.

“But I doubt he still has Principal Beatty’s keys,” she assures me.

I truly wouldn’t put anything past Sean.

“For real though, he didn’t tell you anything?”

“Nada.” I pull off my clothes and slip into the new outfit. The shirt has short sleeves, so I don’t have to worry about adjusting the left sleeve. “I don’t even have his number.” How is he supposed to pick me up? He told me five. He didn’t ask any follow-up questions and neither did I. I thought he’d forget, and now, I’m pretty sure

he has because he doesn't know where I live. This all feels very familiar.

My throat constricts. That's it. It's all a prank. Again. "He was probably just joking."

Nerves flutter in my chest, and I adjust the top. I've been nervous, anxious, and excited, the complete rollercoaster of mixed emotions for the last day. But now it's all winding down into a giant ball of unease in my stomach.

"I don't believe that for a second," Monica says.

"Why? It's Sean, history has proved he likes to ditch me." Maybe that's what hurt the most back then. Before the dance he made a point to say hi to me in the halls and talk to me in the one class we shared. But after, he barely even glanced in my direction, and I swear he purposely flirted with other girls in front of me.

I couldn't look at him either. It hurt too much. I take a deep breath; this isn't high school. If Sean doesn't show up, then good riddance. Right?

"Besides, Sean and I are complete opposites. It would never work out." I place the phone on the bathroom counter while I finish my makeup.

"You know," Monica picks up one of the books she always seems to have near and fans her face. "There's this widely known romance trope known as opposites attract. It seems like it could be legit."

I roll my eyes. "You know what I mean."

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“Yeah, what you mean is, why would Sean go for me? And I’m going to stop you right there, sister, because the better question is why wouldn’t he go for you? You’re a boss babe and killer baker, the kindest human being alive and not to mention drop-dead gorgeous.”

I laugh. “You’re like a little mood booster.”

“Don’t pretend that’s not why you called me thirty minutes before your first official date with the man you’ve been hung up on since high school.”

She’s right, I needed her confidence but— “I am not hung up on Sean. I got over him in high school and haven’t thought of him since.” Well, until two weeks ago, and now my thoughts are on little else than the mystery that is Sean Bentley.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you want me to claim ignorance? I thought we were best friends who didn’t lie to one another.”

I accidentally peg my eyebrow with my eyeliner. “I am not lying to you.”

“Then you’re lying to yourself. You claimed you were over him after the dance debacle, but you never stopped pining after him.”

“Psh. I did not pine. I don’t even know how to pine.”

“You’ve never been this nervous for a date before,” she continues like she didn’t even hear me. “And I know because you’ve called me before each one.”

“Maybe I call you too much.”

“No that’s not the problem. I think seeing him again has opened up a well of unresolved conflict within you and though you claim to hate him, he’s already weaseled his way into your heart again. Why else do you let him come to your bakery every day?” she asks.

“I don’t lethem. It’s Sean. He does what he wants.”

“True. But Sean’s never been stupid. If he knew he didn’t have a chance with you, he would have stopped coming. So what excuse do you have for agreeing to go on a date with him?”

I didn’t tell her that I had been the one to initiate yet another bet with Sean. It won’t help my case.

“I’m only trying to prevent further catastrophe by heading things off now before he can wreck them.” Like my heart.

“And how’s that working for you?”

“I’m afraid it all ends in catastrophe.” I hold the end of the mascara tube in my mouth and start on my lashes.

“It doesn’t have to,” she says. “You know... he pined after you, too.”

I exhale and the mascara tube flies out of my mouth and straight into the mirror.

“What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t think much of it at the time, adolescence and all that. But I had a study break

with him. At least once a week he asked about you. Especially after the dance.”

What? Why had she never told me that before? She keeps talking before I can ask.

“I thought he felt bad for the whole thing and wanted to make sure you were doing okay. But thinking about it now, what teenage boy consistently checks in on a girl he’s not pining after?”

Her words confuse everything I thought I knew about Sean, and I’m not sure I like it. But I also don’t hate it. “He was just being nice.” He always had a girlfriend, or two. A specific incident comes to mind when both Shanna Taylor and Brittany Hunte from the volleyball team thought they were dating him. Those two caused the uproar of the year. But then they turned their revenge on Sean, who good-naturedly played it all off like it was a joke when his basketball shorts were dyed pink.

Good grief. Am I really going on a date with the man who left a trail of broken hearts behind him in high school?

As much as I want to believe he’s still that same kid, last night-the last week really-have proved how wrong I’ve been.

I cared for him once before, but there’s more to him than meets the eye. Which is the problem. Because I’m bound to fall for him all over again if he keeps this up.

“Don’t worry, it’s going to be fine,” Monica says.

I’m not so sure.

Chapter 16

Sean

As I walk up to London's front door, I'm reminded very vividly of the last time I was here. There's the rose bush I stepped in and the little fence I jumped over when I was run off by a very angry Mr. Larsen. Glad to see both survived.

I step onto the porch with a satisfied grin. I've already made it farther than last time.

I reach for the video doorbell, then stop and wipe my sweaty hands on my pants. This is my second chance with the girl I fell for nearly eight years ago, and if I botch it, I'm not sure if I'll be granted a third.

I poke the doorbell, then wait.

Two heavy footsteps pound through the house, and I swallow. Confidence.

London's dad pulls open the door and looks at me. We are the same height now, but I still feel intimidated. Did London tell her dad she was going on a date with me?

"Hello, Andrew." My smile stretches across my face.

"Sean," he nods once. Then he shuts the door in my face.

He didn't yell and chase me off. I suppose this is progress.

"I'll just wait out here, then!" I holler. I stuff my hands in my pockets, pacing around the small porch until I hear voices inside the house. I stop at the door and lean in just

a touch.

“Did you slam the door on him?”

“Of course not. He wanted to wait outside.”

“I’m sure he did. And why are you holding a butcher knife?”

“It was dull, and I was sharpening it.”

“By the front door? Dad, seriously...”

“What? It’s not my fault he got scared by a little knife.”

Psh, I’m not scared of his tiny kni—

The door opens, and I jerk upright. They both stare at me, giving me identical versions of a raised brow. I don’t think my act fooled them. I’m about to explain my behavior when I notice London. Like really notice her. I’ve only seen her recently in her cute bakery t-shirt, jeans, and apron. Which is completely beautiful by the way; she could turn flour-dusted aprons into the next thing in fashion.

But her light blue top hugs her curves, the V of the collar hitting the middle of her chest, and those white skinny jeans are defining her legs in a much too appealing way. Do bakers do squats in the kitchen?

A throat clears, and I jerk my eyes up and away from London's legs.

My ears burn and I laugh awkwardly. “I think I’m going to have to ask you to change young lady. You can’t leave the house like that.”

Silence. Glares.

Silent glares.

What is wrong with me?

“She is perfectly covered. Perhaps you should evaluate your own intentions,” her dad snaps.

Shoot. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I... ” I scratch my neck and look up at London. “I just meant you look beautiful, London. Way too beautiful to be going out with me.”

“Agreed,” her dad says and starts to close the door again.

I don’t blame him. I’m screwing this up big time. I feel like a sixteen-year-old picking up a date for the first time in his brand-new used car just praying it takes him where he wants it to.

“Dad,” London stops the door. “I’ll be home in a little while.” She reaches up on her toes and presses a kiss to her dad’s cheek.

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Then she walks out onto the porch and right past me.

“Hey.” I chase her down the sidewalk. “I really am sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve never said something so stupid to a date before.”

Her lips curl in the corners. “I believe you.”

I open the truck door for her, and she climbs in. I round the truck, my eyes meeting her father’s one more time. He still doesn’t like me. That’s okay. I can change his opinion of me. But first I have to change London’s.

“A tree farm? You’re really invested in this Hallmark scenario, aren’t you?” London asks when I turn down the lane for the “Ivy Forest.”

I shoot her a grin. “I have it on good authority they hang plenty of mistletoe around these places.”

She taps her chin. “You’re thinking of pinecones.”

I chuckle. I want to lean across the console and hold her hand, but her little arm is the one available to me, and for some reason, I’m scared to cross that threshold. Not because it’s weird. The exact opposite. Her little arm is special, and I want her to know I respect her and won’t do anything she’s not comfortable with.

“So are we picking out a tree?” she asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

I rub my jaw. “Yes...” Crap, is this a stupid idea? “Unless you don’t want to?” Why am I doubting everything when it comes to this date? I’ve been nervous all day. I’m never nervous. Not even when I went skydiving for my eighteenth birthday.

She bites her bottom lip, contemplating. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I’m just... surprised. But it’s probably a good idea we are going somewhere where you will remain vertical.”

“I would have remained vertical if you hadn’t intercepted my landing.”

“How was I supposed to know you were planning a suicide mission?” she laughs.

I love her playfulness. Her teasing. She’s the same girl I remember in high school, time has only made her more beautiful, more gracious, more incredible.

“I like your laugh.”

She swallows and stares straight ahead as I pull into a spot.

Her eyes are wide and worried. Do I worry her? Was it too soon for a first date? She still doesn’t trust me. And I can’t say I blame her. But I’m not giving up yet. Not unless she chases me away with a witch coven.

I hop out of the truck to go to her side. She lets me open the door and waits for me to lead the way.

Lights dangle over the entrance and Christmas music filters from the barn a hundred yards away. The whole scene is very romantic, so where’s the mistletoe?

“Stop looking. There’s not any up there,” London says.

I arch a brow, a grin taking over my face. “You checked already?”

Her cheeks turn bright pink. “Yes. So I can avoid it.”

“Is that the lie you’re telling yourself?” I look up one last time. This would be the perfect place for the little sprig of that stuff. “Wait that might be—”

I look down at her...but she’s not there.

“London?” I call into the endless rows of trees.

I would be offended if this didn’t feel like her flirting. Lucky for her, it’s my favorite kind.

I walk perpendicular to the aisles so I can see down each one. On the third row, I catch a glimpse of blue before it disappears down a different aisle. I take off in that direction, slowing down when I reach the spot. Another flash of blue two rows away. I sneak through the trees, catching a glimpse of her white pants. Phew. I’d hate to scoop up a stranger instead.

I weave in and out of the trees, following her at a safe distance. Finally, she stops and looks around with a smile on her face. She thinks she’s lost me.

She turns in each direction and I match her movements, inching closer to her.

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Her back is to me now. I step between the two trees and grab her.

“Ahhh!” she screams, flinging her arms in the air. She socks me in the nose with her little arm. It startles me. But it seems to set off a chain reaction in her because her fist follows on the heels of her last hit and she lands a knockout to my nose.

I drop my hold on her and bend over, clutching my nose.

“Sean! Why did you scare me like that!”

“I was trying to be romantic.”

“Well, it came across as psychotic!”

Her defense mechanism was more maniac than my approach was.

I stand up rubbing the bridge of my nose.

“Uh, Sean.”

I look at her wide eyes and pale face.

“What?” I step toward her, but she backs away.

“Blood,” she manages before she faints right into a tree. The tree stops her fall long enough for me to catch her, but I can’t save the tipping tree with her limp body in my arms while I bleed.

Again.

We are going to have to talk about how we keep ending up in these situations.

Chapter 17

London

My head feels heavy and something is digging into my back. I'm on the world's most uncomfortable chair and there's Christmas music blaring through my brain.

What's happening?

I crack one eye open but the image it brings me is confusing. The room I'm in is nothing but wood beams, a toilet, and a man with his back to me.

I swallow. That's not any man. That's Sean. Why am I in the bathroom with him? Why is there a chair in the bathroom to begin with?

I'm about to ask all these questions when Sean pulls the hem of his shirt up and over his head. My brain turns to mush. I'm not capable of anything except cataloging the corded muscles on his back and the way they wrap around his shoulders, bunching and flexing as he moves.

The fresh scar to the left of his spine snags my attention and suddenly I have feeling in my legs again. What's possessing them to move though is beyond me. They don't stop until I'm an inch from him, running my fingertips over the purple skin.

Sean freezes, his muscles flexed, waiting.

"Sean," I whisper. "This is awful."

“Really?” He lets out a ragged breath. “I thought it made me look more rugged.”

“That must have hurt so bad.”

He turns, slow enough my hand grazes along his skin as he does, over his side, landing at the top of his abs where he captures it in his fingers. “I love that scar.”

My brows furrow.

“That was the day I found you again.”

His words are full of so much meaning it hurts. He’s made it overly clear how much he cares for me, but will it last? Or will his feelings fade just as mine grow and he leaves me utterly debilitated?

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I slip my hand away from his warm skin and put some necessary distance between us. “Next time you’d like a woman’s attention, I’d suggest something less dramatic.”

He smiles, but there’s a cautiousness in his eyes.

“Want to explain our current circumstances?” I motion to the toilet in the corner that has seen better days.

“After you passed out, I carried you back here. The owners said this was the only seat in the building so I put you down here while I got a new shirt since mine was covered in blood and I didn’t want to lose you again.”

Oh. Yeah. The blood. “It’s uh,” I swallow the bile rising up my throat, “it’s coming back to me now.”

“We can’t keep doing this, Sunny.”

“Huh?” I blink up at him. Does he mean this date? He’s already done with me? I was supposed to turn him down first.

“Someday a bleeding man carrying an unconscious woman is going to get suspicious.”

“Oh,” I exhale. “Well, uh, don’t scare me again then.”

He rubs the bridge of his nose. “Believe me, lesson learned.”

“I’m sorry by the way.” I look down at his chest, but it’s more distracting than his tempting grin. My eyes are glued to the deep V below his abs and breathing becomes impossible.

He must sense my struggle and thankfully resumes dressing. He slips his arm through the sleeve of a flannel shirt and I catch a glimpse of the tattoo again. My whole body goes still. Except for the wild pounding of my heart echoing in my ears.

It’s a sun. He has a sun on his arm.

Suddenly the bathroom is too warm. I need to get out of here. “I’ll uh, let you change,” I say, turning around.

“Wait,” he gently stops me. “I didn’t want to scare you before but I need to tell you something.”

No. I don’t want to know why he tattooed a sun on his arm. Because once I know I won’t be able to pretend these feelings away. I won’t hate him anymore and I’ll fall for him instead. “Do you also faint at the sight of dried blood?” he asks.

“What?”

“Will the sight of dried blood make you faint again?” he repeats.

“Most likely.” That or puke.

“Then I’m going to need you to promise you’ll do what I say.”

What is he talking about right now?

He gently spins me around. “Close your eyes.”

“What? Why?”

“Please.” His eyes beg me to do what he says. This is the most serious I’ve ever seen him. What’s wrong? Is there more blood? I thought he just had a bloody nose, but what was the aftermath like? Is it a massacre out there?

“Okay.” I close my eyes and he puts a piece of fabric in my hand.

“This is a shirt for you.”

The pieces finally fit together. There must be blood on my shirt. His blood. My stomach drops and I sway, but he holds me still.

“Wh—huh—Sean? I’m not changing with you in here.”

“I’ll turn around, you take off your shirt and toss it to me, then I’ll take it out while you change.”

My hand trembles around his arm.

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“Is that okay?” he asks again.

I nod, but the movement is shaky. I stand up straighter, getting a grip on myself.
“Yes.”

He releases my hand and I hear the shuffle of his feet on the floor.

“I’m closing my eyes too,” he says.

Is he? I have no choice but to trust him.

I rip off my shirt and toss it forward, then hold the new shirt in front of my chest in case he turns around. But a moment later the door shuts.

My eyes pop open and I look around to make sure he’s gone. My body relaxes when I realize he is. I study the flannel shirt. It’s a button-up, but the bottom half of the buttons have already been done up. My heart thumps harder. Did he do that for me? How can he possibly know? The better question is, how can I ignore my feelings for him anymore?

Chapter 18

Sean

“Howbigdoyouwant?” London asks, stopping at a tree that’s no smaller than twelve feet.

I peer up at it. “I don’t think that one will fit in the bakery, do you?”

“What?” Her head flips toward me. “You’re getting a tree for my bakery?”

“I would have told you this an hour ago but you were busy fainting because of my sexiness,” I smirk.

“Shut up.” She adjusts the flannel top that matches mine. When Trent and I were little, my mom used to dress us in matching clothes all the time. I remember being annoyed by it by age five. I’ll have to apologize to her for all the fits I threw because now I see the appeal. Nothing says this woman is mine quite like itchy Christmas flannel.

“I noticed you didn’t have a tree,” I say. Or any Christmas decor for that matter. “Stuff like that helps bring customers in.”

She frowns and then turns back to the tree. “I kind of forgot about all that stuff. I’ve been so focused on getting ready for the grand opening next month.”

Her grand opening. Of course, she would be stressed about that. It’s right after Christmas, which means the tree will be another thing she will have to worry about getting out of the way before then.

I’m suddenly doubting the genius of my plan. “We don’t have to get one; we can do something else.” I scratch my neck, my mind somehow blank on ideas.

“No,” London stops me. “I would like one if that’s okay.”

The worry fades away, and my shoulders relax. “Charlie Brown or Rockefeller?”

She purses her lips. “I’ve always been partial to trees with missing limbs. Makes me

feel less lonely.”

The blood drains from my face. Oh no, did I just offend her?

“W-we can get—”

She grabs my arm, just above my elbow and my voice dies. “It was a joke, Sean.”

Her palm is warm on my arm, comforting. “You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“I always wondered what it would be like to pull one over on a Bentley.”

“Really?” The way she says that, the teasing lilt to her voice, her infectious smile, I want to drink it in. She’s been doing well so far, I can’t wait to see what else she’s got.

Her hand drops, and she shrugs with an innocent grin. She turns and walks through the next lane of trees before coming to an abrupt stop. “This one.”

I take in the tree. It’s barely as tall as her, and a little crooked up top. Its branches are uneven, but it’s got all the charm of Christmastime. Her gaze is fastened on the tree full of character but I can’t tear mine away from her. A breeze rustles her hair, blowing it across her face, and a strand gets stuck to her pink lips. The faint smell of brownies wafts over me and I wonder what else she baked today.

“It’s perfect,” she says.

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She is. “Let’s get it.” I will do anything to keep that smile on her face forever.

“Mommy look, half of that lady’s arm fell off.”

My body turns to stone at the little voice to our left and the sound of the mother desperately trying to shush her child.

Did London hear? Is that always how it is?

Before I can process what I should do, London turns. The mother tries to apologize but London waves her off and kneels by the little boy who can’t be more than four. “Hi, I’m London. What’s your name?”

“Leo.” He pushes his oversized beanie off his forehead and peers at her. “Where’s your hand?”

“That’s a great question. I was born like this. Just like you were born with those beautiful brown eyes.”

He blinks like he’s trying to look at his own eyes but can’t quite seem to do it. It’s adorable. He looks at London again, then he turns to his mom. “She’s the coolest lady ever,” he says, very matter-of-fact.

I agree.

London chuckles. “Thank you. That’s the best compliment I’ve ever received.”

I need to step up my game.

London stands up and looks at the mom who's got tears in her eyes.

The boy is then distracted by a bird and takes off after it, pulling the mother behind him and London turns back to the tree.

"You're amazing, did you know that?" I step up next to her and slip my hand around hers.

She shrugs, but she's grinning. "Things that are different can be scary to people. But it's not what's different that's scary, it's knowing how to treat people who are different that is scary. I used to hide my arm when things like that happened. It's uncomfortable being the cause of so much attention when you're still young and insecure. I didn't know any different but then I'd pass a group of kids and suddenly I was awonder." She shakes her head and my heart breaks for her and the pain and confusion she must have felt. "My parents helped me come up with crazy stories to use when I felt uncomfortable. Things like a shark bit it off, or I lost it while fighting with ninjas."

I chuckle just thinking of a little London telling big stories like that.

"But around the time I met you, and suddenly everyone knew my secret—"

"Sorry," I grimace.

"No," she shakes her head. "I was upset at first, but it helped me realize that sometimes approaching things head-on is better than hiding. And why should I hide it? My arm doesn't make me any less me."

"You should never hide," I whisper.

I love her. Never once in my life have I felt this way about a woman. Never once has one impressed me so much. My heart has jumped overboard, and I'm sunk.

I've been trying to compensate for so many things, for my differences and downfalls, and in one evening she taught me how to embrace them. I'm never going to be as patient as Grant, as smart as Trent, as driven as Michael, and maybe...that's okay.

"Have I told you how incredible you are?" I hook a finger through her belt loop.

She bites her bottom lip and looks up at me expectantly.

"Because you are the most—"

"Sean?"

I spin toward the voice before my brain can catch up to me and tell me it's a bad idea. Because I know that voice. I have never run into so many exes as I have in London's presence.

"Stacey?" I look at the woman. It's her, all right. Blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and the token glare women seem to have around me. This isn't good. "You look great, how are you?" My attempt at damage control, before the actual damage.

She pops out a hip. "Well, let's see, after you made out with my boss at the company party I took you to, I was fired."

I don't know what to say. Sorry isn't enough. It wasn't quite that simple. I glance at London, who looks shifty and nervous like a scared little animal ready to flee. She slips her hand out of mine, and I feel its loss like a visceral reaction.

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“I’m so sorry, Stacey. I know an apology can’t fix anything...”

Stacey sneers, and then her hand flies through the air right across my face with a loud smack. Stars dot the edges of my vision and my cheek stings. Wish I could say that was the first time I’d been hit by a woman today.

“Save yourself some trouble,” Stacey says to London, “and leave him before he ruins your life.” She stomps off and then it’s me and London... and the old guy who witnessed the whole show.

“London, I...I don’t even know how to explain what just happened.”

She folds her arms tight against her body like she needs to protect herself, but her face remains unchanged. “I think it was pretty obvious. You’re a player Sean.” She purses her lips and looks away. “Everyone knows that.”

She turns and heads for the barn, leaving the tree and me. Everyone knows that.

Is that all I am? Is that all people see? I know I make bad choices, but every so often I help people, too. I helped Michael find his wife, and Trent his girlfriend. I was a jerk about it, yes. But I’d hoped that someday I’d be more than a sum total of my mistakes.

Chapter 19

London

This was a mistake. A very embarrassing mistake. Sean seems to bring them out in me. Of course, the man is a player. But making out with his girlfriend's boss? That's a new level of low. I gave him a shot, and gosh he was sweet, but it was an act, his charm. The sun on his arm? I was falling for it all.

My phone pings. No doubt my dad "checking in." I ignore it, putting the ornament I was looking at back on the display.

I pick up another ornament—a gingerbread man with a baker's cap. My mom always made homemade gingerbread. Most people got it from the store, but my mom made it all from scratch. She swore the homemade stuff held up better under pressure, but it all cracked and crumbled eventually. Nothing lasts forever.

I sigh and put it back on the display as well, but just as my fingers release it a strong, calloused hand grabs it off the hook.

"We are definitely getting this," Sean says.

I bite my lip, forcing the picture of the tree in my shop out of my head. "Actually, I'm rethinking the whole tree thing."

"Too late, it's already in the truck," Sean says, his smile forced. Sean never has to force anything.

"You can take it home then." I don't want to be another woman played by him.

He sucks in his cheeks. "I'm not going to do that. The tree is for you."

"But I don't want it." I swallow the sudden lump in my throat. It's a lie. I want the tree. What I don't want is feelings for a man who is only going to hurt me.

He blows out a breath. “What Stacey said wasn’t the whole story.”

“Oh?” That sounds just like a player, trying to downplay his... playerness.

“Her boss came onto me. I rejected her. Then she told me she would fire Stacey if I didn’t kiss her. She was drunk, I didn’t know what to do, and while I stood there trying to think of a way out, she kissed me. Apparently, she still fired Stacey.”

I watch his eyes, his face, trying to catch the lie. All I feel is the raw emotion. “That’s...”

“Dumb. I know. I was stupid to even consider doing it to save Stacey’s job.”

I shake my head. “That’s harassment, Sean. That woman crossed a line.”

He shrugs. “Stacey’s right. I ruin everything.”

Ten minutes ago, I would have agreed and asked him to take me home. But I think I get it now. Sean comes across as wild and playful—the perfect excuse for everything that goes wrong. And he lets it happen because he believes it himself. Even when he doesn’t deserve it. Like last night at the ice rink. The race was my fault, but he took the blame. How many times in high school did he take the blame for something that wasn’t his fault? Have I been reading him wrong this whole time?

“You don’t need to fake an emergency text or anything. I’ll take you home.” He shoots me a sad smile and turns from the barn.

His broad shoulders slump like they are straining to hold the world upright. It’s not fair of me to judge him for his past mistakes. He’s not the same boy he was in high school, he’s not even the same man who came running into my shop two weeks ago. He’s changed.

I might not trust he won't break my heart at the end of whatever this is, but he's a good man, a good friend, and he deserves a second chance on this date. I also owe it to him after giving him a bloody nose and passing out on him for the second time. Super generous stuff.

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I grab the ornament he discarded and pluck one more from the display and head over to the cash register.

When I make it to the truck, Sean is already sitting inside. He hasn't seen me yet, and I take a moment to study the disappointment in his eyes and the set of his jaw. He's hurting. He never lets it show, but I see it now.

He blinks and looks at me, forcing another smile. He gets out and opens my door.

"My lady."

He's putting on a show to cover up what he's feeling inside. I don't want to be the reason he keeps things bottled up.

He doesn't say anything as he maneuvers out of the parking lot.

"Sean?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to keep the tree at my shop if that's okay."

His eyes brighten, and he looks at me hopefully. "Really?"

"Would you help me set it up?"

"Of course." He grins, for real this time, and I smile in return as he heads for my

shop. This is probably a bad idea. But I've had worse.

I purse my lips and tilt my head to the side. The tree is way more crooked than I remember it being in the lot. It doesn't help that it's currently leaning against the wall.

I look over at Sean. "I think we need one of those standy thingys."

Sean lifts a brow and pulls out his phone. "Siri, direct me to the nearest standy thingy."

I roll my eyes but have to bite back a smile. "Ha ha."

He grins. "I think I've got something in my truck actually." He sprints outside and returns a few minutes later with a couple of boards, screws, and a drill gun.

"You had all that in your truck?"

"Are you telling me you don't have any baking supplies in your vehicle?"

He's got me there. It's like a mini bakery in the back seat of my car.

He sets about screwing the boards to the trunk to create a sturdy stand, and I have to admit, I'm impressed with his handyman skills. He finds a way to fix anything. My shop is a testament to that. Is it bad I suddenly have an itch to destroy something else to keep him around? Or to turn up the thermostat so he has to take off his shirt for this sexy lumberjack stuff?

Cool it, woman.

I take a deep breath and reign in my wild thoughts.

Sean picks up the tree and sets it on its new stand.

“It worked!”

His lips tug down, but there’s no anger in his eyes. “I’m a little offended you doubted me.”

“It will never happen again,” I tease, crossing my heart.

“I’d like that in writing.”

I shrug. “Fresh out of paper and ink.”

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He steps closer and slips a hand around my waist. I gasp. I've had a boyfriend, or two, but his touch is different. It's electric. It burns and soothes at the same time. It makes me come alive, like I've never fully been me without him.

“What about piping that promise on a cake?” His gaze flicks to my lips.

“That would get a little long don't you think?”

He looks up, his dark eyes hooded and tantalizing. “What were we talking about again?”

I have no clue. Does it really matter right now?

“What are your thoughts on getting some mistletoe in here?” he asks, his voice deep like he just rolled out of bed. And now the thought of him rolling out of bed shirtless attacks my brain and my knees go weak.

“I could be swayed,” I whisper.

His head dips, and my eyes close like we are performing something we've done a hundred times before.

His warm breath brushes against my cheek and my lips part.

CRASH!

I jump and scream. Sean releases me and sprints into the kitchen. It takes me a full

ten seconds to process the danger we could be in. Is someone here? Are they going to hurt Sean? Why didn't I install security cameras?

My pulse pounds in my brain. Where's my rolling pin when I need it?

"Sean?" I whisper-yell.

"It's all good." He pops out of my office. "Your desk collapsed, and your vase fell off."

I sigh. Dumb boxes. I need a new desk. But that's on next year's Christmas list.

"Thanks for checking it out for me." Not like I was scared or anything.

"I can be your hero if you just let me." He winks.

"You would have to shed your villain's cloak first." I tease.

He snorts. "Apparently it was a women's bathrobe."

I laugh as I head to the office, broom in hand. Only Sean would wear a women's robe to infiltrate a witch coven.

One of the boxes remains, so I stick everything on that one, then take the flowers Sean gave me and hang them upside down on my tack board by the ribbon. It takes only a few minutes to finish and when I return Sean is standing a few feet away from the tree, head tilted to the side and deep in thought.

"Sean...why are all my baking supplies on the tree?"

"I forgot ornaments. But these should do for now. Got any stale donuts?"

I want to be annoyed but can't find it in me. Sean always finds an out-of-the-box solution that makes me smile. "You're ridiculous," I laugh, adjusting a pair of tongs on the top of the tree. But I kind of love it.

Not as much as when we add stale desserts. The cupcakes and brownies are still in their plastic cases, the donuts are hanging from branches. Then I pull out the two ornaments I purchased out of my pockets.

"Here." I hand Sean the other one.

"What's this?" He flips it over and barks out a laugh so hysterical, I have to join in. "Is this supposed to be me?" he asks, holding the ornament next to his face. It's a lumberjack, but not the sexy kind, this one has his shirt unbuttoned and his hairy beer gut out.

"Can't you see the resemblance?" I ask, keeping my voice serious.

He narrows his eyebrows and rubs his stomach. "I guess if I keep eating here this might be my future."

For a split second, I hoped he would try to prove it and grant me another glimpse of his abs. But two glimpses in one day would be dangerous when I still can't get the picture of his tattoo out of my head.

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After Sean adds his ornament, right next to my gingerbread man, I pull out my phone to take a picture. I want to remember this tree. This night. I'm taking the second photo when Sean jumps in front of the tree. Now I have a picture of a handsome man on my phone. What ever will I do?

"Sean..." I laugh.

"Oh, you wanted to be in it, too?" He grabs my phone and flips the camera then pulls me in under his arm. "Say cheese."

I barely have the energy to pull a smile onto my face with his arm wrapped around my body, making me dizzy and breathless. He clicks the camera button no less than twenty times before sending himself a dozen pictures.

I rescue my phone from him with plans to thoroughly inspect each and every single picture later tonight.

"Are you ready for dinner?" Sean asks.

I'm starving. "Ye—"

My phone rings. My stomach sinks. Dad.

"You should answer that," Sean nods to my phone before leaving my side to gather up his tools.

I really don't want to. But my dad will just call again. Then possibly alert the police if

I don't answer. I take a deep breath and swipe the screen. "Hello?"

"Grandma fell down and broke her hip," Dad says in response.

My heart leaps frantically around my chest. "What? Is she at the hospital? Is she okay?"

Sean glances up at me, worry tugging his brows together.

"Yeah, they gave her some medicine. We're at the hospital downtown."

"Okay. I'm coming." I hang up, and Sean is at my side.

"What's wrong?"

"My grandma broke her hip."

Sean nods only once. "I'll take you." He loads his arms full of tools and matches my rapid pace to the truck.

"Is she okay?" he asks, once I've told him where to go.

"Yeah." I rub my arm. "My dad didn't give me much info. But hopefully, they are helping her."

"I'm sure they are," he comforts me. A couple of times while he drives, I see his hand twitch, like he wants to hold mine. But he never makes the leap across the console. Is he afraid of my arm?

"Do you want me to come in with you?" Sean asks as we approach the parking lot.

I'm not sure what I want. In my shop, I wanted to kiss him. Now I want to run away and I'm not sure why. I'm still pulling away, putting up new walls between us in place of the ones he breaks down. "No, it's fine. My dad's there. He can take me home. Plus, it's late, and they probably won't let you in."

He nods and gets in the drop-off line. "Everything will be okay."

I swallow the lump in my throat. I hope so.

The car in front of us pulls away, and Sean moves into the drop-off zone. I never thought this was where the end of the date would take us and I don't know what to say. I reach for the door handle.

"Hey, thanks for the tree." "Thanks for the tree? That's the best I've got?"

He nods. "Of course. Let me know how your grandma is."

"I will." I hop out of the truck and rush into the hospital. It doesn't take long to find my grandma's room. I run inside, tears stinging my eyes when I see her engulfed in the starchy white sheets. Her tiny frame is smaller than ever in the unwelcoming hospital bed.

"Grandma." I gently take one of her hands.

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Her eyes fly open and she grips my hand harder than a little old lady should. “London. What are you doing here?”

“Dad said you broke your hip. Are you okay?”

Grandma scoffs then does an eyeroll she’s practically famous for. “I didn’t break my hip. I’ve just got a big bruise. Your dad is a worry wart.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “So you’re okay?”

“I’m perfectly fine. The doctor said I can leave as soon as your father gets up here with a wheelchair. He doesn’t want me to walk without one.”

“He’s right. You should take it easy for a few days.”

“Darling, my life is taking it easy. I want to live before I can’t any more.”

My eyes widen. “Grandma, don’t talk like that.”

“It’s true,” she says and starts sitting up. I help her the best I can. “Everyone spends so much time worrying about what they should or shouldn’t do with their life, they miss out on actually living.”

She’s right. I wouldn’t have admitted that two days ago, but being with Sean has unlocked a new side of me. A braver, more carefree part of me that yearns not only to live but to find joy in every aspect life has to offer. To take bigger risks and open up my heart to new adventures. Open up to Sean.

Grandma's eyes lock onto someone in the doorway. "Andrew Herschel Larsen. Why did you tell London I broke my hip? I told you I was fine and not to worry her on her date."

Dad's face turns red. Is he embarrassed? My grandma is the only one who can do that to him.

"I didn't tell her to come," he says.

While that's technically true, I can't help but wonder if it was a ploy to get me away from Sean. Grandma didn't break her hip; he would have known that when he called, so why did he say that? I'm about to address this when he scowls at me.

"That's not the shirt you left in."

Perhaps we can talk later.

Chapter 20

Sean

It's late, but I'm wired. I didn't get to finish my date with London, and now I can't stop thinking of ways to get it back. Should I work out or do something to kill the extra tension?

Nah. I'll just sit on the couch and mindlessly watch TV until something comes to me.

When I hit our hallway, I hear Trent outside the apartment talking to Karli. I'm about to shout a hello when I catch the subject of their conversation.

"Well, of course, I want to marry you," Karli says.

I freeze and consider how one might turn themselves into a statue in the middle of the hallway.

“But you know I’ve been scared about this.”

Retreat. Retreat.

“I know,” Trent says. “I can wait. For as long as you need. But I had to ask.”

He asked her to marry him? She turned him down? Is this good? No, it’s bad. Right? I need answers.

The rest of their words are mumbled, and thankfully they haven't seen me, so I creep back down the hall. When I hit the stairs I sprint the rest of the way to the parking lot. I’m sure there’s something I forgot in my truck. Ten minutes later, I find it. A pack of gum. Knew I had one.

I return to the apartment. Trent and Karli are either gone or have moved inside. I’ll take my chances.

I make as much noise as possible as I search for the right key, unlock the door, and open it slowly. Very slowly, in case I walk in on something precarious...again.

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Trent is alone on the couch. The TV turned on. But his eyes are glazed over and his mind clearly elsewhere.

Looks like we had the same idea.

“Hey, bro,” I say, dropping my wallet and keys on the table. “How’s it going?”

He changes the channel.

“Did you uh, do anything with Karli tonight?” I ask, unable to help myself from prying.

He blinks as if he just realized I was here. “Yeah. I asked her to marry me.”

Hearing him admit it out loud throws me. “Whoa.”

“Yeah, I didn't plan to.” He rubs his beard thoughtfully. “It just kind of happened. I’m not even sure I realized the words were coming out of my mouth until they did. I love her so much.”

“So... you’re getting married,” I say. I’m not sure if he’s in a happy or mooney mood. Do I throw a party or let him throw the coffee table?

“Yeah, I think. She just needs some time. Everything in her past freaks her out. Not having a place to stay after we’re married, the security... It's a lot.” He shakes his head and pushes off the couch. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this. The only person you care about is yourself. You wouldn’t understand.”

Ouch.

“I get it. You’re still mad at me.” I step out of his way as he stalks toward the kitchen. He’s not in a mopey mood, this is much worse. This is fighting Trent. The one who would come out before we took literal punches at each other.

“It’s not that hard when all you’ve done lately is mess things up.” He opens the fridge, takes out a water bottle, and slams it again.

This feels exactly like a conversation we had two weeks ago when I tried to get him to come to Vegas with me.

Honestly, it’s getting old. I’m so tired of hearing I suck. I’m trying here. And yeah, I’m not perfect, but he’s no saint.

I fold my arms across my chest and, for possibly only the second time in my life, I’m actually upset with my brother. The one person who used to understand me when no one else did. When did he stop?

I thought going to Vegas would fix that. But it didn’t. It just gave him Karli. Now he’s going to marry her, and he’s going to leave work. Are we going to become holiday siblings who only see each other when they are forced to? No. I can’t stand that thought.

I clench my jaw until it ticks. “Everyone thinks I purposely make mistakes, but believe it or not, some mistakes are just that. I know I act before I think, but you are my brother, so no matter how much you hate me, I’d do anything for you.”

“Like drug me? Did I not thank you for that one?” His hands are clenched at his side.

I shove my hands in my pockets. “Maybe you should; it seemed to work well for

you.”

“People don’t want to be played with, Sean.” He tosses his now empty water bottle at me and I catch it easily.

“I didn’t take you with me as a joke.” I did it because I could feel us slipping apart and it scared me. I’ve never been without my twin brother. “If you can’t stick with me, who else would want to?”

And that right there is the most vulnerable thing I’ve ever said in my life. And it hurts even more that it’s true.

Trent frowns but says nothing.

“Nice talking to you, bro. 'Night.” I head for my room and shut the door. I send London a text asking how her grandma is, but no response comes before I fall asleep.

The only thing that sucks about working with family is working with family when I’m trying to avoid them. I managed it for two hours. That is until break, when every single one of them came into the break room at the same time.

“Hey,” Grant claps me on the shoulder.

I nod in greeting while continuing to scarf down my terrible PB&J. Does peanut butter expire? Or did I use Trent’s disgusting nut-free butter again?

Grant sits across from me, watching me eat for a solid minute.

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“What’s wrong?” Grant asks. “You’re not talking, you’re always talking.”

“Just hungry,” I mutter, tossing my trash in the bin.

Grant’s eyes narrow but I turn away.

“Hey,” Michael stops me before I can leave the room. “You must have read the measurements wrong on the Goodwin project. The cabinet between the fridge and dishwasher is too big.”

I shrug. “I have it on good authority that all I do is screw things up, so I thought I’d stick with what I do best.”

“Well, yeah, you’re pretty good at that but don’t sell yourself short. I’m sure you have some other decent qualities,” Michael chuckles.

“Thanks,” I clench my jaw.

“Oh come on. I was kidding. You’re a good guy. Is this about that girl? Did she break up with you already?”

“No.” Not yet.

Despite what I’d hoped, I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t like the way things ended with London last night and I have a nagging feeling that I messed up again. I swear I don’t try to screw up. But everyone in this room would plead the opposite.

I'm done hurting people.

I look at Michael. "I'm sorry I made you compete with me for a job I didn't even want. That was immature."

Michael opens his mouth, but no words come out.

I turn to Grant. "I'm sorry you got involved in a bet that included my sister. And all the other bets you got dragged into by association because of me."

Grant frowns, but I turn away.

"And Trent, I'm sorry I kidnapped you. When you get married, you and Karli can have the apartment, so she'll feel safe. I'll move back home or something."

His eyes widen and both Michael and Grant shoot him funny looks.

Oops. "Also, I'm sorry for just saying that. I'll try to step out of everyone's way from now on."

Michael shakes his head. "Wait, that wasn't the only reason you challenged me for my job. I think your way of helping is different than most, but that doesn't make it bad."

"Yeah. I mean you roped me into some crazy stuff, but call me stupid, I liked being included. You guys were my only family," Grant adds.

I suppose my stupidity doesn't sound quite so bad when they phrase it like that. I study the ground, letting their words sink in and ease some of the guilt I've carried around.

I look up and find Michael and Grant both looking expectantly at Trent who is sitting there silently.

It was a nice moment while it lasted.

“Well, I better go cut down that cabinet.” I push around Michael and head out the door just as I hear him and Grant start interrogating Trent.

“Dude, you need to get over it,” Michael says. But the door slams behind me to spare me Trent’s objection. It doesn’t matter anyway. He’s got Karli now. She makes him happy. And I’m happy for him.

I hop out of the truck and walk to the bakery. Cassie is behind the counter, and I catch a glimpse of Grady through the serving window. But no London. There is Christmas music though, coming from a tiny Santa speaker and it makes me smile. She’s getting into the spirit.

But still no mistletoe.

“Hey, Sean,” Cassie looks up from her textbook to greet me. “Good thing you’re here; the toilet isn’t flushing.”

I lift a brow. “Cassie, you know I don’t actually work here, right?”

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She taps her pencil on her notebook. “Then why are you always here?”

“My thoughts exactly.” London walks into the front of the shop with a smirk on those delicious lips. And just like that, there’s sunshine in my heart again.

She looks beautiful today in a bright yellow skirt under her apron, and her hair twisted back into a low bun.

“To, uh, fix the toilet.” I wink and slide by her.

I hear her tell Cassie and Grady goodbye before she finds me in the bathroom with my hand down the tank of the toilet.

“I thought we had a deal.” She leans against the doorframe.

I purse my lips. “Remind me.”

“You said you’d stop coming to fix things if I went on a date with you.” She rubs her arm. “And I did.”

That’s my cue. I got the date; she’s done with me. But maybe I’m not ready to be done.

“Technically, we never got to finish.”

She lifts a shoulder. “A date doesn’t have requirements. We got together, we talked, we had fun. Date.”

I pull my hand out of the toilet and to my relief and slight amazement, the thing flushes. I wash my hands.

“Did you?”

I need to know what she thought of our date and where we are now.

She chews on her bottom lip. “I did.”

I walk to her then stop in the doorway and turn, planting my hand above her on the door frame. “What did you most enjoy?”

“Um...” She swallows, her eyes darting to my arm over her head. “The uh, tree. Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“I noticed the new donuts. And the creme puffs were a cute addition.”

She swallows again. “I’m surprised you didn’t steal them off the tree and eat them.”

My serious expression cracks. “Are you insinuating something?”

“Yes. You could eat me out of business.”

“I like an honest woman.” I pump my brows. “I have a question then.” I lower my voice, and my gaze finds those lips once more.

Her eyes drop to my mouth. “Hmm?”

“Are all those donuts making my butt look big?”

Her cheeks turn the most adorable shade of pink I’ve ever seen.

“You’re ridiculous.” She ducks out from under my arm and goes to the front of the shop. She grabs the cleaner and starts spraying the glass surfaces.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I plop my hand on the counter where she hasn’t cleaned yet. She sprays cleaner on my hand.

“I don’t want to hurt your fragile ego.”

“It’s cute you think it’s fragile.”

She rolls her eyes, and I continue to follow her like a shadow.

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“Maybe I should humble you, then.” She spins around so quickly I barely refrain from body slamming her.

“Bring it.” I rub my palms together.

“Okay.” Her eyes rove over my body searching for imperfections. There are many. As anyone else who knows me can point out. But something tells me, I’ll still enjoy it. “Well, your hair is... I mean your eyes...” She purses her lips. “Your nose is a tad crooked.”

“I broke it in the eighth grade when I walked into a pole while looking at my phone.”

“You did not.” She laughs.

“I did. Texting and walking is an extreme sport. Now come on, what else do you have?”

Her eyes peruse my body again and I enjoy every inch they travel.

“Your muscles could be bigger,” she says absently.

I grin. “Good to know. Thanks for the constructive feedback.”

“And your ability to listen to directions is atrocious.”

“Agreed. Though we may be getting off track no—”

“And the way you talk to every woman. It’s like you’re constantly flirting.”

My eyebrows shoot to the sky. She clamps her lips shut. She’s jealous. Very good to know.

“I’ll work on that,” I muse. “I’d hate to give people the wrong impression. Especially when there’s only one woman I’m interested in.” I lean closer, making my intent clear.

“And that.” She sticks a finger at my face. “That charm. It’s... repulsive.”

The quiver in her voice tells a different story.

“If you insist. But charming Sean is way more fun.”

She looks at me. Like really looks at me, for so long I start to worry if I’ve got a rogue nose hair she’s about to point out. That would be terribly inconvenient.

“I think there's more to you than you let others see.”

I lean against the counter. “Like what?”

Her eyebrows narrow in concentration. “Like how much you care. You pretend things don’t hurt you, but you’re human like the rest of us. You’re sentimental and passionate.”

Hmm. I’m not sure how I feel about those...compliments?

“I get it, though,” she continues. “For a long time, I hid a part of myself I thought was less desirable. But that didn’t make me happy. What makes you happy?”

Truly? Kissing her would make me ecstatic. But I get what she's saying. She's allowing me to open that part of myself to her.

What makes me happy? My mind is utterly and completely blank. Why can't I think of anything?

I swallow and stand up straighter. "You really did humble me. Good job."

"Sean," she starts, but then her voice falls flat.

I turn away. I think there's another cabinet somewhere here I can fix. If not, I'll break one so I can fix it.

"Sean?" she says again, stopping me in my tracks.

"Hm?"

“I told you no more fixing.”

“I uh, need to fix...” I have no clue.

She steps up beside me. “If you’re going to be here, you can help me bake.”

“Really?” My brows must be halfway up my forehead right now. “You want my help?”

“Don’t make me regret this.”

“Never.”

Chapter 21

London

Sean is a terrible baking assistant. He would never make it in the industry. Or my kitchen because he’s causing me stress. More ingredients are on the outside of the bowl than on the inside. When I tell him to measure a cup, he scoops up a heaping cup full of brown sugar without packing it and drops it into the bowl.

However, he looks downright sexy in the bright pink apron I offered him. He didn’t even bat an eye; just put it over his head with a wink that made my heart flutter.

I thought I was starting him off easy with gingerbread cookies I’d planned to sell tomorrow. But no one will be paying for these.

“What’s the story behind today’s sticker?” Sean asks, cracking an egg.

Did an eggshell just fall in there? Look away.

I glance down at the heart-eye emoji currently decorating my prosthetic. My cheeks burn. “There’s not always a story behind the sticker,” I lie. Every morning I pick one that fits my mood for the day. And yes, maybe our date was a tad romantic and I was still thinking about it this morning.

“But there’s a story behind this one, right?”

I turn around to see him pouring salt into the bowl. That looked like way more than the required amount. “Do your carvings tell a story?” I open the door to the sugar cabinet to reveal the tiny carving there.

He looks at me, a kind of reckless passion in his eyes. “Yes.”

I blink and face the cabinet again. What was I looking for? “Well, they are definitely... something. Just do me a favor and don’t quit your day job yet.”

I feel more than see him step up behind me. I feel the heat of his chest as it brushes my shoulder, and shudder with the warmth of his breath on my neck.

“But I thought you were hiring.” His lips are next to my ear and I feel the ghost of his hand on my hip.

I swallow. “Sorry, all positions have been filled.”

“Really? I could have sworn there was one opening left for the man who gets to hold your hand.”

“I’ll consider your qualifications.”

“All I’m asking for is a chance.”

I feel every word in my heart.

“Now come on, stop dilly-dallying, I don’t work for free.” He pats my butt with the wooden spoon, the tension shifting from deep to playful in half a second.

“That’s literally what you’ve been doing for the last three weeks.”

He grins. “That’s because I have a thing for the boss.” He turns the stand mixer on and powder flies everywhere. I rush forward to shut it off.

“I’ve changed my mind, you’re fired.” I take the sugar bowl and put it away then go back for the flour.

“Why?”

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“Because you murdered those cookies.”

“Hey now, whose fault is that? You said you’d teach me, but you’ve been standing way over there.” He continues to bake undeterred, adding a cup of ginger to the mixture. An entire cup. Is he even looking at the recipe card? “I thought you were going to help me stir.” He waggles his brows.

“You don’t know how to stir?” I smirk.

“Of course I do, I’m excellent at stirring milk and butter into Mac & Cheese. But I could always go for some hands-on assistance.”

“Too bad this assistant only has one.”

He snatches my hand and tucks it into his chest. “And it’s my favorite.”

He’s being too...charming. He wasn’t supposed to be doing that. He’s breaking all the unmentioned rules of the evening.

I pull my hand away and reach into the bowl. Then I fling brown, goopy, batter all over his handsome face.

He backs up, sputtering as he goes. “What was that for?”

“The atrocious charm,” I smirk, reaching for another handful. “And for ruining the cookies.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I was trying.” He holds up his hand to block my throw. Then he dives forward, reaching for the bowl. He’s got both hands in it. Clearly unfair.

He drops what feels like buckets of thick snow on top of my head and I screech. But it’s followed by a laugh. Sugar grains fall on my tongue.

Ew. Not sugar.

“Way too much cinnamon,” I choke out as more of the substance tumbles into my mouth.

“That wouldn’t have happened if my teacher had been paying attention.”

“Maybe you’re not a very good student.”

“I can’t argue there,” his voice drops and he steps through the mess on the floor, trapping me against the counter. “But I did learn something very important tonight.” He brushes his nose along my cheek and my body turns to fire.

“What’s that?” I croak out, as his lips tickle my ear.

“Food fights are very sexy.”

I can't breathe. He’s broken through my walls, shattered them really. I couldn’t find all the pieces to fix them if I tried. I don’t think I want to.

He lifts his hand and brushes powder off my nose, my cheeks, my eyebrows. Each stroke of his thumb is gentle and thorough.

My heart is beating out of control now. Why isn’t he kissing me?

“Did you, uh, think of something that makes you happy?” The words escape like a breathless whisper.

His thumb brushes my bottom lip and I catch my breath. His eyes meet mine. “I did.”

He pulls his thumb away and presses his lips to my cheek, less than a centimeter from my lips.

My heart goes haywire. It's the softest, most tender touch that's completely ruining me.

“I found my Sunny,” he whispers against my cheek. Then he pulls back, leaving me wanting more.

That awful man.

Chapter 22

Sean

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 2:29 am

My presence has been kindly requested at Lennox's. I got a letter. In my mailbox. Which means one of two things. She heard about my little breakdown in the breakroom. Or she's trying to get Trent and I on good terms again. Or both. I wasn't going to come until I made the world's worst gingerbread houses with London last night. She insisted the cookies wouldn't turn out, but I lovingly reminded her that they weren't a lost cause yet. They were. Our walls turned into molehills the second we touched them. But while I helped her clean up the disaster, I thought of something else that made me happy. My family. Which means I need to fix this.

I ring the doorbell and expect to wait the required two minutes before someone manages to free themselves from a baby and make it to the door, but instead, it swings wide open.

"Hey, Sean," Lennox beams, holding little Emmett in her arms. "How is my favorite brother?"

I arch a brow at her suspicious words. "If I wasn't sure before, I am now. What's up?"

She blinks innocently. "What do you mean?"

"You never greet me like that. Though I'm not complaining. It's nice, can we make it a habit? And the formal invitation? Classy, but a dead giveaway."

Her face falls. "You know, you pretend like you're not good at anything, but you're really perceptive."

“False,” I scoff. “I don’t pretend I’m not good at things. I’m great at everything.”

“And humble to boot,” she deadpans. “But you don’t know what I’m up to.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, dear sister. Baby first.” I hold out my arms and she hands me the chunky little boy dressed in the cutest Grinch outfit and sucking his thumb. “Now get on with your scheme. Where’s Trent?”

“Ugh, I hate when you know everything.”

“It’s a blessing and a curse,” I say sarcastically, because if I knew everything, Trent wouldn’t be so annoyed with me.

Lennox leads me to the small sitting room just off the kitchen. Trent is already here, and so is Michael. How cozy.

“Alright, guys.” Lennox claps her hands together. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Trent looks at me, his eyebrows raised in a challenge. If he leaves the decision to me, he knows I’ll choose the hard way. Always more fun.

I don’t say a word, neither does he. Does he still hate me this much, or is he letting me choose how this goes?

“Just as I expected,” Lennox sighs. But she hardly looks disappointed. In fact, she looks giddy. “If you immature children will please follow me to the backyard.”

“What about dinner?” Michael whines.

“Dinner is for winners.”

A competition. Now we're talking. Lennox knows the way to my heart.

Lennox and Grant's home is small enough it takes exactly ten seconds to walk from the front room to the back door.

The backyard hasn't been landscaped yet and is nothing but a pile of dirt. Which Grant is currently spraying with a hose. The result is a thick and soupy mud pit. He must have been spraying it for hours. On the far side of the yard are three boxes padlocked shut.

"Lennox, have you been watching Survivor again?" Trent grunts.

"Nonstop," Grant says.

Lennox smacks his chest, but he captures her hand and pulls her in for a kiss.

"Careful, you two," I say when the kiss continues far longer than three older brothers would like to witness from their little sister. "That's how babies are made. You already got one."

Lennox pulls away, but Grant smacks her butt and winks.

I shield my poor nephew's eyes. "I'm sorry you have to live with them."

Grant chuckles and takes Emmett from me then settles into a lawn chair.

"There are three keys hidden in the pit. You must find them and open your box. Once you have what's inside, you know what to do," Lennox explains, projecting each word as if she's Jeff Probst.

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“Three? Why do I have to do this?” Michael asks.

“You can ask your wife that question,” Lennox says. “Something about clipping your toenails in bed.”

“That’s disgusting dude,” I say at the same time Trent says, “Nasty.”

Michael’s face turns bright pink. “Who knew one nail would make her bleed like tha—”

“Please don’t continue,” Lennox stops him. “I don’t need to know what you do in the bedroom. Bring it up with her. Either way, you’re doing this.”

“Fine. Only because these two idiots have been making my job harder.”

Trent tries to protest, but Lennox throws her hands up. “Work it out in the pit.”

I slip my socks and shoes off, then my polo. “I, for one, am appreciative of the effort you put into this.” I run my hands up my arm to fight off the slight chill.

“Kiss up,” Trent mutters.

“Never said I’d play fair, brother,” I grin.

“Why would you start now?”

“When I blow the whistle, you go,” Lennox says, cutting off my next remark. “I need

to put Emmett down for a nap, but I have a clear view from his room. You have until I'm done to fix this." She points between me and Trent.

"What about Grant?" Michael asks.

He's being quite the whiny baby tonight.

Grant grins from his seat. "I'm just here to make sure no one kills each other."

"Great, so everything else counts?" I ask.

He shrugs.

Lennox blows a whistle, and I rush into the pit. I'm stunned by the tepid temperature but plunge through the muck anyway. I'm bending over to begin my search when I'm body slammed from behind. I go face first, butt up into the sludge.

"Sorry," Trent mutters, digging through the mud beside my face.

I heave my body up. "For what? It was just a little tap." I offer him a little 'tap' in return, sending him backward and down with a thick splash.

His eyes narrow. He pushes to his feet but slips and goes back down, giving me time to search for the key.

My hand hits something hard. Just a rock. I toss it.

Trent resumes his search. I'm not sure where Michael is. My hand brushes something thin and pointy.

A key. I hold the small object up to double-check.

“Thanks, bro.” Michael snatches it out of my hand.

My beef isn't with him, so I let him go. But not before grabbing his leg out from under him. It's only fair.

Mud slaps my face. My eyes instantly burn, and I struggle to clear them. The second I get them free, I'm pummeled to the ground by pure rage. Trent's, to be specific. It's evident in the vice grip he's got around my shoulders.

I shoot my arm up and break his hold, spinning around to tackle him. “Do you have something to say?”

“Nope.” He glares before flipping me onto my back.

I cough up mud and what little air is left in my lungs, but Trent is on top of me.

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He may be taller, but I'm still broader, and I use that to my advantage. I knock out his arm and throw my leg into his neck. "You know, words are the ideal form of communication. You're going to have to learn this if you want to have a healthy relationship."

"You don't know anything about my relationship," he growls, pinching my leg until I release him.

"And whose fault is that?" I shove him down before pulling myself to my feet.

Trent scowls. "You're right."

I plant my hands on my hips. "Was that so hard to adm—"

My legs are swiped out from under me, and I land in the mud. And a rock.Ow.

Trent's on me again. Seriously, did Grant fall asleep over there?

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, how many times do I have to say it? I'm trying to be better," I grunt.

Trent sighs, his hold on me loosening, slightly. "I know. I've noticed. I'm actually..." his face screws up and he grimaces. "Kind of grateful to you," he grits out.

"All I'm asking for is a thank you," I grin. Which is the wrong thing to do because the next thing I know I'm coughing up mud again. "But it's not a deal breaker."

“Good. Then I forgive you. But so help me, Sean, if you ever pull another stunt like that again, I will castrate you.”

All good apologies end with a threat of sterilization.

“Also, you owe me.” He hops up and holds out a hand.

“Just say the word.” I grab his hand. He pulls me up enough just to let me fall again then leans over to give me a noogie.

My brother is back.

I trip him again, just for fun this time. He comes up coughing and shaking his head. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have kept my program from you.”

“I get why you did. I’m kind of needy,” I tease. “I’m glad you found what makes you happy.”

“Me too,” he nods as we sit in the mud together.

A blast of icy water hits me, and I turn to find Michael with the biggest water gun I’ve ever seen. And he’s clean. Not for long.

I sprint for him and he squeals like a little girl. Trent catches on and tackles Michael from the other direction, slamming him into the mud. Then we are all rolling around, chucking mud at each other.

Immature?

Totally.

Cathartic?

Totally.

“Grant! I told you not to let them kill each other!” Lennox yells from somewhere in the house. So much for getting the baby to sleep.

“Ah, they’re just playing. Look at them, they’re like a little pack of puppies.”

Grant doesn’t make it far after those words are out of his mouth before all three of us are hauling him into the pit. And it takes all three of us. The dude is just that big. But he’s part of the family now which means he should be in the mud as well.

I’ve heard good things about mud baths, how they are soothing and such. This one isn’t quite that. But I feel good anyway. Nothing a little fight can’t fix between brothers.

Lennox groans. “Well, come in when you’re clean. I’ve got pizza and ugly onesie pajamas for you all.”

Chapter 23

London

Custard.Inmyhair.And my ear. Andagh! Now it's in my eyes.

No no.

I rush to the sink and spray the water directly into my eye. Now would be a good time for Sean to show up since he has a knack for appearing when I'm at my worst.

The bell above the shop door dings and my heart rate spikes, expecting him. But it's just Cassie heading out for the day. Grady leaves shortly after and the silence they leave behind brings all my thoughts back to Sean.

He has been texting me all day. Silly things, thoughtful things. Each one makes me smile, but I'm quickly realizing I want more. So much more than that pathetic little peck on my cheek. It's criminal how much a tiny thing affected me. How much he affects me. I know he'd kiss me without qualms if I just permitted him to do so.

"Just so you know, when you finally decide to kiss me, you're safe."

He's going to wait for me to kiss him. Which is rather irritating coming from the man who once kissed the principal on a dare. He was suspended for that one. It's honestly surprising he graduated.

I duck into my office and glance over my to-do list of everything I need to complete or set up before the grand opening. Only thirty-five items left. My heart rate increases

until I feel a pounding in my head. This is why I started with a soft launch. Because I can't handle it all at once. I have to slow it down and take it one step at a time. The same way I get into a pool. One tiny inch at a time. This is how I'll be successful. As long as I make it in the pool.

"Cardboard really makes you pop."

I jump at the voice, my head jerks backward into the wall and I groan. "Sean! You scared me."

"Sorry," he says with a smile that doesn't look the least bit apologetic. "What are you doing?"

Besides wondering how it's possible to look that good in a basic t-shirt and faded jeans that fit him like a well-worn, well-loved glove? I clear my throat and focus on my laptop.

"Narrowing down my to-do list for the opening."

He comes around my side of the cardboard desk and leans over my shoulder until his cheek is a centimeter from mine. He's barely touching me, but I feel him everywhere. The brush of his shirt against my shoulder, his natural masculine scent from working with wood all day. I shift and a strand of my hair gets stuck to his five o'clock shadow like velcro. I want to rub my hand along that beard. Is that dirt in his ear?

"I can help you with number fifteen."

"Oh, no." I shut the laptop and stand up. "It's fine. I can do it."

"But I want to help. I can also hang the banner for you, and what else was on the list?"

I shake my head. His offering to help should make me feel less anxious, but it's doing the opposite. "Maybe."

He stands up straight and pulls out his phone, reading something off the screen. "Oh, that reminds me, do you have social media for the bakery?"

"Uh, yeah?" I think I posted a picture last month.

"I could help you make some videos if you want to release them leading up to opening day."

I hadn't even considered making videos, but that's probably a good idea. "Okay." My head is spinning as a dozen more to-do list items pop up in my brain. Make videos, post online, find people to post as well...

"Also, our work Christmas party is this weekend," he says, looking at his phone again.

Does he have his own to-do list on that thing?

"I told my dad about you, and we were wondering if you could make some dessert. I know it's last-minute. I'll text you all the info and the address—"

"Sean," I cut off his rambling. "I need you to stop talking for a minute." I know he's only trying to help, but it's all too much. Does he not think I can do this? Is he going to turn into my dad, breathing down my neck to make sure I don't fail.

"Okay...?" Sean frowns.

I take a breath. "Do you think because I only have one arm, I won't be successful?"

His head rears back as if I slapped him. “What? No, of course not.”

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“Because it kind of feels like you’re doing all these favors for me because I need them. But I need you to know I am capable. I can protect myself. I can be successful. Just as I am.” My heart thumps louder in my head with the reminder to him, and myself, that I am capable of this. I’ve never even been this open with my dad. Why is it so much easier to say these things to Sean?

“I know you are.” He loops a finger through the tie of my apron. “You are all those things and so much more. You don’t need me at all Sunny. Yet I keep coming back because...” he shakes his head. “I guess I just want to be needed.”

The righteous indignation that was rearing up in my chest flickers and dies. Before I can tell him that I want him, I need him, he speaks up.

“I just want to help, Sunny, because I lo—” he swallows. “Because I love to see you smile.”

My heart races with the song overhead, its rhythm matching the crescendo and intensity of the Carol of the Bells.

“Consider me your cheerleader.”

I bite the inside of my cheek trying to reign in all the emotions flooding me right now. He’s too sweet, too charming, and I love it. “Does that make me the quarterback?”

“Whatever you want, baby.”

I'm going to do something stupid. I can feel it, but I can't stop it. Nor do I think I want to. I step closer to him, intoxicated by the control he's allowing me to have. I reach for his hand, mingling our fingers. "So... if I pull you under the bleachers for a kiss?"

"I'd follow." His head drops lower. But this is my game. I get to decide how this ends. I arch up on my toes and plant my lips on his.

A groan escapes him, so deep I feel it tingle against my mouth. He releases my hand and grabs my waist, hauling me up to him. He backs us into the empty kitchen, setting me on the table and kissing my lips in intervals.

My jaw, my lips.

My neck, my lips.

He raises my left arm and presses achingly tender kisses to the end, all the way up to my shoulder.

I've never felt so adored, so seen. When he brings his lips to mine, I urge him to stay and deepen the kiss. And he does, slanting his mouth over mine, coaxing my lips to match his intensity. His hands are in my hair, on my neck, pulling me closer, kissing me deeper. My own kiss is just as wild. I need Sean.

"What is happening?" a voice booms through the kitchen.

I rip my lips away from Sean to find my angry father in the doorway. "Dad?"

He stomps between the two of us, pulls me off the counter, and pushes Sean away. "I believe I've made it perfectly clear that you need to stay away from my daughter."

Sean folds his arms. “Funny, those aren’t the words I remember.”

“You’re right. There were probably a few expletives. Look, I’ve been generous, I let you two have a little date, but this ends now.”

“Excuse me?” I yell at my dad. He doesn’t run my life. But he doesn’t hear me as he keeps laying into Sean.

“I told you seven years ago, and I’ll tell you now: you’re not good enough for my daughter.”

“What are you talking about?” Ice settles in my veins. What did he do seven years ago? “Dad, look at me. Talk to me please.”

Sean steps around my dad and smiles at me, his hazel eyes like pieces of shattered glass. “It’s fine. Your dad’s right. I’m not nearly good enough for you, Sunny.”

My dad stiffens. I never told him about the nickname.

“No, Sean.” How could this be falling apart so fast? Was it me? Did I do something wrong? My eyes burn, but I refuse to let any tears fall.

“Hey,” Sean whispers. “Don’t cry, beautiful. I’ll be back.” Then he turns and walks out of my shop.

Will he? What if this time he doesn’t come back? I feel like I’m bleeding out and nothing can stop the flow.

I whirl on my dad. “Get out of my shop.”

“London!” He falls back a step. “Don’t talk to me like that. I’m your dad. I

wasprotectingyou.”

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“You’re not protecting me, you’re suffocating me. Please, just leave.”

He blinks and when his blue eyes clear, I see the pain. I look away, not able to bear it. But I don’t regret my words either.

He doesn’t say anything as he slips out the door.

The shop is empty. The sky is dark. I flip the sign closed, lock the door, and cry.

Chapter 24

Sean

Againstmybetterjudgment,I confided in Trent on the way to basketball. He’s been laughing for a solid minute.

“Her dad really broke you guys a part? What rating was this kiss, PG, PG-13, TV-14, TV-MA, R?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Geez, how many ratings are there?”

“More than there used to be,” he says. “Did it bring back memories from high school, being caught by a parent?”

I pull into the parking lot and turn off the truck. “You know, I think I liked it better when you weren’t talking to me.”

I hop out, but he's right on my heels. "You're really serious about her."

"More than anything," I mutter.

"Interesting," he says, pulling open the gym door.

"What's interesting?" Grant asks from where he's lacing up his shoes. He's been pulling late nights with a teething baby lately, it's good to have him back.

"Sean's in love," Trent says.

"I didn't say that."

"It's the best thing I've ever been," Grant says.

Trent and I both look at him. "Dude, come on. That was so cheesy."

"Cheesy, but true." Our buddy Connor slaps Grant's shoulder. He's just gotten engaged and brings it up every week at basketball. All these lovesick fools are ruining the game. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Can't we just play? Like men?" I grumble.

"Sean's grumpy because her dad walked in on them kissing," Trent says so helpfully.

Hoots and hollers echo through the gymnasium. They are clearly enjoying my suffering. I can't fault them too much. I've caused them all to suffer a time or two with the same teasing.

"Did she get grounded?" one of the guys calls.

“Oh, come on now,” Grant shushes everyone. “I’m sure it’s just a time-out.”

“I hate you all.” I take a ball and sprint down the court for a layup. The rest of the guys follow suit warming up and Trent joins me by the hoop.

“So now what?”

I know what he’s asking, but I don’t have a good answer.

“I don’t know. I can’t argue with her dad. I’m not good enough for her, not yet.”

“Is that really what you think?” Trent rebounds the ball and holds it against his side.

“I know I haven’t been your biggest fan lately, but you’re not a bad guy.”

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“Wow, thanks for the glowing review, Karen.”

“I mean it, Sean. You’re ridiculous, a little insane—”

“It keeps getting better.”

“But deep down, like really, really deep—”

“Does this end?”

“Down, you have the biggest heart of any of us. I saw how upset you were when you came home. I’ve never seen you like that. I think you’ve finally found the one that changed everything for you.”

“Ugh, this is getting mushy.” I steal the ball from him.

“Just...don’t give up. That’s the worst thing you can do.”

That was never even a consideration. I’ll never give up on London. I’ll never stop trying to be enough for her.

“Sorry I’m late,” Michael yells as he busts through the doors. “My beautiful wife made steak. Have I mentioned how much I love that woman?”

That's it. This court is no longer sacred. I give up.

London

After crying on the phone with Monica for an hour, I got the nerve to go home and face this head-on.

I unlock the door and tiptoe inside.

Kind of head-on.

My foot hits the spot in the wood flooring that always creaks and I cringe.

“London?” my dad calls.

“Yep.” I purse my lips and resume a normal walk.

The TV shuts off and he cuts me off in the hall before I can make it to my room.

“We need to talk,” he says.

“I know.” I fold my arms and wait for him to do the talking.

“I...” he scratches his neck. “Am I overbearing?”

I squeeze my upper arm. “I know you love me, Dad, but I’m an adult now. I have been for years. But you still treat me like a kid.”

“Because you’re all I have left.” His voice cracks and I reach for him. “When your mom died, I promised myself that I’d protect you.”

“But you can’t protect me from everything in life.”

He sniffs. “I wanted to anyway. It’s hard not to. You’re my little girl. I’ve been over it a million times how I could have saved your mom, and I’ve thought of everything I could have done, and I’ve used it on you.”

“It wasn’t your fault she died, Dad.”

“I know. That’s what my therapist says.”

My eyebrows shoot to the sky. “You have a therapist?”

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“Grandma made me go. I’ve only been once,” he says, looking down at his socks. This is a man who has believed all his life he could fix anything with hard work. But mental work is as important as the physical.

“Dad, I’m proud of you. Mom would be proud of you too.”

He sniffs and looks up. “When you were born, your mom and I decided that no matter what, we would help you accomplish anything. We wanted you to know that nothing was impossible for you.”

“You have, Dad. And I can’t describe how much it has meant to me. You taught me how to believe in my abilities. To work hard and prove myself.”

He scuffs his foot along the ground. “I haven’t given you a chance to do that, have I?”

I squeeze his hand. “You have supported me every step of the way, but now I have to do some things on my own. And you have to trust that I can. And that if I can’t, I will ask for help.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. I’ll always need help handling some things.” I tease. “But my personal relationships are not one of those things.”

His face scrunches up. “Does it really have to be Sean Bentley?”

I bite back a smile. “It really does. I get to choose, for good or bad. If my heart gets broken or not. That’s my choice. You need to trust my judgment and stop scaring him away.”

He grimaces. “About that. My therapist was talking about addressing the past, and...I should probably tell you something.”

The tone of his voice has my knees buckling and I grip the edge of the table. “What?”

“The first day of school, when Sean embarrassed you like that? I nearly went down to the school and yelled at him. Mrs. Beatty wouldn’t let me.”

“Dad!” Thank goodness he was stopped.

“But then he came over the week before prom asking to talk to you. I remembered how upset you’d been that first day, and I lost it.”

I blink. My brain is trying to reconcile the past with what my dad is telling me right now.

“I told him he wasn’t allowed anywhere near you. That he couldn’t take you to prom.”

My head spins. That must have been after he asked me at school. “You’re the reason he stood me up? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t.” His voice cracks and tears spill down his weathered cheeks. “I thought it better you hated him instead of me. The guilt ate at me, and I planned on telling you when you came home, but you looked happy, and I didn’t want to hurt you again.”

I never told him about Trent. I simply said I’d had fun with a friend. Whether that

friend was Sean or his brother, my dad never knew. Never asked.

“Dad...” I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how he could sit there that night watching me fall apart and not say anything. That’s what hurts. Not what he did-it was long ago, and everyone is entitled to a few mistakes-but that he lied about it for so long. I scoot away from the table. “I get why you did it, but I don’t approve of the way you lied to me.”

He nods, not even looking up at me.

“I’m sorry, London, I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“You were wrong about Sean back then. And you’re wrong about him now.”

He nods again. “I hope so, darling. I hope so.”

I hope so too.

Chapter 26

Sean

“You made this?” Michael asks, running his fingers along the smooth walnut desktop.

“I did,” I say, a stirring in my chest. Who knew it felt so good to accomplish things that mattered?

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“I just had to hold his hand a few times,” Grant says with a chuckle.

“I had to let go, it was too sweaty. I don’t know how Lennox stands it,” I tease him back and he snorts.

All the guys have left the shop. It’s closing time, and I’ve recruited Grant and Michael to help me deliver the desk. I don’t know where I stand with London after her dad’s appearance two nights ago and I’ve used the extra time away from her to finish the desk.

I wanted to give her some space, to figure out her feelings. I also wanted to make sure I wasn’t being the same turd I used to be and putting my wants above her needs. Two days away from her, her bakery, her baked goods, nearly did me in. At this point in past relationships I was ready to jump ship, but with London, I feel like I’ve only tasted one of one million flavors and I can’t wait to try the rest.

“Well, let’s wrap it. Who knows when you’ll make something this pretty again” Michael says. The two of them wrap it while I grab the truck and back it up to the open garage door. The desk is small since London won’t be spending much time at it, mostly just to consult with clients who want custom orders. But I figured a beautiful woman should get the most beautiful desk. Which is why I carved a little something into the bottom of each drawer. An ice skate that looks nothing like an ice skate, a Christmas tree, mistletoe (which I still haven’t managed to locate, apparently they are out of stock in every store within a thirty-mile radius), and an S+L inside a heart.

We get it loaded and strapped easily enough, and head through town. Grant opted to bring his own vehicle so he could take himself and Michael home after. But I think it

was more the fact that he didn't want to sit on the hump seat between us.

"Where's Trent?" Michael asks suddenly as if he just remembered we have another brother.

I had originally asked Trent for help, but then he'd confided in me his secret. "He's...got an errand." Is picking out wedding rings considered an errand? Most people do that between picking up eggs and getting the car washed, right?

"Well, I'm glad you guys are on better terms so we can enjoy one last work party all together."

"Don't get too excited, I heard Dad hired another pig."

"He did not."

I only shrug. "Who's turn is it to embarrass themselves this year?" Two years ago Lennox had pulled a massive prank on us, ending the night with some interesting fireworks between her and Grant, the year before that my date made me belly dance with her, Trent toppled over a table and a psycho pig had a vendetta against Michael. Last year my grandma came in a bathrobe.

That's where I saw that black robe she made me wear for the heist.

"Don't jinx us," Michael mutters.

I laugh as I pull into the strip mall, driving around the back and counting the doors until I find the bakery. "I'll go talk to her; you start unstrapping it. Be careful, I don't want it dented."

Michael lifts an unamused brow. "Thank goodness you're not my boss."

“Nah, but Juliet is,” I snicker.

I hop out of the truck we affectionately refer to as Big Bird, because it’s the biggest, ugliest, yellowest truck there ever was.

I pull open the bakery door and run right into Grady.

“Oh, hey man.”

“I found a duck in the bathroom,” he says.

It takes me a moment to understand what he means. I bought a couple dozen miniature resin ducks and hid them around the shop the last time I was working here. I’ve been waiting for London to find them. “Cute, huh?”

“Did you know they glow in the dark?” Judging by his terse expression, he did not think it was cute.

“I did not. How fun,” I grin.

“I don’t understand why London likes you.”

I only smile bigger. “You and me both, buddy. Aren’t I lucky? Hey, where is she?”

He nods to the office.

Perfect.

“Knock, knock.”

London looks up from her laptop. “You know that’s more of an action than

dialogue.”

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“Good to know.” I walk over to her and pick up her scattered pens and notepads, a few recipes, and a single duck. So she did find one. I turn over the small box she added to her makeshift desk.

“What are you doing?”

“You’ll see.” I take her laptop from her and then gently settle it in the small box. I carry the box to the kitchen to keep it safe then go back to her office and stomp on the remaining box.

“Sean!” she screeches. “What are you doing?”

I hold a hand out to her. “Will you come with me, beautiful?”

“What is happening right now?” she asks, sticking her hand in mine.

“You’ll see.” I pull her out of the office.

“You’re infuriating, did you know that? First, you kiss me—”

“I think you kissed me.”

“And then you just leave, saying you’ll talk to me later, but then you disappear for two days, and you don’t say a single thing before waltzing in and making a mess of things again.”

“Oh, I have lots of things to say.”

“Meanwhile, I’m thinking of every worst-case scenario. I also learned some interesting things from my dad about prom.”

I didn’t want to do this yet, but we’ve reached the point where we can’t not talk about it. I prop the door open with my foot, but neither of us walks through.

Her fingers play with the sticker on her prosthetic, a sad little rain cloud. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner what my dad did?”

I scrub a hand down my face. “The truth was, I didn’t even know I had stood you up until about three weeks ago. Even though I was too stubborn to admit it back then, I thought Trent was the better option for you. He was all the things I wasn’t. I didn’t want to say anything to you about the past, because I was afraid your dad was still right about me, that I’m not worthy of you. In fact, I know I’m not. I could live a thousand lifetimes and still never measure up to you but it won’t stop me from trying. You don’t have to believe me yet but I promise—”

“Sean...” She shakes her head, and a few tears slip from the corner of her eyes. I brush them away for her. “He was wrong. So wrong. I see you.”

“For the record, I look better at golden hour,” I grin.

Her eyes grow intent on mine. “You have a sun tattoo on your arm. Why?”

She saw it. I roll up my sleeve, turning my arm out until the two-inch sun on my bicep is visible. “It started as a bet gone wrong.”

“A bet?” Her expression falls and I hurry to explain.

“It was Lennox’s fault. Anyway, the first tattoo was a mistake. I didn’t know what I wanted to get when I went in to cover it up. But then I saw this and it was perfect.”

“Why?”

“Because you, Sunny, were the one that got away,” I whisper, dropping my arm and pulling her into me.

She tilts her chin up to me. “I came back.”

“Well, technically I did. I’ve got the scar to prove it.”

She shakes her head but smiles. “Always a competition with you.”

I brush my lips along her cheek. “I just know what I want.”

Her whole body shudders and it’s maddening. I move my lips over hers, hovering only momentarily before kissing her sweet, red lips. She tastes like apple pie.

I pull back. “Do you have pie in there?”

She laughs. “Yeah.”

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“I’m going to need some of that later, but right now...” I brush my lips across hers.
“This is all I need.”

“I need you,” she whispers against my lips.

She has no idea how much I’ve longed to hear those words.

I suck in her bottom lip and she moans, the sound making me dizzy. I settle her against the door frame and kiss her like I never stopped two nights ago. This kiss could be hours or merely seconds. Time no longer matters now that it's not separating us anymore.

“Careful, you two, I’ve heard that’s how babies are made.” Grant’s annoying voice ruins the kiss.

London gasps and jumps away from me.

I chuckle. “He’s kidding; making babies is a lot more—”

“Shut up.” London punches my stomach then glances at Grant and Michael. “Sorry, who are you?”

“These are my brothers. They came to help me with something.”

She looks them over. “Is Sean making you guys fix my shop now, too?”

Michael raises a brow, but I just shrug. I don’t need to explain myself to him. We all

do different things for love.

“I thought you appreciated my help,” I smirk down at her.

“Most of the time.”

“Well, hopefully, this makes up for the other times.” The guys step to the side, revealing the walnut desk.

“What? Sean?” London looks at me. “What is this?”

“It’s a desk. I believe its primary function is for writing, though I’ve never been too fond of that particular activity.”

“I know what it is, you goof.” She rolls her eyes. “You made it for me?”

I shrug. “I like you.”

Her cheeks turn pink because I’m pretty sure she knows I more than like her. I’m falling for her. Head over heels from the moment I busted into her shop three weeks ago.

“Thank you.” She looks away.

“Should we take it inside now?” Michael hedges. We get it, he has a wife to get home to.

London holds the door for us, and we make quick work of installing it. Then Grant and Michael leave. With a pie each. I’m a little jealous when London only offers me a single slice across the bar.

“I still can’t believe you did that, Sean.”

I take a big bite, chewing and swallowing before answering her. “London, I realized exactly twenty-four days ago, that all I have done in my life is ruin things.”

“What happened twenty-four days ago?”

“I drugged Trent with Benadryl and took him to Vegas.” I wave my hand in front of her worried expression. “Don’t worry, we’re cool now, worked it out in a mud pit.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t understand you Bentleys sometimes.”

“Anyway, I don’t want to be that guy. And ever since I found you again, I feel like I can be more than my mistakes.”

She leans over the bar. “Sean, I hope you know you’re worth so much more than that.”

“Only if you’re by my side.”

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A grin pulls at her lips. “Sean Bentley, are you asking me to be your girlfriend?”

I scoop up a dollop of whipped cream and poke her nose. “Yes ma’am.”

She gasps. “No more food fights in my kitchen.”

I round the minibar. “But the last one was so fun.”

She slips my pie away and holds it behind her back.

“Wait, no. I’ll obey.” I grab her waist. “I simply can’t live without your sweets.” I waggle my brows.

“You’re such a charmer. I don’t know if I can put up with this.” She tilts her chin, tempting me with those perfect lips. “That and your propensity for messes.”

“You know what they say if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” I pucker my lips, tempting her back.

Instead of her sweet lips, I’m met with a whole piece of pink lemonade pie to the face. I’m shocked, only for a moment. Which she uses to sprint away with the cutest little cackle laugh I’ve ever heard. Then I grin, wipe the pie off my face, and rush after her.

“I think you understand Bentleys just fine.”

London

“This is a stupid idea.”

“No, It’s a great idea,” Monica protests.

“But Sean and I are moving on from the past. I don’t want him to feel bad all over again.”

“Correction. Tonight, you are rewriting the past, and let’s be clear. He’s only going to be thinking about how sexy you are in that dress.”

I run my hands down the purple tulle. I had the bottom skirt shortened a bit, so I don’t trip when bringing in and plating desserts, but the rest of the dress is the same. Light lavender, spaghetti straps, and V-neck that shows off a little more cleavage than I had in high school. It’s still to die for.

Sean’s work party is tonight, and the theme is a holiday carnival, which is confusing, but hey, that’s out of my hands.

“Are you sure?” I ask one last time.

“Positive,” Monica says.

“Okay.” I finally accept this is a good idea and hang up. I head to my store where my dad and Grady are finishing loading up the desserts. Grady will help me get them into the Bentleys, but I wanted to plate them myself to make sure they are perfect.

“Have fun sweetheart,” Dad says, handing me the keys. “And keep your pho—” he stops himself. “Just have fun, alright?”

“I will.” I press a kiss on his cheek and hop in the van with Grady. He’ll take it back after we get everything unloaded, and Sean offered to give me a ride home.

I’m a bundle of nerves as I drive to the party. I hardly slept last night, too busy making the final touches on the fifty desserts Mr. Bentley ordered and thinking about Sean. I’ve thought of little else since he asked me to be his girlfriend a couple nights ago.

When we pull up to the Bentley house, my jaw drops.

“Is that a Ferris wheel?” Grady asks, eyes trained on the tip of the Ferris wheel visible over the house from the backyard.

There’s nothing else it could be.

“Let’s go see.” I smile over at him and hop out of the van.

I texted Sean an hour ago letting him know I’d be early and setting up in the kitchen, but he hasn’t responded. What if he stands me up again?

No. This is his work party. Not prom. I shouldn’t have worn this stupid dress; it’s bringing out all my past fears. Everything is fine because I trust Sean. Heart and soul.

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I ring the doorbell and wait a few moments. Mrs. Bentley opens the door looking as beautiful as she did all those years ago.

“London, right?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“I remember you, and that dress. You are stunning, darling, come in.”

“Oh, I have the desserts as well. Where should I bring them?”

“Right this way.” She waits for me to grab them out of the van and leads Grady and me through the house.

“This looks amazing,” Mrs. Bentley says, moving over some potatoes for the box of funnel cakes. I agree with that move.

“Thanks,” I say, laying everything out in order. “Fried food is kind of a staple of a carnival, so we have funnel cake sundaes topped with fried cookie dough bites.”

“Mmm, you had me at fried.” She helps me unload the boxes, asking a million questions about where I learned to bake, and all about my business. After she’s run out, she moves on to the next obvious subject.

“So you’ve forgiven Sean?”

I shake my head, placing the final box on top of another. “There was nothing to

forgive. It was a misunderstanding.”

She sighs and offers me water from the fridge. I opt for the only coconut water. My nerves are still on the fritz.

“That’s always where Sean has struggled, being misunderstood. It didn’t help that he was so ashamed of being dyslexic and had a really hard time in school.”

I didn’t know that. And the news only makes me love him more. He’s human. He’s imperfect.

“I’m glad he’s found someone who understands him.” She arches a brow at me.

I chuckle. “I wouldn’t say that exactly. That might take a lifetime.”

“I hope it does,” she winks.

My cheeks burn with the confession I’ve just made, but I don’t take it back.

While we’ve been talking in the kitchen, the noise beyond has grown louder. Someone whistles, and Mrs. Bentley jumps.

“Oh, the party. We’re late, and we are already here.” She rushes out of the kitchen, but I stay behind. I tell myself it’s just to check on a few things, but I’m nervous. What I need is Sean. Where is he? Why hasn’t he found me yet?

I check the lids on the containers one more time for no obvious reason, then slowly walk out of the kitchen. Someone had been talking, but now people are making their way outside.

I slip behind an older couple and follow the horde. The backyard is even more

incredible now that the sun has gone down. There are lights in every tree and bright neon signs along the fences. In the pool, there's a floating flamingo, a Christmas tree, and a clown.

The Ferris wheel isn't the only ride. There's also a merry-go-round and several little booths with stuffed prizes.

This is... insanely awesome. It would be incredibly romantic if my boyfriend would magically appear.

I head for the food line like everyone else but stop when I see a familiar figure.

“Trent?”

He looks up from the gorgeous woman he's talking to and blinks repeatedly. Did he forget who I was?

He clears his throat, the sound like tires on gravel.

“London?”

I walk toward him, relieved to be remembered.

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“London.” He wraps me in a hug. “Wow, it’s like deja vu. Is that the same dress?” He glances down, then seems to think better of it and returns to the woman's side, putting a possessive arm around her.

“Yeah,” I shrug. “I felt like it fit the occasion.”

“It definitely does,” the woman says. “I tried to wear a poodle skirt but he wouldn’t let me.” She pinches his side.

“I said you could,” Trent says. “I said no to the actual poodle you wanted to buy.”

“But he was so cute. I wanted to call him Hobie.” The woman grins, and Trent looks down at her with nothing but pure love.

“Maybe next Christmas,” he whispers. “I already have a gift for you.”

The woman snuggles up next to him but then seems to remember I’m still standing here as witness to this adorable exchange. “I’m Karli. How do you guys know each other?”

“We were friends from high school,” I say at the same time Trent says, “We went to prom together.”

Karli raises a brow. “I sense a good story.” She squeezes Trent’s arm. “Please say there’s a good story. Did you wear the chainmail to prom?”

I laugh. I like her.

“No, I did not,” Trent grunts.

A warm hand slides around my waist and I know without looking who it belongs to.

“He just stole my prom date.”

Chapter 28

Sean

Sunny...that dress...she's making my head spin. I can't comprehend her beauty fast enough, it's like my brain is on overload trying to take in her curves, and every piece of skin I'd like to place a kiss on. I can't believe she wore it.

“The girl you've been seeing is London?” Trent's brows furrow as he looks between London and me.

I grin. It was worth keeping this info from him just to see the dumbfounded look on his face.

“Aren't I lucky?” I grin, squeezing London's waist.

“So...I was right, there is a juicy story,” Karli says, looking pointedly at Trent.

Trent, whose eyes are wide and... guilty?

What's that about?

“No story,” Trent says quickly.

“Oh,” London laughs. “Trent was a sweet guy and took me to prom after my dad scared Sean away,” she says to Karli.

I clench my jaw. That's not quite how I remember it happening. But sure, we'll go with her version.

"Ah," Karli coos, squeezing Trent's bicep. "He's such a gentleman."

I grunt. Such a gentleman? He took my date. "Yeah, it's not like he kissed her or anything."

Trent's eyes widen, and London turns stiff in my arms.

What...? No. He didn't. I clench my jaw. Don't get mad. It's in the past—

"You kissed my girlfriend?"

Whoops. Got mad.

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Trent jumps behind Karli and London grabs my arm to pull me back, but I am a man on a mission.

“It was years ago! She wasn’t even your girlfriend.”

“She is now!” Something snaps in me, and I lunge for him. He was so mad I’d kidnapped him. But he’s not so innocent, is he? He darts away, but I chase him down. This is payback for the last month of heck he put me through.

“How about we call this even?” Trent calls over his shoulder.

“I’m still going to throw you in the pool,” I say, a split second before I jump on him, launching us both into the water. Something pops and slows our fall. The cool water takes the edge off my anger. But I still pop back up to the surface intent on dunking him a few times for good measure.

“Stop!” Trent splutters, pushing away from me. “Truce?”

“Yeah, man. Truce.” I shove the hair out of my eyes. “Still can’t believe you kissed her, though.”

Trent coughs. “Just once. Then she turned me down so kindly I couldn’t be mad at her.”

That sounds like my girl.

“Hey, Sean?”

I turn toward the edge of the pool where only Michael is standing. Everyone else has written this off as another one of my stunts. But it's the last one. I promise.

Trent and I trudge out of the water. "Yeah?"

"Remember when you asked who was going to make a fool of themselves?"

I shake my hair out, shivering as I accept the towel he's extending. "I know. Go ahead, sing some Taylor Swift to me. I'm the problem." I grin at him. "Or do you want to sing some JB? I hear you're a fan. I'd like to see that t-shirt—"

Michael's narrowed eyes are the only indication I get before I'm shoved back into the pool.

I come up in time to hear Trent joke about Juliet's loose lips. And ask if that's why Michael married her.

Michael crosses his arms. "Should we talk about the chainmail, Trent? Is it a fetish or—"

And then Michael's in the pool.

Chapter 29

London

Sean's dried off and dressed in a fitted white t-shirt. I enjoyed the suit he was wearing before, but this look is no less attractive.

"Are you done playing in the pool?" I grin when he sits down by me on a bench. While he and his brothers were fighting, I ate dinner with Karli, Juliet, and Lennox

who told me story after story about the brothers. I officially love their whole family.

“Unless you want to go for a dip?” He wraps an arm around me.

“I’m good. For now,” I grin. “Is Trent going to live to see another day?”

“Ah.” He scratches the scruff on his chin. “I wasn’t really mad.”

I arch a brow.

“Okay, I was a little, but mostly mad I never got the chance to kiss you back then.”

I purse my lips. “Would it help if I told you you’re a better kisser than him?”

A heat burns behind his eyes. “Immensely.”

“Well...” I reach up, leaving only an inch between our lips. “You’re not.”

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The heat becomes a fire, and I leap off the bench. But he's only a step behind me. He scoops me up and into his arms bridal style.

"You're going to get it now," he growls.

"Are you going to throw me in the pool?" I ask, not afraid at all.

"I love you too much for that," he murmurs. "How about a ride instead?"

Love. Sean just said love. Should I acknowledge that slip of the tongue?

"I was wondering when you were going to do something romantic," I tease, tickling the hair at the base of his head.

He shivers. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were a member of the family already."

"I learned from the best."

"So, in your humble and unbiased opinion, am I the best Bentley?"

I laugh, remembering the time I told Trent he was the better Bentley. He might have been better back then, but Sean is the best, for me.

"I suppose. But don't let it go to your head."

"Too late."

The Ferris wheel operator motions us forward, informing Sean he will have to let go of me. To which Sean replies never. And then the ride operator threatens to not let us ride, so I have to tell him it was a joke.

But Sean takes one look at the waiting carriage and frowns. “We’ll wait for the next one.”

“Sean,” I tug his arm. “That one’s fine.”

“Nah, it looks like a bolt is missing,” he says, eyeing the operator.

The guy rolls his eyes and starts up the ride again.

Sean tucks me into his side as we watch the Ferris wheel spin and I wrap my arm around his waist, placing my little arm on his chest. He takes hold of it like it's a gift, pressing a kiss on it. Then he turns my face kissing me like it's all he's thought about tonight. His fingers trace the ties up my back, then get lost in my hair.

“Uh-hmm.” The operator clears his throat and I untangle my lips from Sean's. He motions us forward as the ride slows down.

Sean lets me get settled first before stepping on. Once the bar is over our legs Sean pulls me into his side.

I lean into him, enjoying his warmth as the ride starts up again. We pass by the tops of trees, then over houses. The neighborhood below us is lit with thousands of Christmas lights and it's magical to experience it from up here. We circle back down then head up again but the ride slows when we reach the top.

“Hey, Sunny?” Sean whispers, pulling me tighter as the ride stops to let more people on.

I nuzzle in closer. “Yeah?”

“Why did you name your shop Sunny’s Sweets?”

“I liked the nickname,” I shrug.

“Me too, but there’s more to it than that. Although I am excellent at giving nicknames.”

He laces his fingers through mine and I give a resigned sigh. “When I moved here, I was lost in the dark. But that day you introduced me like that, something flipped like a switch in me. I’d been planning to hide for the rest of the year. But all at once I wasn’t in the shadows anymore, I could just be myself. Everyone knew me. Everyone said hi to me. You think I’m your sunshine, but you were mine.”

He pulls my chin up until I can read the look in his eyes telling me very plainly how much he cares for me.

“Would you call me crazy if I said I loved you?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, my heart racing. “Honestly, Sean, nothing you do surprises me anymore.”

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“Really? That sounds like a challenge.” His eyes flick to the sky. “Sunny, look.”

“What?” I look where he’s pointing. There’s a sprig of mistletoe directly above our heads. How did I not notice it before?

“It’s a Christmas miracle.” He grins.

“That’s where you were.” I nudge him.

He laughs and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “Sorry, it took longer than I thought to find mistletoe and then convince that guy to let me hook up some wires to hang it.”

I tilt my chin up to him. “It’s about time.”

“Just wait for your Christmas present.” He whispers, his tone hinting at promises and temptation.

Shivers race down my spine.

“I rented a hairy beer gut.”

“Sean!” I laugh. “That is the least romantic thing ever.”

“You’re the one who wanted the lumberjack.”

“No,” I shake my head. “I just wanted you.”

“Then your Christmas wish has come true because I’m all yours.”

Epilogue

London

OpeningDay

I step back from the door. The banner is perfectly aligned. Thanks to Sean and my dad painstakingly adjusting it again and again, according to my wishes last night. And thankfully, neither of them tried to kill the other while setting everything up. They even talked a little. Let me rephrase that, I made them talk. But after twenty very painful minutes, they finally found something they could connect with. Besides loving me.

Their distaste for Hallmark. Of all things.

I open the door, leaving it unlocked behind me. My bakery doesn't technically open for another thirty minutes, but I'm too excited.

“Hey, beautiful.”

I spin and throw my arms around Sean. “You’re here.”

“Where else would I be?” He drops a soft kiss on my lips. “I got you something for today.” He holds up a sticker to his chest. A little sun, next to his shirt that says, “You are my sunshine.”

I press a lingering kiss on his cheek. “I love it.”

“I knew you would. My mom says I’m not a good gift giver, but I’m winning so far,”

he teases.

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m still finding those tiny ducks all over my shop.”

“Oops.” He grins, but there’s absolute mirth in his eyes.

I poke his cheek. “You hid something else, didn’t you?”

“When you find it, let me know.”

“Sean!” Now I want to throw open every cabinet in search of whatever he left me, but I have an opening to attend to.

He grins and scoops me into his arms. “Just a little something to make you smile, and take your mind off the stress of the day.”

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I love him. “You already make me smile.” I grin, closing the distance between our lips.

“Then I guess I’m doing my job.” He kisses me until the worry about my grand opening fades away. Today is just another day, another chance to live my dreams. Another day to love him.

I finally pull away, my lips swollen and my vision hazy. “Time to get to work.”

“Yes ma’am.” He salutes me.

I run through the menu again with Cassie and check on Grady in the kitchen. But they don’t need me hovering around them, they’ve got this.

I’ve got this.

“Hey, darling,” my dad says, walking in the front door. “Where do you want me?”

“Uh, sitting at the table pretending to enjoy everything?”

“Honey, I’ll never have to pretend.” He kisses my head before carrying an actual newspaper to the table in the corner. A newspaper. Is he finally taking my advice and slowing down?

“I want his job,” Sean says, sliding up next to me and holding out a coffee.

“You’d eat me out of business,” I tease, taking a sip of the warm liquid and letting it

melt my nerves.

He places both hands on my hips and turns me into him. “What about the part where he gets to call you darling and honey?”

I shrug, hiding my smile behind my cup. “No one’s stopping you.”

He wiggles his eyebrows. “What if I call you...” He leans down and presses a kiss to the sensitive part of my neck. “My Sunny.”

I grin. “I like it. Let’s keep it.”

He laughs then I tell him where he will be handing out free samples and mingling, basically selling the bakery to anyone who walks in those doors. He’s a smooth talker, that’s why I gave him this job.

Two of my aunts come next, promising the cousins will come in and out throughout the day and talk me up to anyone who will listen. My grandma is still resting at home but doing much better. I invited absolutely everyone I could think of. But what if it’s not enough?

The crowd is slow at first, but the second ten o'clock hits, families of all sorts make their way through the door. Even a woman I recognize from a hilarious TikTok video a year ago and her little boy.

I’m about to approach her when I see Sean’s family walking in. Well, everyone except for Trent and Karli, who are currently on their honeymoon. Each of them is wearing a shirt that says, “Here for the sweets.”

I know without a doubt Sean did this. And I love him for it. I look over at him where he’s handing out samples to the families milling about, paying special attention to a

little boy with red hair. This bakery was my dream, but I didn't even realize part of my dream was missing until I found him.

"Look at this turnout." Mrs. Bentley hugs me. "This is incredible."

"Thank you."

"You've convinced me, I think I'll have one of everything." Mr. Bentley says and goes to the counter, rubbing his stomach.

Mrs. Bentley is on his heels. "Oh no you don't. You're supposed to be watching your sugar intake."

"Says who?"

"The doctors."

Why does it feel like that will be me and Sean in twenty-five years?

I glance around the bakery, the laughter and happiness, the feeling of family. This is exactly what I wanted my bakery to be.

The back of my eyes sting and I slip into my office. I close the door behind me, allowing myself to breathe for a moment. This day could not be more perfect. Mom would have loved it.

A tear slips down my cheek and I go to my desk, absently rubbing my fingers along the smooth top. I open the top drawer and freeze, hand hovering over the tiny bag of tissues. There next to Sean's heart carving is the world's tiniest rolling pin.

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I laugh, picking up the note attached to it.

For the next time I do something wrong, I give you permission to use this.

I stick the tiny rolling pin in my apron pocket with a smile. He's pretty good at fixing things, but he's incredible at making me happy.

"London!" Sean calls.

I leave the office and find him by the counter. "What?"

"So...two things. One, we're out of all the samples, but Grady is making more right now."

What? How did I not notice? I made hundreds of samples and it's only been a few hours. "Sean, how many are you giving away?"

He purses his lips. "Probably more than I should. But Crew said he was training to be Spiderman and that requires at least five mini cupcakes."

I shake my head. He's much too kind and giving. And I'd never fault him for it.

"What's the second thing?"

"There's a reporter from the paper asking for you. He's sitting over there next to your dad."

I glance at my dad's table to find the two of the men happily chatting away. Hopefully saying all good things about the store. "Did you over-serve him samples as well?"

"Of course. So anyway—"

"You!" Sean and I both jump at the loud screech that just came from the front door. There are three sullen figures in long dresses and dark capes.

Sean curses.

"Sean?" I gasp, my eyes frantically darting between the reporter and the witches coven. How many witches make up a coven? Never mind, there are more pressing issues.

"You're the one who took our cat!" the one in the center calls before the three of them pull out wands and rush toward Sean.

"On second thought, I am way overserving. I'm going to do you a favor and fire myself," Sean says a split second before kissing my cheek and sprinting out the back door with three angry witches hot on his tail.

"Dessert and entertainment." Sean's grandma chuckles, raising what looks like a bottle of wine. I do not sell wine. "Doesn't get better than that, folks."

I, for one, hope it does get better. And that none of this ends up in the article.

The man writing the article meets me at the counter. "You know, you didn't need to try and impress me with the witch act. Your baking speaks for itself. I loved everything I tried. Everyone in Phoenix needs to visit your bakery, and that's exactly what I'm going to put in my article."

My jaw drops. “Are you serious?” About so many things. First, he thought I was trying to impress him. I could kiss Sean for his craziness. But did he love it that much? I know it’s only one person’s positive opinion, but that’s all I need for now. One person at a time.

This is the best grand opening I could have imagined.

Given the witches don’t curse my boyfriend.

Bonus Epilogue

Sean

Just One More Bentley Christmas

TwoYearsLater

There have been many wild holidays in my time. But this one takes the cake. And not because Emmett got into the actual cake twenty minutes ago. Which was unfortunate because it was my favorite kind my beautiful wife made just for me.

It’s fine, though. It would just go to my stomach, which currently cannot hold anything more than the twelve-pound watermelon strapped to it.

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Why am I wearing a watermelon? Well, besides the obvious benefits for my glutes, nine months ago, not one, but all four of our wives ended up pregnant. Too much kissing, folks. And get this, we are all expecting daughters, merely weeks apart. Can you believe that? Bentleys with girls? Whatever will we do with them? More importantly, though, what won't we do for them? And now I firmly believe pregnancy and the accompanying symptoms are contagious, because let me tell you, the last nine months have proved it true. When one girl gets a craving, they all get it. One a pain, all a pain. I think between the four of them, they've cried for nine months straight.

Of course, we have a running bet on who will go into labor first. There's a hot tub on the line.

One night at family dinner while the girls were cooling off in the pool, us guys made the mistake of complaining, in the kindest way of course, about their wild hormones which led to this. "The gift of experiencing things you know nothing about." Lennox's words when we all opened identical boxes with watermelons and duct tape this morning.

Hence the watermelons that have been stuck to our stomachs the entire day. It's been seven hours now, and yes, I'm eating my words. London is superwoman.

"Having fun boys?" Karli grins.

"Loads," Trent mutters.

"My back hurts," Michael groans. The second the words are out of his mouth, Juliet sprays him in the face with water.

That was one of the conditions. No complaining.

London walks over to me. She's incredibly beautiful. The round belly only adds to her appeal. I've watched her accomplish so many things in life. Because of a few trending online videos, and her killer desserts, her bakery is booming. She's doing so well I work part-time at the shop and part-time with her. Though, we don't always get much work done. But what I most look forward to, is seeing her become a mother.

"Are you ready to give up?" she asks, perching on the edge of my chair with a grimace. I immediately press my hands to her hips, massaging her like I learned in our childbirth class.

"Never. These guys are wimps and will quit before me." And I hope one of them quits soon because my feet are starting to swell.

"I could go for days," Grant smiles, rubbing his watermelon.

"If you don't start putting your socks in the laundry basket, you might have to," Lennox says and Grant chuckles.

"Alright then," Juliet says. "Here's your last gift. Let's see who wins." She hands Michael a wrapped box. Throughout the day the girls have given us "gifts." After the morning rush, they gave us cleaning supplies and we got to clean up after everyone, mainly Emmett who is a little tornado. It was harder than I thought it would be. I had to resort to picking stuff up with my toes and kicking it in the air. For lunch? Pickles and peanut butter, with a side of Cheetos. Safe to say I'll never be eating those items again. They did let us take a nap at one point, which would have been nice if I could have gotten comfortable. But my personal favorite was the matching pairs of New Balance "dad shoes" that we had to put on ourselves and then go for a mile walk. Lots of honks and whistles with that one.

Michael opens the single package and pulls out four pink speedos.

Someone call it quits already.

“Careful boys,” Grandma cackles, “If you wear those, your babies will be born naked.”

“Grandma!” Lennox busts up, and then the rest of us join in. Everyone clutching their protruding bellies.

When the laughter has died down, Juliet explains the speedos. “It’s time for your workout. You must stay healthy while growing another human.”

“Think you can do it?” London asks, laying a tempting kiss on my cheek.

“Don’t you know me better than that yet? I will do anything to beat my brothers.” I turn and look at her. “And to show you how much I love you.”

“You’re going to be a great dad,” she whispers. I drop a kiss on her belly, then meet her lips.

“I just have to be better than them,” I tease.

She heaves herself off the chair and then holds out a hand to me. “Come on, in the pool you go.”

“Now, this is a look.” I chuckle ten minutes later when all four of us are standing by the pool wearing watermelons and speedos.

“Karli, put your phone away,” Trent says. “I can’t. I really can’t.” She’s laughing so hard she’s crying, but she’s crossing her legs, so she doesn’t pee. Something I’ve

learned over the course of the day is it's hard to control your bladder when there's something constantly pushing on it.

Lennox drops an armful of towels onto a chair. "You have to run two laps around the yard. Then twenty burpees, followed by six laps in the pool."

"Don't throw up," Mom calls down from the balcony where she, my grandma, my dad, and Emmett are enjoying the show with hot chocolate and popcorn. Earlier my dad said this was the best Christmas he can remember. I'll be sure to gift him a watermelon next year.

"If you do, you'll have to clean it," Juliet says.

"There will be a surprise in the pool when you're done," Karli adds.

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“It better be my wife,” I say, shooting her a grin.

London blushes and shakes her head.

“Alright, on your mark, get set, go!”

I take off, sprinting around the yard. My parents’ yard is huge. Nearly an acre, and by the time I’ve completed one lap, I have to pee. But I continue because I’m not about to lose to my brothers.

We finish around the same time and then drop into burpees at the edge of the pool. I hate burpees. My heart is beating at a pace it shouldn’t considering my age. Perhaps I should stop taste-testing so many of London’s desserts. I pause at ten and wait for the world to stop spinning. My parents and grandma have disappeared. That, or I’m losing consciousness.

Cool water will help. I take comfort in the fact that everyone else is struggling just as much as I am. By the time I finish, I slide like a slug into the water. Screw swimming; I’m walking.

The girls have left now as well. They better be getting suits on to join us. If I don’t see my wife in a skimpy bikini, I’m going to be very upset.

The pool isn’t a full lap pool, so we are each done in no time. I lean against the wall farthest away from the house.

“That was brutal,” I mutter.

“I can’t feel my butt,” Michael moans, grabbing onto the wall next to me.

“Let’s pray it’s over,” Trent says.

“I think I’m getting rope burn from this duct tape,” Grant says, his first complaint of the day.

Something moves around my waist. I look down to see scraps of pink fabric circling the water around me. Uh oh.

“Hey, guys?” I say.

“Huh?”

“Are your speedos disappearing?”

Michael screams. Like a little girl, I might add. And Trent and Grant curse. Good thing all the girls went inside.

Not quite the surprise I had in mind. I’ll definitely have to get London back for this, and I’m very much looking forward to it.

“Sean, get out and get us a towel,” Michael says.

“Why do I have to?”

“Because you’re the most...”

“Yes?” I’d like to know how he plans to end this.

“Sean!”

I turn to the house where London has just let out an unearthly scream. She's waddling out the back door, hand over her eyes.

What is she doing? She's going to fall.

"London! Stop!" I jump out of the pool, grab a towel, and sprint for her. All of it was made harder to do by the watermelon strapped to me. Apparently, my pregnant wife putting herself in danger is all I need to get out of an awkward skinny-dipping session. "What's wrong?"

Her hand is shaking, and I steady it in mine. "My water broke."

For about ten seconds I stand there, unsure what to do. Then my face bursts into a grin. She's coming. Our baby girl is coming, and not that it matters, but I totally won the bet.

"Are you okay? You're not going to pass out right?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet. But I make no promises for the hospital."

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“I’ve got you, Sunny. Always.” I press a kiss to her lips for luck, for love, for hope.

“We’ve got this,” she nods.

“Let’s go. Your bag is in the car, right?” I hold her arms, steadying her so she doesn’t slip on the slick surface I’ve made. I can’t believe I’m going to be a dad. Gosh, I hope I don’t let her down. I’m sure even the best parents let their kids down at some point. But I’m never giving up on this little girl.

“Yeah, all the hospital stuff is in the car. But you need to change,” London says.

“I thought you liked me for me.”

“I meant the watermelon!” she yells then bends over with a scream. She’s killing my hand, but I’m not about to complain. We’ve all learned that lesson well today. “I,” she takes a breath and stands up straighter. “Am not having a baby while my husband wears a watermelon and a towel!”

“I’ve got clothes somewhere around here.” Hopefully.

“Hey!” Michael hollers. “The towels.”

“Sorry, no time. Merry Christmas, boys!”