



Room 405 (The Scarlet Hotel #13)

Author: *Trisha Linde*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Behind closed doors at The Scarlet Hotel, anything can happen even a change of heart.

All Liam has ever wanted is to open the café and bakery of his dreams. If only it hadn't taken the inheritance after his grandfather died to give him the money to finally be able to afford it. Uprooting his whole life, he moves to the city to jump in with both feet. He assumes he'll be taken seriously—as a man, an omega, and a business owner. But when he finds himself butting heads with an employee from the café down the street, he's not afraid of a little friendly competition—or to play dirty, if that's what it takes.

Alpha Jared has been working at Crave for years, ever since his boss took him under his wing. He gave him a place to belong, a family, and when he sees the café moving in down the block, he worries that it might put his boss's business at risk. He tells himself it is with the best of intentions that he finds himself locked in a battle of underhanded pranks—and it certainly doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he can't seem to stay away from the bakery's sexy owner.

Total Pages (Source): 24

The Staff

The Scarlet Hotel had been around for a long time. Almost a hundred years, in fact, dating back to when Friedrich Holland had first built the place in the late 1920s. And in that time, it had seen the world remade ten times over. War and peace, economical boom and bust, changes in politics and fashion and technology. Yet, here it still stood, an icon of a bygone era.

Conner Rose had always been halfway in awe of the place, even before he'd been hired to work the front desk. He had memories from his childhood of standing in front of the austere building, admiring its classic architecture and glamorous guests. Now, even though he wore the same uniform as every other staff member—same crimson coat and black pants, white button-up and black tie—he couldn't force himself to believe that he truly fit in, and not just because he was the youngest by far.

At 20 years old, he was still afflicted with that post-teen awkwardness, all gangly limbs and a clumsy gait that came with a late growth spurt that he'd never really gotten used to. His beard—if the strict dress code had permitted him to grow one, that is—grew in rust-colored patches in contrast to his blond hair, and every time he was left to watch the front desk alone, he broke out in a cold sweat. His boss, Monsieur Holland, had told him that confidence would come with time and experience, and Conner could only hope that was true.

It was during one of these terrifying moments of alone time, his supervisor Emily having stepped away from the desk, that a young omega came in through the front door. It was a good thing Sandy had opened the door for him, because his arms were laden with a stack of sage-green boxes tall enough to block his view. He had a large

black duffle bag over one shoulder and walked carefully, unable to see where he was going.

As the man approached the desk, Conner started to worry. “Uh, hey, sir? You’d better slow down... Hey, whoa !” he ended up shouting when the man was just two feet from the counter and showing no signs of stopping. Conner had instinctively reached, arms outstretched, as if to catch him, but luckily, his shout had gotten the man’s attention as it echoed loudly off the marble foyer, drawing attention from a couple on the lounge over by the window.

A head, topped with a mop of curly brown hair, peeked around the boxes. “Oh! Hey, thanks. That could’ve been bad.” Whatever was in the boxes didn’t seem to be heavy at least as he lifted them up and plonked them on the counter to the side. He was dressed casually, with what appeared to be a dusting of flour down the front of his shirt, and he looked to be at least in his mid-20s. “Checking in for Liam Turner.”

“Yes, sir. Of course.” Conner’s hands were sweating. It wasn’t like he didn’t know what he was doing. He’d checked people in hundreds of times over the past six months, but he didn’t like working without a safety net. When he had a coworker on the desk with him, he could always ask for help if he needed it. Not that he ever needed it anymore, and he supposed it was nice that they had confidence in his abilities, but... in his mind, it didn’t matter than he knew the whole process inside and out; he was convinced he was going to screw up.

He reached beneath the counter and pulled out the heavy, leather-bound book where they kept a copy of the hotel’s reservations. Obviously, they had electronic backups, a whole website and online booking system, because they weren’t entirely in the dark ages, but Monsieur Holland insisted that people loved the charm of the relics, like their check-in book and old brass keys.

“Have you lived here long?” the man asked casually, propping his elbow on the desk

as Conner ran his finger down the page, scanning names.

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah, my whole life actually.”

“And how do you like it?”

Conner blinked a few times, getting distracted from what he was doing. “It’s okay, I guess. I don’t really have anything to compare it to, though.” What did the guy say his name was again? Leif Tanner? No, that’s not right .

“Cause I just moved here,” the man went on—Liam Turner, Conner reminded himself, going back to the top of the page and starting over. “Or rather, I guess I haven’t moved yet, since I’ll be staying in the hotel for a bit. You see, it’s always been my dream to open a little café and bakery, and I finally saved up enough money. I’m leasing a space just down the street. Maybe you’ve seen the sign? It’s called Grounded.”

“Mm-hm,” Conner murmured, only half listening as he turned to grab the key from the hook on the wall behind him.

“I’m originally from North Salter. You know where that is? Anyway, I had to drive into the city because I took ownership on the first of the month, and the ovens were just installed this morning and I wanted to make sure they were working, but there was a delay on the apartment, and a friend of mine from back home used to work here, so... here I am.” Liam splayed his hands, like ta-da! before his smile turned sheepish, an adorable blush pinking up his cheeks. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to give you my life story. I’m just so... excited, you know?” The young man did indeed appear to be almost vibrating.

“Nah, it’s okay. I don’t mind,” Conner said with a smile, handing over the key. He appreciated the light banter. It helped ease the stress of working solo a little. “You’re

in room 405.”

Liam stood there smiling, so Conner smiled back... and the silence stretched. Why wasn't he leaving to go to his room? “Um, have a good evening?” Conner said eventually.

“Don't you need a signature or a credit card or something?”

“Oh! Right. Yes.” Well, shit. It was a good thing Emily wasn't here, or she would've scolded the hell out of him.

Once all the payments were sorted, Liam bent to pick up his duffle bag, slung it over his shoulder, and headed for the elevator. “Sir, your boxes?” Conner called after him.

Liam turned and waved his hand. “Those are for the staff. Since I needed to try out the ovens and fryers to make sure they were working, I ran a few batches of pastries and donuts through. You can help yourselves, and if you enjoy them, maybe you'll consider stopping by on opening day. I left a flier on top.”

Conner beamed, his mouth already watering. “Hey, thanks!”

The elevator doors had barely closed before Conner was reaching for the top box. Sure enough, there was a flier taped to the box, advertising the grand opening of Grounded Café & Bakery in two weeks' time. He folded back the top of the box and couldn't bite back the groan that snuck out at the incredible aroma. You couldn't get much fresher than this. There were blueberry muffins with what smelled like cinnamon and nutmeg sprinkled on top, and strawberry custard tarts, but it was the powdered jelly donut that was calling Conner's name.

Glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching, he reached in and brought the donut to his mouth. Biting down, the slightly sour jelly mixed with the

sugar, and it was so damn amazing that he might have gotten a tiny bit of a chubby in his pants.

He might've blacked out for a minute, in some kind of dessert stupor, because the next thing he knew, the entire donut had somehow made its way into his mouth, and there was the tap-tap-tap of his supervisor's toe on the floor behind him. Emily's arms were crossed over her chest, her eyebrow taking on a dangerous arch. He paused mid-chew, debating his next move.

"Sow'y," he mumbled in apology with his mouth full, powdered sugar flying. He tried to explain that the goodies were a gift for the staff, but it was all messy, powdery gibberish around the donut, so he pointed at the flier, regretfully chewing too quick to savor it. He'd have to have a second one to make up for it.

Emily read over the flier, before she made an inhuman growl and crumpled the paper in her fist. Then she turned that murderous gaze on him, and he nearly choked. She reached under the desk and came up with a garbage can. "Spit that out this very second," she snapped.

In reflex, he swallowed. "No! Don't swallow!" she yelped, and for a second, he worried she was going to pry open his mouth and go after it.

"What? Why not?" Was it poisoned? That seemed highly unlikely. Liam was so nice.

"Because he's the competition!" she hissed, leaning in close and trying her best to keep things quiet. The Scarlet Hotel was not the kind of place for yelling. "We buy our coffee and donuts from Crave. "

"But... can't we go to both?" She was already shaking her head, her face a mask of disappointment, and his shoulders sank. "It was a really good donut," he said weakly, though he felt almost guilty for thinking it.

“I know you’re fairly new to The Scarlet Hotel, but we are a fiercely loyal bunch around here, and the owner of Crave, Hugh, is like family. How would you like to see your brother’s business go under, all because you supported the competition? You wouldn’t, so you will. Not. Eat. The tainted pastries. Understood?”

Conner’s head bobbed frantically. He was a little afraid of Emily on a good day, and he realized he probably should’ve been terrified by her current fierce state, her flashing eyes and flushed cheeks, but in all honesty, he felt a tad jealous. He’d never had anyone this protective of him in his life.

“Now, you just leave these pastries with me. I’ll dispose of them.” She nodded once firmly then loaded up her arms with donuts, and with a heavy heart, Conner watched as the dozens of delicious treats were carted away.

Conner couldn’t decide which was a worse offense—if she threw them out or if she ate the whole lot of them herself. He sighed, licking the last of the sugar off his fingers. “It was a really good donut...”

1

Jared

The sun was shining as I tipped my head back toward the narrow strip of clear sky visible between the tall buildings lining the street. I threw caution into the wind and allowed my eyes to drift closed for a moment, breathing deep, as I wove my way along the crowded sidewalk, trusting that people would step out of my way. It was a beautiful summer day, and not even the honk coming from the yellow cab at the corner could dampen my mood. The driver leaned out his window and shouted a few filthy curses at the guy who cut him off, before tearing down the street with the squeal of burning rubber, in a hurry to get somewhere.

None of the toxic traits of big-city life could touch me because I was on my way to work, and I just so happened to love my job. My hum turned into a whistle, because yeah, I was the type of guy who whistled on his way to work, so sue me. But as I came even with Crave Coffee, the jaunty tune died off as my lips flattened into a hard line, and my legs stalled. My eyes had caught on the new sign being installed down the block. It was across four lanes of traffic, but in large, bold print, it was easy to read the white lettering on a dark green background: GROUNDED.

Even as dread churned in my belly, I let myself hope. Maybe it's a yoga ashram, or a florist, or maybe a daycare run by a disciplinarian...

An unfamiliar frown settled firmly in place as I wrenched open the glass door to Crave, setting the little bell above the door tinkling. Hugh was behind the counter as usual this time of day, and he looked over his shoulder when he heard the bell. "Hey,

morning, Jared. You know you're not supposed to start for half an hour, right?"

"Yeah, I had nothing better to do, so I came in early." I stopped in front of the counter and hiked a thumb over my shoulder in the vague direction of the new shop. "Hey, boss, did you see—"

He cut me off with a roll of his eyes. "The café going in down the street? Yes. Everyone and their dog has been telling me about it today." Dammit, there went any hope I had that it was some harmless business. He went back to cleaning the cappuccino machine like this was no big deal.

I rounded the counter and stood, hands on hips, until he looked back up at me. "What?" he asked.

"Why aren't you upset?" I asked, incredulous.

He straightened up, wiping his hands on a cloth, looking confused. "Why would I be upset?"

While I'd always prided myself on being laidback, Hugh's lack of anxiety was making me agitated. "Um, hello. Because he'll be in direct competition with us?"

Hugh arched a brow, far too skeptical. "Do you have any idea how many people in this city drink coffee? I'm sure we'll be fine."

A timer went off in the kitchen, and he headed for the back, leaving me scrambling after him, begging him to see reason. "But what if their coffee is better? What if all our customers decide they would rather spend their money at Grounded instead, and we slowly lose income, day by day, until you no longer make enough to pay the bills?!" My voice had been getting higher and tighter as I went. "You'd have to lock your doors for good. You could lose your apartment, leaving you and your family

destitute!”

Crave was my home away from home. Hugh had taken me in when I was in desperate need of a job, giving me my first paycheck in advance so I could afford rent that month, even though he didn’t know a thing about me. I’d been here for years now, and he treated me like family, often inviting me over for dinner at his place with his husband Charlie. I babysat his kids! It would break my heart if something happened to his business.

Hugh just shook his head, chuckling. “You have an overactive imagination, Jared. It’s a tiny little café, not a Starbucks. There’s enough coffee for the both of us. You’ve never said a peep about the Q Cup on the corner.”

I shot him a crooked look, because we both knew that black tarry sludge the Q Cup served couldn’t be classified as coffee.

He shuddered at the thought then waved a hand. “Never mind, forget I said anything.” He turned off the timer and pulled open the oven, a billow of dark smoke wafting out. “Oh...”

Choking on the fumes, I came to peek over his shoulder at the muffin-shaped briquettes. “Please don’t serve those.”

Hugh snorted. “What kind of man do you take me for?”

“The kind of man who sets the oven too high, apparently.” Reaching past him, I turned down the oven temperature to where it should’ve been.

We were interrupted by the tinkling of the bell from the front, signaling a new customer. “Go, I’ll take care of this,” I offered, jerking my head toward the front .

“Thanks, Jared.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze on the way by, and I grabbed one of the aprons hanging on the wall, looping it over my head and wrapping the straps around to tie in a messy bow at the back.

The happy murmur of voices carried through to the kitchen and soothed my frayed nerves. I set the tray of burnt muffins aside and propped the back door open to help clear the air, before I got lost in the familiar rhythm of making a fresh batch. These were bumbleberry, my favorite, and I used a piping bag to inject a dollop of jam straight into the middle. Topped with a toasted oatmeal crumble and I was a happy man.

Debra came in at noon, and together, the three of us rocked the lunch rush. We’d all worked together for so long that it was like we’d developed ESP or something. All it took was a tilt of my head and Hugh knew to toss me a cloth, or Debra would say, “Hey, could you—” and I would pass her the oat milk. This... This right here was what I was scared to lose. It broke my heart to think of anything getting in the way of the business.

Because without Crave, I had nothing.

Even though I always insisted that Hugh not pay me when I came in to work early or stayed late just because I was bored, he found ways to show his appreciation. Today it was a paper bag of food that he passed to me on the way out at the end of my shift. “Just some day-olds and a few goodies for Lulabelle,” he told me before I could argue.

“I would tell you not to waste food on her, but I can smell through the bag that they’re the burnt muffins.”

He laughed. “I know Lulabelle has a refined palate.”

“That she does.” Lulabelle was my senior basset hound. As sensitive as Lula’s sense of smell was, burnt was her favorite flavor. Her second favorite was floor food—anything I wasn’t fast enough to pick up .

My ex and I had adopted Lula from a rescue a few years ago, back when we thought we were each other’s forever. Needless to say, we were wrong, but our love for our floppy-eared baby was unconditional. We now shared custody of Lulabelle, which worked well for both our work schedules. Ridley worked as a real estate agent, so he was lucky to have flexible hours.

“Hey, Ridley,” I called, walking in without knocking. I heard the heavy thump of Lula hopping off the couch and the click-clack of her nails on the hardwood as she sauntered down the hall to greet me. “There’s my squishy-faced girl,” I cooed, crouching down to smoosh all her loose skin up while she tried to lick my face.

Ridley emerged from his office. “Hey, Jared. You’re looking... um, how are you?” He winced, scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck. We were still working on this whole friends thing. It had been three months since we broke up, and my insides still squirmed as I avoided making eye contact.

“Um, I’m good. You?”

“Yeah. Good.”

We settled into an awkward silence full of fidgeting that neither of us knew how to break. If this was what it was like to co-parent a pet, I didn’t envy parents with an actual biological child. Luckily, Lulabelle had scented her favorite snack, and the tension was broken when she began snuffling at the bag tucked under my arm.

“Oh, here. I saved you one of the not-burned ones,” I said, holding out a muffin to Ridley.

He took the muffin, smiling as he cradled it in his palm. “Thanks. Do you...” He sighed, bracing himself. “Do you want to stay for dinner? It’s no big deal, I’m just making some chicken nuggets and tater tots... you know, if you want. ”

He knew I loved nuggets and tots, and that somehow made it worse. “No, I’d better... Thanks, though.”

We stuttered our way through a goodbye, and he promised to come pick up Lula from my place on Friday. Back outside, I blew out a long sigh of relief, a not-insignificant weight lifting off my shoulders. Sometimes it was hard to remember why we didn’t work out as a couple, since we looked good on paper, but we’d just reached that point of our relationship where it was either get married or break up. And we just... couldn’t do it. Sure, we’d loved each other, but sometimes, love just wasn’t enough. We were missing the spark, that *je ne sais quoi* .

Lula pattered along beside me, her short legs working double time and ears swaying, her head on swivel as she took in all the scents riding the breeze. And since it was the perfect day for a walk, we did a lap of the park before heading home. I lived in an outdated apartment complex, in a tiny bachelor pad barely larger than a closet, but it was cheap, clean, within walking distance of work, and they allowed pets, so I couldn’t complain.

As soon as we walked in, Lula wandered over and sat in front of her food dish, looking up at me with those big brown eyes, showing off how patient she could be. “Yeah, yeah, but only one for now,” I muttered, grinning as I peeled off the paper wrapper and broke the muffin into a few pieces and dropped them in her dish. “We both know it’ll give you gas, so I hope you appreciate the sacrifice my nose is willing to take.” Three seconds, that was all it took, and then she turned her face back up to me, as if waiting for more.

I shook my head. “I told you just one. Not my fault you didn’t make it last. You

should learn the art of the savor.” I knew people food wasn’t good for her, but I told myself it was in moderation, and I knew there were no preservatives or artificial flavors or colors. Lulabella groaned in complaint and padded over to her bed for a post-snack nap.

When her back was turned, I grabbed a muffin for myself and ate it quick before she saw. Then me and my best girl settled in for a long, lonely night of reality TV. I told myself this was better than settling for a relationship that would never be quite enough.

I lifted Lula up onto the couch and stroked her velvety ears while complaining about how unrealistic the show’s contestants were. “This has to be scripted. There’s no way people are this na?ve.”

As silly as I found it, though, it was a nice distraction from all the unease I felt when I thought of that café going in down the street. I just had a hard time seeing it as anything but a bad thing.

2

Liam

Opening day. At last!

My heart beat like a bird was trapped in my chest, fluttering and flapping like mad, making my hands shake as I unlocked the front door and flicked on the neon OPEN sign. There was no one waiting outside yet, but I knew these things took time. I'd done everything I could to get word out. I handed out fliers and put ads in the newspaper, both the physical copy and their online sites, plus radio spots. Did people still listen to the radio? I hoped so. But just to be on the safe side, I'd hit the major social media apps too. Even now, I imagined all the eyes catching sight of my new café, making them wonder if they wouldn't like a coffee, and why not treat themselves to a delicious snack? They'd earned it, after all.

I sighed blissfully, hope and anticipation making me giddy. Yes, it was still early, but it wouldn't be long now.

Just a year ago, I wouldn't have imagined this possible. I'd been working part-time as a line cook at a Greek restaurant in my little hometown of North Salter, saving every dime so that I could one day open my little dream café, maybe ten or 20 years in the future. I didn't have many bills, since I was living with my grandfather so I could help him out around the house. He was getting older, and he'd done so much for me and Dad growing up that I really didn't mind doing the laundry and shoveling the snow in the winter. I did most of the cooking and baking too, much to my grandfather's chagrin.

“You’re stirring it too fast,” Pops would say, backseat baking from his seat at the table, leaning as far forward as he could without falling, just to watch. “You need to be gentle, or the texture will be too dense and you’ll end up with a heavy cake. You don’t want any of your future customers to break a tooth. Fold it... That’s right, like that.” He never bandied about his praise, so when I heard it, I knew I’d earned it fair and square. It always made me feel like standing in warm sunshine.

Thinking about Pops always made my whole body ache, a fresh reminder that he was gone, picking off the scab from the slowly healing wound of his loss. He was the whole reason I’d started baking in the first place. My dad had been pretty young when he had me, just out of high school. My alpha father was never in the picture, never wanted to be, and I guess I’d been quite the handful, so my pops had started to watch me on the weekends to give my dad a break.

That first Friday, I’d been four years old, and I’d just finished crying for a good hour because I thought my daddy had abandoned me. Pops just let me cry myself out, and when I finally picked myself up off the floor, he’d tugged a massive t-shirt of his over my head and set me on a chair so I could reach the counter. “Let’s make a mess,” he’d said. I didn’t remember it myself, but it was his favorite story. I must’ve heard it a million times. The way he told it, I was some kind of baking prodigy, knowing just the right amount of cinnamon to add without being told.

I laughed, my eyes stinging with the memory. He would’ve loved my café. The floor was a deep brown hardwood, the walls sage green, and the ceiling a light sky blue. I’d placed potted ferns and ivies and vines all over the open space, giving the whole café an outdoors vibe. All because Pops had said there was something soothing about the color green. Humans evolved in nature, he said, surrounded by trees and grass, and he believed that bringing a little piece of nature indoors could stave off depression. That it could ground you in the moment. I wasn’t sure if that was true or not, but I’d always loved it. It was why I’d decided to call my café Grounded. Well, that and coffee grounds, obviously.

The excitement of opening day had started to wear off by 9am when I'd only had three customers for what I would've considered the breakfast rush. Two of them were tourists brandishing a guidebook who were disappointed when I couldn't give them any sightseeing information, since I was new to the city too. And the third customer was someone who had wandered in by accident, intending to go next door to the insurance place, but he'd seemed embarrassed after I greeted him so enthusiastically that he ordered, "Whatever's good."

I mean, I didn't expect to break the bank today, but by the time 6pm had rolled around, I'd barely had a dozen customers since I opened. Literally thousands of people walking past, and nobody wanted coffee? It was impossible. The math didn't math! At this rate, I wouldn't even make enough to assign myself a wage, let alone pay the bills. I had a bit of money saved up to get me started, leftover from my grandpa's will, but that would only go so far.

My only staff member, Aubrey, was leaning against the counter, cell phone in hand, texting or streaming or... I dunno, whatever teenagers did on their phones. Her blond hair was pulled into two pigtails, making her look even younger than her 17 years. I probably should've told her to put her phone away and get back to work, but it wasn't like there was any work to do. I'd come in early to make all the pastries, and there were only so many times you could wipe down the tables—especially considering nobody had sat at one all day. Besides, I was scared to upset her because I couldn't afford for her to quit. Hers was the only resume I'd had to choose from, and unfortunately, because she was still in high school, she could only work evenings and weekends.

The whole situation was beyond frustrating. I couldn't come up with a single reason for why nobody wanted to work here. Was I not offering enough money? It was a pretty slack job, especially since it was just standing around so far. Did I smell bad? Had I somehow contracted the plague and no one had told me? Was the café haunted? Cursed, more likely.

This had been my dream since I made my first cinnamon bun when I was a kid, and after all the research I'd done, it had seemed like a sound business venture. The neighborhood was perfect for this! But if anything, I'd seen people curl their lips up at my audacity. Like, how dare I open a café?

I swallowed on repeat, the sides of my throat sticking, gut squirming. What if this was all a mistake? What if, after my grandfather left me all that money to make my dream come true, it just flopped. The truth was, my pops had always been my anchor, all while encouraging me to dream big. With him by my side, I knew nothing bad would happen. That I could live within fantasies of cafés and bakeries without having to worry about floating away.

Without my anchor, though... I was adrift.

With a frustrated sigh, I grabbed a plastic tray from under the counter and started lining up rows of small paper cups on it. "What are you doing?" Aubrey asked, looking up from the screen she held six inches from her face. I was surprised she'd noticed I was doing anything at all.

"I'm going to drum up some business, of course." Because I refused to just stand here and let everyone pass by. I would give them all free samples of coffee and cherry danishes, because if they would just try it, I knew they would love it.

Balancing my tray, I stepped outside. It was a little crisp, a bite to the air. Perfect for a hot drink. "Hello, can I interest you in... Pardon me, but you look cold. Perhaps you could use a..." Why wouldn't anyone stop to listen? Maybe it was just me, but it seemed almost like people sped up to walk past me.

There was a young couple walking past. The twenty-something woman looked up and made eye contact, and I pounced. "Free coffee!" I yelled, making her jump.

In her shock, her legs locked up, forcing her partner to stop too. She relaxed slightly, and her eyes panned down to the sweet pastries I'd cut up. "Oh! Those look lovely." She was nodding, already reaching for one of the paper cups when the man cleared his throat sharply.

"What would Hugh think if he saw you drinking that?" he whispered, just loud enough that I heard him. He took her hand from where it was still hovering in midair and urged her to keep walking.

An intense look of guilt scrunched up her features. "Oh, you're right. Sorry," she said to me as she backed away. Her look of pity seemed genuine, though no less confusing.

They hurried off down the block, and I frowned after them. Who the hell is Hugh?

There was clearly something I was missing, something I couldn't hope to understand—at least not today. Sighing, I trudged back inside and set my tray down on the counter. "You know what, Aubrey, why don't you head on home. I think I'm just going to close early."

"Are you sure?" She looked sad for me, but like she didn't know how to make it better.

"Yeah, I'm sure." I was dejected, absolutely, but not broken. I would come back and try again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. This was a dream worth fighting for. "I'll see you tomorrow. And make sure you help yourself to something out of the display case. I made too much."

My original plan for when I got home had been to unpack my kitchen boxes, maybe hang some clothes in the closet, since I finally got the keys for my new apartment yesterday. Instead, I kicked off my shoes and sank down into my grandpa's old couch

with a tub of ice cream and a spoon. Most of my stuff was still in boxes, bags, and bins, but I didn't need much to do some quality wallowing. What I needed right now was a distraction, so I flicked on the TV and turned on my favorite reality dating show, Lonely Alpha .

This season's alpha was Leo Schuster, pro NFL player for the Comets. He honestly seemed like a bit of an ass, overly cocky and full of himself, not my type in the least, but he was hot to look at and brought the drama, which was ultimately the whole point to the show. I allowed myself to get sucked in, laughing as the omegas all fell over themselves trying to get Leo's attention.

Sometimes, I had no idea why the show's ratings were so good, but then one of the omegas "accidentally" fell in the pool, and they had to blur out the crotch of his shorts when they got too see-through.

And that was the moment when a spark flickered somewhere in the darkness at the back of my mind. Huh... I followed the tingle of a growing idea.

Business might've been slow today, but what I really needed was a gimmick. And if there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that sex sells.

My grin widened until it stretched ear to ear. I knew just what to do to drum up a little business.

LONELY ALPHA 4EVA

BottomsUp: I would top Leo Schuster any day. *swoon*

RimJobbins: No way he'd bottom. Daaaamn dat ass tho

MuffinTop: The whole debacle is like a car crash... and I can't look away. Why can't

I look away?!

Dripdrip69: Welcome to the club muffin. Ur one of us now

CreamyJoe: This season of Lonely Alpha is truly inspiring. Seriously, though, I think the show might've just saved my ass.

3

Jared

Ridley arrived right on time to pick up Lulabelle. He'd always been punctual. I couldn't remember a single time in our five years together when he'd been late. I'd always liked that about him.

I met him out front of my apartment building, with Lula on a leash beside me. Her tail wagged hard when she caught sight of her other daddy, and she pulled on the leash until she was wiggling under his scratching fingers. Ridley finally spared me a glance, and his blond brows shot up. "Wow, you look like shit."

I chuckled, rubbing a hand down my cheek, raspy with whiskers I hadn't bothered to shave. Normally, I would've made some joke about how his comment hit my ego dead center, but that didn't seem the kind of joke I could make with my ex. Especially when he looked well-rested and impeccably dressed. So instead, I said, "Yeah, haven't been sleeping well."

"Everything okay?" His gray eyes creased at the corners with familiar concern.

I waved him off. "Yeah, just... work stuff. "

He huffed, his lips pinching. "This doesn't have to be awkward, Jared. You can still talk to me. You know that, right? I'm still your friend."

"Yeah, I know," I said vaguely, while not entirely believing it. The weight of

everything pressed down on me, and for a second, I actually considered venting to him. Telling him about the rival café moving in down the street and that I was scared about Crave going under, because without my job and my work family, I didn't know what else I would do. Wouldn't know who I was anymore, because everything that had defined me as an adult was falling apart.

But no. That wasn't the kind of thing you admitted to an ex-boyfriend. Especially when our breaking up was the first bump to my shaky house of cards. I didn't regret breaking up, I knew in my heart that it was the right decision, but change was always hard. Change meant instability, loss, and inevitable grief.

“Okay, well... call me later if you need. Even if you just need some puppy kisses. We'll be around.” He led Lulabelle out to the car and then lifted her into the seat and buckled her harness. With one final wave, he pulled out of the parking lot, and I headed for work.

The overall mood today was far darker than it had been on my last shift. There was no whistling today. Every honk and rev on an engine grated on my nerves, and I found my hands bunched into fists, which I then shoved in my pockets with a grunt. I'm laidback , I reminded myself, making a conscious effort to relax my tense muscles. And Hugh was right, there's enough coffee for the both of us.

I repeated it in my head, and I had almost convinced myself it was true when I headed down the final block and saw a few people standing in front of Grounded, chatting excitedly, pointing at something in the window. I tried to mind my own business, to go to work and surround myself with friends and family, with love and coffee, but I couldn't seem to drag my eyes away. There was a persistent tug from somewhere in my chest, and as I reached to rub my fingers over the spot, massaging, I found my legs were moving, without ever making a conscious decision.

I licked my lips, dry from my jagging anxious breath, as I stopped in front of

Grounded, staring at the bright yellow paper taped to the window.

RECONNECT WITH LIFE AND LOVE

Join us for a night of fun and maybe meet your future

—three minutes at a time.

Speed dating with a side of coffee

Saturday 8pm

GET GROUNDED

My stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch. An after-hours event at a café? And speed dating? That was... lame, right? Everybody just used an app to hook up with people these days. It was how I'd met Ridley. How I'd met nearly every ex since high school, in fact.

But when I peeked at the people standing beside me, I noticed their eyes were lit up, excited. They were making plans for Saturday and taking pictures of the flier, sending it to their friends. Shit. Word of mouth was always the best kind of advertisement, and it seemed Grounded was getting it in spades.

I trudged back to work, nearly getting hit by a car as I stepped into the street without looking. I waved an apology as the car took off, before jogging the rest of the way across. My brain was like scrambled eggs—slowly burning in the pan because I couldn't seem to turn down the heat.

The rich scent of coffee greeting me as I walked in. Crave was busy, as usual, nearly every table packed, and I told myself to take it as a sign. We were fine, Hugh wasn't

struggling, and nothing in my life needed to change. But I couldn't seem to get my brain in line. It was busy replaying a slideshow of every catastrophic change I'd ever had in my life. Every time my mom had said, "Hey, honey, I got a new job," followed closely by "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" and "pack your bags." She meant well, and logically I knew that she'd done what it took to make ends meet. I didn't begrudge her at all. But... I'd been the kid wrenched out of school every two years. I was the one always having to adapt to a new city, new teachers, new friends. I was always on the outside, always struggling to catch up.

It wasn't until that final move a week before I turned 18 when I'd finally told my mom that was enough. I was two months from graduation, and I hadn't had the strength to do it all again, not when I was so close to the finish line. She hadn't wanted to leave me here, but she was tired too. So she'd left me money for food and one month's rent on our little one-bedroom apartment, and she'd moved on to better jobs and greener pastures. Which left me scrambling to find a job that would pay enough to keep a roof over my head.

Cue Hugh Barnes.

Hugh essentially saved me that day. He'd shown me what it meant to feel safe, to trust that I would rest my head on the same pillow every night. He gave me security and a steady paycheck, a homebase I could rely on. And I would do whatever it took to repay him—even if that meant doing something... unsavory. Something that went against my morals.

I was going undercover.

On Saturday night, I put on my best button-up and the jeans that Ridley always said made my ass look mouthwatering. Because I might've been playing the role of spy, but that didn't mean I would say no to a date if I happened to meet someone nice. Then, I made my way to Grounded. I did it furtively, shoulders hunched, the theme

song from Mission Impossible playing in my head, as if I were some kind of superspy. In reality, I just didn't want anyone to see me slipping in through the door to our competition. It felt sleezy, underhanded, even though I told myself I wasn't technically breaking any laws. I wasn't sure what I would say if anyone called me out. I couldn't very well admit to what I was actually doing—looking for weakness in our foe's defenses.

Ducking my head, I slipped inside and immediately shuffled off to one side of the door, planning to survey the scene from behind a conveniently placed Ficus tree. When I finally looked up, though, I felt... well, I hated to admit this, but grounded was the first word that came to mind.

Where Crave felt traditional and familiar and light, this felt softer, calmer. Like a warm hug. There were plants absolutely everywhere, trailing down from shelves and spilling out of tall pots, dangling from hooks on the ceiling. In the front corners by the windows, there were deep forest-green sofas and armchairs arranged in intimate collections around low coffee tables that looked to be made from reclaimed wood, scuffed and scarred.

The place didn't look brand-new; it looked lived-in, cozy in a way I wasn't prepared for. I hated how much I loved it.

I forced my face into a neutral expression and stepped out from behind the tree to mingle. There was a decent turnout of singles, mostly centered around a long table laden with coffee urns—one full strength, one decaf, and one with hot water for tea—as well as a huge selection of sweet treats.

It would look suspicious if I didn't get a snack, I reasoned, meandering over to grab a gooey tart. I bit into it warily, and the flavors exploded on my tongue, brown sugar and browned butter and pecans, sweet and nutty, and my involuntary moan turned a few heads. I felt a blush creeping up my neck. "The tart's... okay," I said with a

shrug as I struggled to remain indifferent.

It was far better than okay. Fuck, it was ten times better than ours. I wanted to fill a swimming pool with these tarts just so I could drown in them. Was that wrong? Yes, absolutely, but that didn't stop me from grabbing three more and seeing how high I could stack them on one of the tiny plates provided, trying to make room for one of everything.

For research purposes, of course.

My precariously balanced pile of goodies had begun to spill over the edges of the plate when an older man with a beard called to get everyone's attention. "Could I please ask everyone to find a seat at one of the tables, and we'll get this party started."

He must've been the owner, but no matter how I craned my neck, I couldn't get a better look at him except to see that he had short gray hair and was wearing a vibrantly loud tie. I made a mental note to watch for him, but right now, all my attention needed to be on carrying this overloaded plate to the nearest table. Because there was no way I was leaving even one of these treats behind.

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4

Liam

I looked down at the clipboard that held the sign-in sheet. I was really excited about the turnout, even having to add a couple tables to make sure we could accommodate everyone, but there was one snafu I hadn't anticipated.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, gnawing on my bottom lip.

"What's the matter?" Dad asked. He'd insisted on coming all the way from North Salter to help out for opening night, even though he'd had to get a room at The Scarlet Hotel. My new apartment wasn't set up for guests yet. Hell, I was still crashing on my couch, but I was getting there.

"I have an odd number of attendees. I don't know why I assumed it would be even so I could have two people at every table. Do you think I should leave one table solo or end up with three people at one table? That could be interesting."

Dad chuckled, shaking his head at me. "You're missing another very obvious solution."

"What's that?" I asked, looking up at him.

He speared me a look. "Oh, I dunno. Maybe... you could sit in?"

I sputtered, though I wasn't sure why I was so shocked. It wouldn't be the first time

my dad had tried to set me up on a date. Only this time, it appeared I'd done it to myself.

I cupped my hand to my ear. "Sorry, I couldn't hear you over your tie?"

"Har-har," he said, deadpan. "You wish you looked this good." He straightened out his garish tie then plucked the clipboard out of my hand and penciled my name into the remaining slot.

"Hey!" I couldn't grab the pencil fast enough.

"You'd better hurry and get changed. Wouldn't look good to have the staff slacking on the job," he teased, nudging me toward the back. It was a good thing I had a change of clothes in my bag.

I could've erased my name and gone with one of my own suggestions. I was the boss, after all, and I'd always been independent enough not to let myself be pressured into doing anything I didn't want to do. Which must've meant... I wanted to do this. The realization was a bit shocking, honestly. I was too busy to date, trying to get my business off the ground, but also, the thought of going home and watching Lonely Alpha while everyone else had a chance at finding love was just depressing.

Not that I thought I would find love tonight, but the chances were better here than at home.

I quickly switched out my dark green Grounded polo shirt for a gray button-down and ran my fingers through my hair. I probably smelled like coffee after working all day, but any date who didn't like the smell of coffee wasn't right for me anyway.

As soon as I came hustling out from the back, Dad raised his voice over the crowd and called, "Could I please ask everyone to find a seat at one of the tables, and we'll

get this party started. ”

And it kind of was a party. Everyone was mingling, trying the free coffee and baked treats. There was a lot of laughing and smiling, flirting and blushing. If even a few of these people came back as paying customers, I would count the night a success.

I settled into a chair at the end of the row and watched as other people did the same. A young woman sat across from me and offered her hand. “Hey, I’m Miranda,” she said.

“Hi, I’m Liam. Nice to meet you.”

It was immediately clear that we weren’t compatible as a couple, mostly because I was gay and so was she, though she seemed like a nice person. We had a fun few minutes before my dad rang a little brass bell, halting conversation.

“Could everyone with a green napkin in front of you please stand up and rotate in a clockwise direction,” he instructed, circling his finger in the air.

There was a little bit of chaos as everyone tried to figure out who was moving and where, but they got the hang of it. I stayed where I was and watched in absolute wonder as a man headed my way with a teetering plate of goodies. He was wearing a sage-green button-up and jeans that were so tight, I might’ve wondered if they were painted on. He couldn’t even look up from his plate, hand braced over the top, the tip of his tongue sticking out in concentration, until he was seated, but then I got my first real look at him and my stomach swooped.

He was beyond gorgeous, with the richest brown eyes I’d ever seen, like molasses, with flecks of lighter honey and amber. He was probably around my age, late 20s, and while he sure had a sweet tooth, his trim body showed no signs of his overindulgence.

I wasn't the only one doing a little scan. His gaze flitted over my features, taking an intimate path down my body as far as he could go before reaching the edge of the table. I wasn't one to believe in love at first sight, but lust? Oh, hell yeah. We had some serious chemistry.

After we'd stared at each other for an awkwardly long time, I cleared my throat, reminding myself that we were on a time limit. "Wow, looks like you really like those butter tarts," I observed, laughing.

"Like?" He scoffed. "No. I want to have dozens of babies with these butter tarts."

I laughed, secretly pleased that it was my recipe he loved, that my hands had touched the pastry that would pass between his lips. "Well, I'm glad you found true love this evening. I hope everyone is so lucky."

"It's true. No one else can compare to my sweetheart," he said, trailing his thumb along the tart's rim in a nearly scandalous way. "I really should just go home to be alone with my tarts." Then he licked a crumb off his thumb, and it was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen. My cock sat up and took notice.

I must've made a noise, a gasp or groan, because mischief snuck into his gaze, his full lips ticking up in a smirk as he bit the tip of his thumb, then closed his mouth around it and gave a little suck, cheeks hollowing.

At the worst possible moment, the bell rang, signalling the end of our date, and disappointment surged through me. That couldn't have been three minutes!

"But—" I began to protest as half the crowd stood up and began to move about the room.

A muscle ticked in his jaw as my next date came to stand beside him, impatiently

waiting for him to vacate his seat. Part of me hoped he would stay stubbornly where he was, but after a long moment, he flashed me a rueful smile. “Looks like my time is up. It was a pleasure.” He stood reluctantly and gave a little bow. And then he plucked one of the tarts off the top of his stack and set it on my plate. “You’re worth a tart,” he whispered with a wink.

My heart fluttered as I watched him walk away. Why was that somehow the sweetest compliment I’d ever received?

“Hey, what’s up? My name’s Ryan,” the new date said. He was an older man maybe in his 40s wearing a brown plaid short-sleeved shirt and clip-on tie, and it wasn’t until this very moment that I realized I hadn’t asked Mr. Sexy Butter Tart for his name.

“Um, yeah,” I said, beyond distracted. Would it be rude if I got up from the table to go ask my last date’s name? Probably, and I needed to be polite to these people if they were going to be my customers. I forced myself to smile. “Nice to meet you, I’m Li—”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt,” my sexy last date said, looking not a bit sorry at all as he leaned in over my shoulder. His molasses eyes were inches from mine, and I could’ve sworn he smelled like coffee too as his warmth washed over me. A match made in heaven. “I’m Jared, by the way.” He held his hand out for me to take.

I sighed in relief as I placed my hand in his, relishing the warm softness of his palm. “Liam,” I said.

When neither of us showed any sign of letting go, the guy—what was his name again? Ryan?—cleared his throat. “Do you mind?” he asked, glaring at Jared. “You had your three minutes, and now you’re stealing mine.”

“Oh, am I?” Jared said with zero remorse. “I’m sorry about that. So, soooo sorry,” he

drawled out, trying his best to prolong the moment, his thumb stroking over the back of my hand.

I giggled before I could stifle it—seriously, who was I right now? I was not a giggler!

Ryan's lips thinned, not the least bit amused. "Shove off, would you?"

But then the bell rang again, and Ryan huffed, pushing his chair back from the table and moving on. Jared gave me a sheepish look. "Sorry if you were into him. My mom always used to say I'm incorrigible."

"No, it's okay. I wasn't. Into him, I mean. I didn't mind the interruption."

But of course, as with each ring of the bell, a new date had appeared at my table. Whose idea was this speed-dating thing, anyway? Three minutes wasn't enough time for a full conversation! How was I supposed to know if what I felt was real without knowing about his family or what he did for a living?

Jared backed away for the second time. "I'd better go before someone eats my tarts. I left them unattended. Maybe I'll find you after?" He looked so damn hopeful, and my stomach gave another one of those rollercoaster dips.

"Yes, definitely."

Suddenly, it didn't matter that I was too busy to date. I would make time.

LONELY ALPHA IS NOT LONELY ENOUGH IMO

BJz4days: Dude, that chat name is way too long.

RimJobbins: Like the line of omegas waiting to suck Schuster's dick, you mean?

Toooo loooong.

Dripdrip69: Word. Hes gotta narrow it down alrdy

BottomsUp: Yeah right, Drip, like you wouldn't love to be the meat in a Schuster sandwich, no matter how many slices of bread there are.

Dripdrip69: I mean..... *shrug emoji *

BJz4days: I'm pretty sure Schuster would be the meat. Just sayin'.

CreamyJoe: Maybe he's just taking his time, making sure he'll pick Mr. Right.

MuffinTop: Orrrr—hear me out—maybe he's already found Mr. Right but the show producers are just playing into the drama, making it look like he's screwing all of them? *cough* fake as hell *cough*

RimJobbins: Go home muffin. Read the room. Only tru stans here

5

Jared

Around the room I went, every three minutes starting a new “date,” though honestly, three minutes was barely enough to exchange names, let alone get to know a person. And while I technically hadn’t come here to find my new significant other, these people had. They were all nice enough, hopeful of finding their future One, and they deserved my undivided attention. I could acknowledge that much. There was just one problem with that, though.

Liam had already claimed all of it.

He was amazing. Curious and eager, the kind of person who made me feel seen. I’d recognized that about him the moment I met his eyes across the table, over my now-dwindling stack of treats. He had this thick brown hair, with curls that he’d tried to tame with product, but the curls were winning. His eyes were a mesmerizing shade of blue, from a navy outer ring then shifting through aqua to almost green around his pupil. They made me yearn for tropical seas.

He was so relaxed meeting all these strangers. I’d bet he was the adventurous type, ready to try anything, whether it was a picnic in the woods or skydiving—he looked like he wouldn’t be afraid of anything, ready to take on the world. But he also seemed the type to be completely at ease spending a night in, pizza and popcorn and a movie while cuddling on the couch. Gods, I was just dying to learn all there was to know about him, because at the rate my overactive imagination was going, I would have a whole fake life created for us before I even learned his last name.

The entire next hour as I went table to table, I kept glancing back at where Liam sat, leaning around leaves and fern fronds, and it sent a thrill through me to find that more often than not, his gaze was already on me too. When I rounded the loop of tables, and found myself across the aisle from him, I couldn't resist the draw I felt. I quickly leaned over and whispered, "What's your favorite color?"

"What?" he asked, confused but laughing.

"Quick! I only have a few seconds, and I need to know everything." I motioned with my hand, begging him to hurry. "Any pets? Allergies?"

"Green, no, and no," he answered quickly before I had to dart back to my table.

I already regretted not having the time to ask follow-up questions. Why green? Like, deep forest green or something pale or neon? And did he not have pets because he didn't like them? Whoever I dated had to like dogs, it was etched in stone.

When I'd moved on to the next table, and I was doing the whole "uh-huh" smile-and-nod thing, I peeked over my shoulder and saw Liam waving to get my attention. When he saw I was looking, he held up a piece of paper that said, "Same questions!" He pointed at me. The woman sitting across from him turned around to see where he was looking, and when she saw us trying to communicate, she gave me a thumbs-up.

I patted my pockets for a pen and came up empty. "Hey, have you got a pen?" I asked the guy across from me .

"Huh? Oh, uh... no?" The guy, whose name I hadn't even registered, looked confused but not annoyed, but as he caught on to what I was doing, he leaned in to help. "Can you flash him pictures from your phone?"

"Ooh, good idea." Pulling out my phone, I quickly found a picture of Lulabelle and

held it up, which made Liam put a hand over his heart, and I could just hear his awww from here. But before I could decide what my favorite color was today—I mean, it had been cherry red, but I was suddenly leaning toward a tropical blue—the bell rang again, and I had to move even farther away.

“Good luck,” my date said as I grudgingly got up and kept moving.

“Thanks,” I muttered, feeling a little glum, but there were only a handful of tables left until the end, which meant I could finally get a chance for some one-on-one time with Liam, without any pesky bell-ringing deadline.

My nerves got increasingly agitated the closer I got to the end, heart thrumming and my knee bouncing under the table, and I kept rubbing my sweaty palms on my pants on repeat. I hadn’t been this giddy in... ever . I had a serious case of cookie breath, but I reasoned that it could’ve been worse.

I nearly jumped out of my seat at the final bell, mumbling a vague thank-you to my last date, then I swiveled to look for Liam in the crowd. Where was he?

But then I heard a raised voice saying, “Thank you, everyone, for coming tonight.” Maybe we hadn’t spoken much, but I could’ve sworn that was Liam’s voice. Why was he talking? Where was the owner with the brightly colored tie?

I moved around a potted plant with narrow spiky leaves so I could see whoever was addressing the crowd, and sure enough, it was Liam. My stomach lurched again, but this time for an entirely different reason. Was he... the owner?

He was smiling, his gaze panning over the crowd. “I’m new to the neighborhood, so it really meant a lot to me that you all stopped by. If you haven’t had a chance to grab some of the complimentary coffee and desserts, please, help yourselves. I hope you all had as much fun as I did.” And then he had the gall to blush as he searched me out

in the crowd.

When he caught the look on my face, though, his expression stuttered, a crease forming between his eyebrows.

Everyone clapped but me. I was currently debating on whether or not I should make a break for it, but that stubborn incorrigible streak of mine was at least a mile wide right now. Anger and indignation burned hot in my gut, and my hands balled into fists at my sides, my fingernails digging into my palms.

There was a stampede toward the snack table, but I stayed right where I was, glaring at Liam as he made his way toward me, zigzagging through the crowd. “What’s wrong?” he asked immediately.

As much as I wanted to tear a strip off him, I couldn’t make a scene since these were also Crave customers, so instead, I grabbed him by the hand and dragged him outside. I blatantly ignored the way his hand felt in mine, so warm and steady, and as soon as the door was closed, I dropped his hand like I’d been burned and rounded on him.

“You’re such a liar!” I hissed, jabbing a finger at his chest.

His jaw gaped, eyes widening in shock. “What are you talking about? How am I a liar?”

I waved my hands vaguely, unable to stand still. “You didn’t tell me you were the owner of the café. You tricked me!”

I hated how hurt he looked at my accusation. “What? You’re being ridiculous! Why do you care if I’m the owner? ”

“Because I work at Crave!” I barked loudly before I could tone down the volume.

He reared back as though struck, his gaze tracking to Crave across the street, windows dark at this time of night. Then he chuckled darkly, shaking his head. “Oh, you are something else. You accuse me of lying, and meanwhile, you’re the one spying on me!” Liam dug his fingers through his hair, giving his curls their wild freedom, and I hated how adorable it made him. “Here I was thinking you were a nice guy, that we had a connection, chemistry, that maybe there could be something between us. Spouting all that bullshit about my butter tarts, and meanwhile, you’re probably just here to steal the recipe.”

Damn, I wish I’d thought of that, but I ate all the tarts without bothering to save one for Hugh. “Yeah, well... I was lying about your butter tarts. They were shit,” I sputtered, nearly choking on the bald-faced lie as I searched frantically for something mean to say. I had to argue against what he’d said, because it was all true. I had been spying on him, and there absolutely was something between us. But I couldn’t date the competition. It was a conflict of interest!

Liam smirked. “Tell that to the crumbs all down your shirt.”

I needed to get the hell out of here. Now. “Look, you just stay on your side of the street, and I’ll stay on mine,” I spat, already turning to storm off.

“Sounds perfect!” he shouted after me. “I never want to see your stupid face again!”

The long walk home started off as more of a stomp, my blood pumping hot in my veins. I’d worked up a real head of steam, and I cursed Liam for the first three blocks. But then the cool night air began to cool my temper, and guilt began to surface. I wasn’t that guy, not really. I didn’t sling cruel barbs like that. I couldn’t get the hurt look in his eyes out of my head. If he weren’t the competition, I would’ve turned right back around and apologized.

“Fuck, you idiot,” I muttered, cursing my stupidity as I finally stepped off the

elevator at my apartment complex and made my way down the hall. I never should've set foot in Grounded. I honestly hated myself for the stupid idea in the first place, because now that I knew how good his baking was, I was doubly worried about my boss's business. Liam almost deserved to win—but Hugh deserved it more.

Gritting my teeth and doubling down, I stepped into my apartment and put my keys on the hook by the door, then kicked off my shoes and grabbed a beer from the fridge. This was a get-drunk-and-forget-my-mistakes kind of night. And since I wasn't a drinker, two beers oughta do it.

Feeling like something I'd scraped off the bottom of my shoe, I clicked on the TV and brought up the show I'd recorded on my DVR. It was the latest episode of that stupid reality show, *Lonely Alpha*. Might as well watch their drama so I could believe that maybe someone was more screwed up than I was.

And the show was all the drama I could've hoped for and more. One of the omegas was feeling all jealous after someone else won a challenge and got a solo date with the alpha, Leo Schuster, so what did they do? The next morning, he put superglue on a mug handle before he passed it to his competition, resulting in a screaming match, followed by a shattered mug and some missing skin.

Huh... competition... I blinked as I watched the whole thing blow up in their faces.

A dark, dangerous idea began to form in my mind. A little harmless prank to help scare off the competition. And maybe to help remind my traitorous heart that Liam was not playing fair, pretending to flirt with me and making me think I had a chance at something more.

Maybe it was time to bend the rules a little, or better yet, ignore them entirely.

6

Liam

After the speed-dating event, I walked Dad down to the hotel where he was staying, and we stopped out front, the light from the lobby's chandelier glittering through the window. I leaned in to give him a hug good night. "Thanks for your help tonight. I couldn't have done it without you."

He snorted, giving me a hard squeeze before he let go and stepped back. He was smirking. "Of course you could have. You've been fiercely independent since you were a toddler, refusing help at every turn. Honestly, I was just surprised you let me help tonight."

"Hey, I didn't 'let you help,'" I snipped, defensive. "I... accepted it gracefully."

"Yeah, right. Real graceful."

In all honesty, I knew I could've made do on my own, just like I always did, but I knew how much it meant to him to be there. And in the end, it had been really nice to have him supporting me. Since Pops died, we'd both been a little lost.

Dad's eyes narrowed as he hit me with one of his practiced dad stares, perfected after years of raising a precocious teenager. "Are you sure you're okay? You've been... quiet since the event wrapped up. Did something happen on one of your dates? Did someone say or do something inappropriate?"

“What? No, no, everything is fine. I’m just tired, that’s all. I had an early morning, and now it’s past my bedtime.”

He gave me a skeptical look but didn’t press. He knew better. I might’ve been smiley and outgoing on the outside, but when I felt cornered, look out. I was the kind of person to close up tight and lock all my feelings away—if you were lucky. When push came to shove, though, I could be a dangerous adversary with a wicked temper.

“Alright, good night, Dad. I’ll see you back at the café in the morning? I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Sounds great, Son,” he said, waving as I backed up down the sidewalk. I knew from experience that he would stand right there until he saw me get into my car. His overprotectiveness used to drive me crazy, but I was used to it by now. It was easier not to fight it.

Once I was in my car, I waved out the window, and Dad finally disappeared inside the hotel, the night door attendant sweeping forward to pull the glass door open for him. It wasn’t until his shadow had vanished that I finally let down my carefully constructed walls.

“Fuck,” I muttered, banging my head lightly on the steering wheel. My back bowed, shoulders hunched forward as I felt the full weight of what happened.

Jared, the seemingly perfect alpha, with his thick brown hair and molasses eyes, and that damn dimple every time he gave me his lopsided grin, was a spy. I had no idea what he’d intended to do once he’d infiltrated my café, but it couldn’t have simply been to charm a stranger—because that was what I was to him, obviously. He’d accused me of lying, which meant he didn’t know I was the owner. And that meant... that the connection had been real .

No! I snapped at myself. There could be no thinking about the electric chemistry I felt crackling between us. No lingering over the memory of his hand in mine, the way his thumb felt as he stroked over my sensitive skin, sending tingles through my body, headed due south.

It couldn't have all been in my head. The connection we had... there was no way he didn't feel it too. Was he just scared at the intensity? Maybe he was worried about what I would say once I found out why he was there. Or it could've been—

Stop it! I scolded myself. Don't make excuses for that asshole's shitty behavior.

I screwed a lid tight on my grumbling and drove the rest of the way home with the radio blasting, hoping it could drown out my inner monologue.

My apartment was just outside of the downtown area in one of the hip neighborhoods, full of trendy restaurants and art studios. Walking from my assigned parking spot, I could hear music coming from one of the outdoor patios, laughter and the tinkle of silverware like a symphony that to me meant good business.

Being in this neighborhood meant my rent was higher than I would've liked, but it was hard to find something closer. I just hoped it wasn't a mistake. Maybe I should've set up a bed in the office at Grounded instead, just until I knew for sure I could make a go of it. Not that I didn't love the apartment. It had a huge open-plan design, with a large exposed-brick wall and high ceilings, two bedrooms, and a deep soaker tub.

And right about now, when my mood was in the shitter, it felt worth it.

I grabbed a spiked cider from the fridge and then sank into a scalding-hot bath up to my neck for what should've been a celebration for a successful evening. But it was too quiet in the bathroom by myself, with just the echoing of my own breath reflected

back at me off the subway tiles, and my brain kept replaying the whole sidewalk standoff for me. The exciting flash of Jared's eyes when he'd shouted, my own temper licking at my insides. I hadn't let loose like that in far too long, and as much as I hated to admit it, a teeny-tiny part of me had... liked it. The broken-down walls and unleashed emotions stirred something long dormant.

My cock gave an unwelcome twitch.

Fuck. Nope, not going there.

I heaved myself out of the tub and threw on a robe, tightening the sash and leaving wet footprints all the way to the living room, taking my still-full drink with me. I'd unpacked most of my knickknacks, but nothing would make my apartment feel like home more than my own pseudo family. I turned on Lonely Alpha on the TV, then booted up my laptop and brought up the fan chatroom.

These other fans weren't what you would call friends, exactly. I didn't know their real names or what they looked like, where they lived, or any personal details of note, but we all shared one important trait—we all had an unhealthy obsession with Lonely Alpha . After every episode, we would all descend on the chat room and gush—or complain—about the characters. I was a bit behind, since tonight's episode had aired while I was at the speed-dating event, so I hit play on the recorded episode and tried to catch up before I inadvertently saw any spoilers in the chat.

It was a particularly spicy episode. First there was a kitchen challenge, with each of the omegas trying to make Leo his favorite food—tacos. The prize? Whoever made the best tacos won a solo date, which obviously everyone wanted. Aside from the total sexist nature of the challenge, it was pure entertainment, and soon, I was thoroughly distracted from my own drama. It didn't hurt that my cider was making my insides all warm and fuzzy.

All of these omegas appeared totally inept in the kitchen. One of them apparently didn't have a clue that there were different kinds of meat or cheese. Another one seemed determined to use a dull knife to cut tomatoes, resulting in a whole mess. And in one case, the tacos were so spicy that Leo had to spit it out, his face turning bright red with tears streaming down his face as he coughed and choked.

In the end, it came down to two contestants, and Leo hemmed and hawed and finally picked the blond fitness instructor, Clark, which led to a whole date montage of heated gazes and lingering touches while they had a candlelit dinner for two in the backyard by the pool, before the two of them disappeared behind a closed door where the camera couldn't follow.

Unable to wait for the end of the episode, I quickly jumped in the chat.

CreamyJoe: Just catching up. (No spoilers!) Just wondering... who thinks Leo actually had sex with Fitness Barbie?

BottomsUp: Who wouldn't? I'd do either of them. Or both of them. Any combination of them. Do you think they have twins? *bow chicka bow wow*

I rolled my eyes. Whoever BottomsUp was, they were always a real horndog, but honestly, at this point I'd been celibate for so long, I couldn't disagree.

My eyes moved back to the TV where the aftermath was exploding in the house. There was no bitch-slapping or hair pulling—yet—but the omega who'd lost the challenge, Marty, had decided to go for a little payback. He added superglue to the handle of Clark's coffee mug the next morning. Things just devolved from there into a smashed mug and a screaming match until they both stormed off. But then, a night-vision camera showed Clark sneaking into Marty's bedroom at night with a bowl of warm water, presumably to put Marty's hand in it while he was sleeping. The final scene was of Marty's closed bedroom door and the silence broken by a yelp, bleeped-

out curses, then a shot of Marty making a mad dash for the bathroom with a hand over his crotch.

CreamyJoe: Ooh, damn! Marty started a war. This is gonna get messy. Remind me to stock up on popcorn.

RainbowRob: Tell me about it! This is way better than that time last season when Nolan pulled off Travis's hairpiece and threw it in the oven on broil.

Dripdrip69: Can you imagine the stank that musta caused?

BJz4dayz: I heard they had to evacuate the set cause everybody started puking.

BananaSunday: I know a guy who knows a guy who works the set, and I can confirm. They cleared the neighbors out too.

MuffinTop: I know I've had my doubts about the show, but I just had a shit day, and you know what? For some reason, staged or not, this disaster made me feel better.

CreamyJoe: Same, Muffin. Same.

BananaSunday: So, who do we think is going to win this thing?

MuffinTop: Who cares? As long as they keep these two catfighting right to the bitter end. Is there a petition I can sign?

That night, I fell asleep with a smile on my lips. It was important to remember that everything had gone according to plan. The event had a great turnout, everyone had a good time, the drinks and snacks were a success, and I knew with absolute certainty that some of those people would return as paying customers.

Jared? He'd been a bit of a wild card, but even that hadn't been entirely awful. Even if it was just for an hour, I'd felt more alive than I had in a long time. I'd felt seen, wanted . He'd rekindled something in me that I thought I'd lost when my pops died—my fighting spirit.

As I drifted off, I laughed softly. Pops would've loved him.

7

Jared

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Hugh asked. “It’s your weekend off.”

I stood at the back of the pet store with my cell phone to my ear, bending down to look through the glass. Lula was fascinated, staring enthralled with her nose pressed to the bottom row of tanks, tail wagging. There were schools of brightly colored fish, exotic lizards, and even a few giant hermit crabs. They definitely weren’t as cuddly as Lulabelle, but I supposed I could see the appeal.

“It’s no problem, I’ll just drop Lula off for Ridley. You know me, I never mind the extra hours,” I told my boss, walking down the row of tanks before I found what I was looking for. “And really, what else would I be doing?” I knew exactly what I would be doing. My nerves gave a little tingle of excitement—more than enough to drown out any lingering feelings of bitter guilt. “Why did Steve call in? Is he sick?”

“Yeah, some sort of a bug. He said it’s not too bad, but he didn’t think he should be serving customers if he could be contagious.”

“Fair enough,” I said. A lot of employers would make their staff feel guilty about calling in sick, especially for something non-life-threatening, but not Hugh. He was the type of boss who would swing by Steve’s house after work to bring him some hot soup. Honestly, Hugh was lucky nobody had ever taken advantage of his generosity. “What time do you need me?”

“Three, if you can make it? I know it’s short notice. Debra can stay a little late from her morning shift, and in the meantime, I’ll be holding down the fort.”

“Yeah, it’s all good. I needed to head down your way anyway,” I told Hugh, while I waved at the guy behind the counter and pointed at the tank beside me, indicating that I would take a dozen.

“Oh? You have a hot lunch date?” Even though he was teasing, I heard a note of hope in his voice. He knew how hard my breakup with Ridley hit me, and just like any good pseudo dad, he wanted me to find my true love. Little did he know, I’d met my true hate instead.

“Nope, no dates here. Just an... appointment.” With revenge .

I wrapped up the call with a promise to be at work by three, then I stood back and watched the pet store employee grab a plastic container and scoop up my purchase for me. “Here you are,” he said, passing me the tub, and I held it as lightly as possible, a shudder working up my spine. I swore I could feel their little legs right through the plastic. I lifted it up to see them from below.

“What do you have?” the guy asked.

“Huh?” I lowered the tub and blinked at him.

He frowned in confusion. “What are you going to feed them to? I assume it’s not your dog,” he added, looking down at Lulabelle.

“Oh. Um... iguana?” I hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question, but I couldn’t very well admit what I was about to do with them.

“Cool.” He nodded, and when I didn’t offer anything else, he said, “You can pay up

front.”

“Thanks!” I turned toward the till at the front of the store, still a bit baffled by my own idiocy. Was I really about to bring a whole dozen cockroaches into Grounded? But then I thought of how Hugh was literally the nicest guy ever, how he was working his ass off to keep his business going to support his family. And Liam? I remembered how much fun I’d had, how much hope he’d made me feel at his stupid speed-dating event, only to turn out to be the bad guy, and my resolve hardened.

Yep. He was going down.

It was 2:30 by the time I settled in down the block from Grounded. I tried to look casual, with my tub of live dubia cockroaches stashed in an inconspicuous eco-friendly fabric bag. I swore I could hear them scuttling around in there, but it was probably my imagination. Right...?

The little roaches were kinda cute if you were into the whole beady-eyes, six-legs thing. They were dark brown with little spots, not even an inch long. They’d honestly gotten a bad rap they hadn’t entirely earned. They were currently snacking on some fruit scraps I’d tossed in there to keep them happy.

I approached the café cautiously, peeking around the edge of the window. Liam was in there, serving a customer. His smile, wide and friendly, did dangerous things to my traitorous body. My heart sped up, palms damp with sweat, and while adrenaline had definitely started to pump through my veins, I suspected it had nothing to do with this sense of danger I was experiencing and everything to do with the man himself.

Why couldn’t he have been in any other profession? Tax auditor, hockey referee, sewage plant attendant. Literally anything !

I groaned, drinking up the sight of him as he handed the customer their coffee, then

darted back before he could see me. When a woman passing by gave me a suspicious glance, I did my best to smile in the most non-threatening way I could manage without looking like a psychopath. But right about now, I felt at least halfway to crazy. At least .

What did I hope to achieve by doing this? I mean, I could plant the bugs then call in a complaint to the health department, get him shut down, but that felt like... too much. I didn't want to ruin his career. Just maybe... encourage him to move to a different neighborhood where he wouldn't be risking my job and those of my friends.

I was caught in a nonstop loop of my existential crisis when the customer came out, and when I peeked inside again, I saw Liam heading into the back. Now was my chance!

Before I could chicken out, I darted in through the door before it even had a chance to close. There was a young girl at the counter, but when she opened her mouth to greet me, I clutched a hand to my stomach. "Sorry, just need the bathroom. It's an emergency!"

She made a face—the kind of cringe only a teenage girl could manage—and waved me off.

As soon as the bathroom door closed behind me, I blew out a sigh of relief. Now, time to get down to business then get the hell out of here. I pulled the tub out of my bag, popped the lid, then crouched down and coaxed the roaches out onto the tiled floor.

"Be free, little guys! For what it's worth, I hope you don't get squished."

Guilt twisted my gut into knots, but I quickly tamped it down, determined to feel satisfaction for a job well done. Liam would find the pests and lose faith in this

location, then he would move somewhere else where he wouldn't compete with us, and in turn, we wouldn't compete with him, and his business would prosper. Honestly, I was doing him a favor. It was win-win!

Ducking my head, I ran straight through the café. "Thanks!" I muttered on the way past, waving a hand over my shoulder. I didn't stick around to see if she said anything in reply.

I waited just outside, my back plastered to the brick wall, until I heard a high-pitched shriek. I slammed a hand down over my mouth to contain the involuntary giggle that tried to escape. Then, with a fresh surge of adrenaline, I darted across the street as if the devil himself were on my heels.

I burst through the front door of Crave at full speed and headed straight for the staff room at the back. My heart was still hammering against my ribcage, my breath sawing in and out.

Of course Hugh was there, steaming milk at the cappuccino machine, and when I tried to slip past, he called after me. "Hey, Jared. You okay?"

My limbs locked up, and I forced a smile on. "Yeah. I'm okay. Great, actually." And I was surprised to find it was true. Sure, there was relief now that it was over and I hadn't been caught, but also... it was a bit exciting. I'd always been the good boy, who then grew up to be the good man. I'd followed all the rules, studied hard, worked hard, smiled and nodded and said the right things.

But this... was wrong. It was childish and silly—and I hadn't felt this alive in a long damn time.

Hugh went back to his customer, and I headed to my locker to change into my uniform, feeling every pulse of my heart as it eventually returned to its regular pace.

It was a little harmless prank, I told myself, and as much as I hated to admit it, it was fun . I was only sorry Liam wouldn't see it that way.

8

Liam

I'd always been a fan of reality TV. It was drama at its finest and really shone a spotlight on human behavior at its best and worst. The audience got to watch real-life people make bad decisions, often followed shortly by a sharp slap of karma. We argued about our favorite contestants and who should get kicked out, and in the end, there was a clear winner. It was the epitome of satisfaction. In the case of a dating show like *Lonely Alpha*, they were popular because they had the added appeal of tapping into one of humanity's basest needs—to procreate. Sex sells, and apparently, so did caffeine and sugar.

It had been a steady flow of customers all morning, starting with the early-rising seniors trying to beat the rush, followed by the Sunday late-risers and the after-church crowd. I hadn't even had a chance to hang out with Dad before he'd headed home to North Salter. By the time lunch rolled around, I'd already sold out of my soft ginger cookies, so I decided to make a second batch.

Aubrey had come in at 11, and she would stay until we closed later this afternoon. She seemed capable of handling the front on her own for a bit, so I left her to watch the counter then headed into the back. Thankfully, she didn't seem to mind not having enough time to sit on her phone.

My pops's ginger cookies were my favorite. He'd gotten the original recipe while on one of his yearly road trips, that time through Virginia. He always came home with some new recipe. Sometimes he'd go into a roadside diner and end up asking to speak

to the chef about the pie. Once, he'd made me pull an illegal U-turn just because he caught a whiff of something delicious through the open window, and we'd tracked it down to a cute restaurant in an old red barn. There was room for only four small tables covered in red-and-white-check tablecloths, with antique kitchen utensils hanging on the weathered-wood walls and a view straight through to the kitchen. It was owned by a married couple, and they swore what made their food so good was their loyalty to butter. "None of that margarine bullshit," the alpha had said.

Over the years, Pops had collected enough recipes that he could've published his own cookbook, but that wasn't why he did it. It was simply the love of good food and good company. Hunger was the great equalizer.

He'd found the original ginger cookie recipe at a museum, but he'd made changes over the years, writing them in pencil along the margins as he worked on giving it his own spin. I was still trying to get the recipe right. I was convinced he'd added a secret ingredient and forgotten to write it down, because I was still missing something, for sure.

I'd been making versions of these cookies for over 20 years, ever since my dad had dropped me off with Pops to watch that first weekend. But now, the molasses only served to remind me of a certain infuriating alpha and his rich brown eyes. It seemed strange, after how quickly things soured, to still be thinking of him in any kind of way. I'd just gotten the briefest hint of what it would feel like to be the focus of Jared's attention, and it had been all-encompassing. He was so intense, even from across the room, and I had a strong feeling that intensity would carry over into the bedroom. The mental image had me fanning myself.

Gods, is it hot in here or just the oven?

Too bad he'd turned out to be a bit of an asshole. It was like he thought I was some kind of evil villain, out to bankrupt his boss or something, which was just plain

ridiculous. If only he'd given me two seconds to talk to him about it, I was sure we could've found some middle ground. Called a truce of some kind, and we could've sealed the deal with a kiss.

I rolled the balls of dough in sugar before setting them on the baking tray, then slid them into the oven. Now the hard part—waiting.

The entire café quickly filled with the scent of sweet baked sugar and spice, and the customer at the counter took a deep breath as I handed him his coffee. “That smells amazing. Any chance whatever it is will be ready in the next... 30 seconds?” he asked, looking at his watch.

“More like three minutes. Too long?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. I'm already running late. But I'll be back this way in an hour. Save me one?” he asked, already backing toward the door.

“Consider it done.” I loved getting to share my grandpa's cookies with the world. Every time someone bought one, I swore I could hear Pops's satisfied chuckle. It was almost like he was still here.

After the customer left, I headed into the back to finish cleaning up while waiting for the timer to go off. My stomach gave a hungry gurgle, and I patted my surprisingly still-flat stomach. Considering I ate the first cookie out of every batch—for quality control, obviously—it wouldn't take me too long to put on an extra layer of padding. In lots of time for winter, perfect for a little bit of extra warmth right when I needed it.

Just as I was taking the trays out of the oven, Aubrey stuck her head in the back. “Um, Mr. Turner?” Gods, that made me feel old, but she wasn't comfortable calling me by my first name.

“Yes, Aubrey? Do you need help out front?”

“Not really? Some rando just came in to use the bathroom, but he was acting super sus. Want me to check that he didn’t trash the bathroom?” She braced for my answer.

I appreciated that she was willing to do it, but I couldn’t ask her to do that. “No, I’ve got it. Thanks for letting me know.” I tossed the oven mitts aside and headed to the back corner where the public bathroom was stashed. I’d worked in restaurants for years, so I was no stranger to patrons behaving badly. No matter how bad it was, I’d likely seen worse. I wanted to believe I was prepared for anything as I pushed open the door, but nope. My jaw dropped.

Aubrey peeked over my shoulder to see what was going on, and that was when she screamed.

“Well, shit,” I cursed, running in to try to contain the insects as they scurried under the stall doors. Most people would’ve stomped on them and been done with it, but besides the ick factor of getting bug guts everywhere, I just couldn’t bring myself to hurt the little critters. They hadn’t done anything wrong, and they were mostly harmless. They were the real victims here. “Come on, guys,” I murmured as I coaxed them off the tile floor one by one, until I’d grabbed a full dozen.

“Get the front door!” I shouted back at Aubrey as I started shoving them into the front pocket of my apron, trying to contain them all.

Aubrey was more than happy to get the hell out of there. She ran ahead of me, squealing and shuddering the whole way, and held the door open as I shuttled the little critters outside onto the street along the curb.

I was so caught up in getting the roaches out that I hadn’t reached the why of the whole event yet, but as I straightened, I just happened to look up at the right moment

to catch Jared jogging back to his side of the street, and I swore I heard him laughing. I gasped. “Why, you little jerk!”

I was too shocked to be truly angry yet, but I knew it was coming. The telltale prickle of my brewing temper was just beneath the surface. This was a truly underhanded prank.

I knew what my dad would say. That as an omega, I should turn the other cheek, that I shouldn't take the bait. But as I glared across the street at Crave Coffee, I drew strength from my bubbling temper, instead of shoving it down deep. I refused to take this lying down. Instead, I thought of last night's episode of Lonely Alpha , when Clark got even with Marty for his prank. Well, I was about to channel my inner Clark.

This. Means. War .

CreamyJoe: Guys, I am having the worst day. Quick, I need a distraction.

RimJobbins: Want me to send a dick pic?

BottomsUp: Don't be presumptuous. Maybe he wants an ass pic.

RainbowRob: Dude, talk about presumptuous. Maybe he's a she. Or a they .

MuffinTop: Um..... Is this really the kind of chat room that posts nudes? Maybe try something like “I'm sorry to hear that. Anything I can do to help?”

CreamyJoe: Thanks, Muffin. It's just work stuff. I'll live.

MuffinTop: If it helps, you're not alone. I can relate. Would some cliché platitudes make you feel better? I have a ton.

MuffinTop: You've got this!

MuffinTop: These things too shall pass.

MuffinTop: Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

MuffinTop: Everything happens for a reason.

CreamyJoe: Okay, okay! Please, no more! lol Mission accomplished. I promise I'm all better.

RimJobbins: Geez muffin, keep it in your pants, would ya.

9

Jared

I snuck out of work carefully at the end of my shift, expecting to find Liam lying in wait for me, but... nope. Nothing. I sagged a little with the letdown of adrenaline. I peeked down the street at Grounded and saw the lights were off.

My shoulders sagged. Huh, I guess he went home .

I was surprised to find that I'd actually been looking forward to him calling me out, cheeks flushed, eyes flashing as he tore a strip off me. The fact that he wasn't was disappointing.

Guilt gnawed at me a little. Maybe that was why I thought I deserved to be yelled at. Like if he got mad, I would somehow be exonerated from blame. Yeah, that was some twisted logic.

The next morning, I braced myself again, anticipating the blowup. And again, nothing.

What the hell? Did he not guess it was me? I stood on the sidewalk outside of Crave and thought about it for a second. If he hadn't figured it out, should I tell him? Well, that would kind of defeat the purpose to the whole prank, wouldn't it? Huffing, I went to work.

Day after day, it was the same. No Liam, no fight. Grounded remained open,

customers still coming and going with greater frequency as he built up a reputation for his delicious baking, but I was less annoyed with that than I'd anticipated. It wasn't like I thought a few cockroaches would be enough to chase him off. He hadn't come across as the cowardly type. He was no pushover.

The urge to get answers was starting to nag at me, like an itch I couldn't scratch. After a full week had passed, I was done.

I stormed into work without pausing. I wasn't the least bit surprised that Liam was once again absent, and I'd pretty much given up all hope of seeing him again. I just wasn't sure if that was a good thing or bad.

As I pulled the door open, I caught a whiff of something unpleasant, and I wondered if the storm drain out front was backed up or something. I made a note to call the city if it was still there at the end of my shift.

"Hey, boss," I said, waving to Hugh on the way to the back. He nodded, but he was busy counting out scoops of coffee grounds, so I didn't interrupt him. Soon, the rich aroma of fresh brew covered up any lingering odor, and I forgot all about it.

About an hour later, though, it had begun to creep back in, and I saw the expressions on a few customers' faces, twisted up in disgust. I should call the city sooner rather than later. It was going to start affecting our business.

It had begun to get warm in here, as the summer sun rose high and hot in the sky, shining straight in through the large front window and reflecting off the tables at the front. Hugh closed the blinds halfway, cutting down on the glare, then said, "I'm going to turn the A/C on."

It was the post-lunch lull, and without the customers to keep my mind occupied, thoughts of Liam invaded my head. I leaned a hip on the edge of the counter, feeling

that familiar itch. “Hey, boss. Have you met the new café owner from down the street?” I asked out of morbid curiosity.

“Hmm? Yeah, of course. He came in and introduced himself a few days ago.” He was distracted by something, his forehead creased. “Why?”

“No reason...” I could’ve left it at that, but the need to know more about the man grated insistently. “I mean, what do you think of him?” I asked, fishing for something, though I wasn’t sure what. If Hugh thought he was a jerk, then maybe it would be vindication that what I’d done was right?

Hugh had tilted his head back, looking up at the ceiling, but my question brought his attention back to me. “Um, yeah, he seemed nice. Awfully young to be starting a business, but he’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

Dammit. Now I was going to have to go over there and apologize.

Hugh went back to looking around, his face twisted into a grimace. “Okay, please tell me I’m not going crazy. You smell that too, right?”

I scoffed. “Of course I smell it! It’s been lingering all day. It’s the sewer out front, isn’t it?”

He shook his head, craning his neck around. “No, I don’t think so. I swear it just got worse when I turned the air on.” Since we didn’t have any customers at the moment, we left the air on and went in search of the smell, which unfortunately meant walking around taking deep breaths.

I was determined it must’ve been sewage, so I started by opening the door and taking a whiff, but Hugh was right. The air outside was fresher than in here, even counting the car exhaust. Next, I targeted the drains in the kitchen sink, thinking gray water

could back up there too, but that came back clear. Then, with a sinking sense of dread, I thought back to what I'd done to the public bathroom in Grounded, so I headed there next, wary and cautious. Hugh said Liam hadn't been here in days, but I checked it all the same. Once I'd cleared it, I trudged back to the counter, confused as hell.

"Alright, I give up," I said, but Hugh was in the back corner standing on a chair. "What are you doing?"

"I think I've figured out where it's coming from." He was standing directly in front of one of the air vents, bracing himself with a hand on the ductwork.

"What, like it's being drawn in from outside? A problem with the unit on the roof maybe?"

"No, I don't think so." He grunted as he tried to wedge his fingers in around the edge of the grate.

I made my way over and held the back of the chair to make sure it didn't wobble and dump him on his head. With a grunt, he got the cover off, and there was no doubt about the source of the stench now. A thick, rancid odor overpowered us both, and I gagged before I got a handle on it. Hugh bravely rose up on his toes to peek inside. "Uh... you are not gonna believe this."

"Oh gods, did a rat die in there?" I asked, stomach threatening to empty itself right here. The city probably had rats, just like any city, though I'd never seen one myself. I was ready to call an exterminator, but before I could grab my phone, Hugh shook his head.

"Nope, not a rat." He hopped down from the chair, a strange look on his face. "First things first, we turn off the air. Then we're going to need a garbage bag, some rubber

gloves, and cleaning supplies.”

“But what is it?” I asked, following him to the kitchen.

Hugh stopped and turned around the face me, his expression unreadable. “You’re not going to believe it, but it’s... a dead fish.”

“A fish ?” My voice pitched higher at the end as my throat tightened .

“Yep. A fish.” He grabbed a black garbage bag from under the sink. “Someone obviously put it there. The vent’s around the corner from the counter, so it would’ve been fairly easy to do without being seen, but what I don’t get is who would’ve put that in there? Some teenager, I guess. I tell you, I am not looking forward to my kids reaching the troublemaker stage. I can already feel my hair turning gray.”

I knew exactly who put it there, and it was no teen. Likely a few days ago, in fact, when a certain rival café owner came by to introduce himself. He seemed nice, Hugh had said. Had a good head on his shoulders. Yeah, right.

“Here, let me,” I said, taking the bag from him.

“You don’t have to.”

“I don’t mind.” This was my mess, so I would be the one to clean it up.

There were a lot of emotions I should’ve been feeling right about now, as I donned thick yellow gloves and bagged up the rank fish carcass, holding my breath for as long as I could. I should’ve been mad, certainly, or even should’ve been put in my place a little after a healthy dose of payback. Instead, though, I felt a bizarre sense of... pride . This whole week I’d been waiting for Liam to make a move, and meanwhile, he already had. He didn’t yell at me, didn’t back down. No, he’d stood up

for himself in the most exhilarating way. Ooh, he'd gotten me good.

I knew I should back down and call it even, but honestly, I hadn't had this much fun in ages. This little battle with Liam was unpredictable, and I kind of loved how completely unstable it made me feel.

Ever since me and Mom had parted ways, everything in my life had been in this delicate state of balance, and I'd been walking on eggshells not to disrupt anything. I couldn't stand the thought of my hard-won stability being shaken up, so I worked hard at my job, making sure I had enough money to pay all my bills, everything planned down to the penny. Even my relationship with Ridley had been more about making sure he was happy and had whatever he needed. Planned date nights, never anything spontaneous, and in the end, that was probably what had done us in.

Liam, though, brought chaos to my world. Instead of clear skies and smooth sailing, he was a hurricane. That delicate house of cards I'd spent so long building, suddenly... it didn't matter so much anymore. He'd thrown a wrench into my plans, and I was still here. He made me feel stronger than I had my whole life. More capable of handling whatever came at me.

Was I going to back down now? Hell no.

10

Liam

I'd always known they would find the fish. I mean, sooner or later, it would become impossible to ignore.

Considering Jared had come to spy on me at the speed-dating event, I had naturally assumed he'd been sent there by his boss. But when I went in to plant the fish, under the guise of introducing myself to the owner, I'd been caught off guard. The guy was beyond nice, not at all what I'd been expecting. Hugh had welcomed me to the neighborhood, and when he learned I was new to the city as well, he'd made me a whole list of must-see locations, which included a bookstore, an art studio, and the park down the street where he swore I could get the best hotdogs in town. He gave me the name of a mechanic, an insurance broker, and a doctor taking new patients.

"And if you're looking for somewhere for a drink, I would suggest Mickey's. It's got a whole 80s theme, but don't go to The Bar Cherry without a chaperone. That place comes with a content warning."

"Uh, thanks," I'd mumbled, getting flustered.

At that point, I'd been seriously reconsidering the retaliatory prank. There was no way he'd sent Jared over to spy on me, and certainly not to plant cockroaches. Jared must've been working under his own direction. The only thing I couldn't figure out was why .

When a customer came in and interrupted us, I'd thanked Hugh for his kindness and went to leave. But then I'd thought of Jared and his maniacal laugh as he'd run off across the street after depositing those roaches. A move that could easily be seen as an act of war. If I didn't get a little payback, he'd think he won, and that was unacceptable. So, pretending to use the bathroom, I'd snuck around the corner and quickly hopped up on a chair, pried off the vent cover, and shoved in the fish.

Since that day, I'd been watching, waiting, the anticipation building. They had to smell it by now. It'd been three days!

We'd been getting steadily busier, and I finally got a few more resumes in my email inbox, so I'd managed to hire someone to help cover a few shifts, but he didn't start until tomorrow. For now, I was alone for the day, which put a serious cramp in my nosy spying on the café across the street.

Every time I had a lull in customers, I would wander over to peek out the window, hiding behind a massive Boston fern. I'd caught Jared more than once standing out front, staring my way with his hands on his hips, scowl ruining his perfectly gorgeous face. It was like he knew it was coming. It made me giggle, thinking about how I'd already played my hand. I kept waiting for him to storm over here and pick another fight with me, but so far, he'd kept his distance.

I was interrupted from my stalking by a customer coming in. I straightened from my crouch, an embarrassed blush warming my cheeks. "Oh, um, good afternoon," I said, clearing my throat.

Thankfully, the guy didn't ask about what I'd been doing skulking behind the plants. That might've been an awkward conversation .

"What can I get for you?" I reluctantly made my way back behind the counter.

“Hmmm...” he drawled, taking his time to read over the entire menu—twice—only to then ask, “What would you suggest?”

I stilled my fingers where they’d been tapping on the counter in impatience. “Well, how about our seasonal latte? Goes very nicely with a pumpkin scone and some maple butter.”

The guy shook his head. “No, no. I’m lactose intolerant.”

It took some effort to bite back on my irritation as I forced on a smile. “I could make it with another kind of milk, if you’d like. We have almond, oat, and soy milk.”

He made a face. “Ugh, soy milk is the worst. Too thick, and the flavor is all wrong.”

Oh, so he was the type to complain about anything I offered. I waited to see if he’d bitch about the other milks, then decided to just stand back and let him come up with his own order, no matter how long it took.

Distantly, I was aware that this wasn’t at all me. I was a people person, always had been. I was the kind of guy who loved to chat about the weather or a customer’s pet or their ailing spouse. As soon as they walked in the door, there was nothing more important than the customer. Each interaction was a personal experience, even if I would never see them again.

Now, though, my mind was thinking about Jared in the background. I wished I’d had more time to memorize the exact shade of his eyes, needed to know what his hair looked like when he first woke up in the morning. Was he thinking about me too?

I scolded myself lightly. Since when had I deemed anything more important than customers? I should’ve been worried about the shift in priorities, but also... it was impossible to ignore the buoyant giddiness this little tiff made me feel.

At long last, the customer settled on an Americano and a bran muffin—the most predictable order possible for the man. I resisted the urge to shove him out the door as he walked at the slowest pace imaginable toward the exit. He even paused to look outside as if gauging the likelihood of rain.

As soon as the door closed behind the customer, my polite smile dropped, replaced with a wicked grin as I jogged around the counter and back to my place by the window. There! The door to Crave was propped open, and I saw Jared with a tea towel, waving it around like he was trying to increase the air circulation.

I cackled, clapping my hands. “Gotcha!” I barked, and even though the door was closed and it was impossible for him to have heard me all the way over here, his head whipped up to glare in my direction. I ducked down out of sight, snickering.

When I was a child and I used to play hide-and-seek with my cousins, I would wedge myself into the very best hiding places, only for the anticipation to immediately trigger my bladder. Every damn time. Well, this was unfortunately just like that. As much as I very much wanted to stand right here and indulge in watching the outcome across the street, I needed to pee or I would burst.

Unfortunately, Aubrey wouldn’t be in for another hour, and there was no chance I would make it that long. Gnawing on my lip, I crossed my legs and debated my options. I could close up shop, but that seemed silly. I dashed toward the back. On the off chance a customer came in in the next few minutes, they would wait by the counter. I could make it !

When I came out a few minutes later, though, much relieved, I emerged from the back to find Jared there, swapping out the sugar in the glass jar for salt.

“Hey!” I shouted, and he was so startled that he dropped the box of salt, spilling it across the floor.

“Shit,” he cursed, looking around for some excuse for what he was doing, but he didn’t have a leg to stand on. Finally, he sighed and straightened up to his full height, a good three or four inches taller than me. He shrugged, unapologetic. “Come on, Liam. Did you really expect me to let that rotten fish go?” His smirk made his dimple pop.

Dammit, my stomach gave a little flip at the sight, but instead of acknowledging the dangerous water I was treading through, I doubled down. “Yes! That was exactly what I expected!”

I marched straight to the door and locked it so nobody could walk in on our argument then turned around to face him, raising my chin defiantly. “We were done! We were even! You put cockroaches in my bathroom, and I put a rotten fish in your air vent. Even Steven, tit for tat. Why couldn’t you just let it go?”

Jared stepped closer, even muscle in his body taut. “Because we’re not even, obviously. Did you forget about how you lied to me about being the owner? Acted all nice and charming, only to turn around and be all like, ‘look at me, you can’t touch me.’”

I scoffed, closing the distance until I swore I could feel the heat coming off him. “First of all, I never said I wasn’t the owner, no lie detected. Second, when did I say you couldn’t touch me?” Oops, that sounded more like an invitation than it did in my head.

“That doesn’t make it any less true,” he said through gritted teeth.

As tempted as I was to reach for him, to show him just how wrong he was, I bunched my fists at my sides, resisting the urge. “What, like we’re star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet style? ”

His upper lip curled back. “Being lovers would insinuate that what I feel for you goes beyond intense dislike.”

I felt my eyebrows jump in surprise, because when I looked at him, the way he was clearly not unaffected by me, I knew what he felt for me was anything but dislike.

Shaking my head, I clenched my jaw, seething. “Gods, you’re so... so...”

“So what?” he goaded, narrowing his eyes in challenge, leaning in until we were mere inches apart. “Say it.”

“Infuriating!” I shouted. My chest was heaving, blood rushing through my veins. And fuck, my cock was rock hard, slick dampening the back of my briefs.

We stared at each other, both of us so riled up that we couldn’t catch our breaths. He was close enough that I could taste him on my tongue, and I licked my lips, chasing the flavor. His eyes dipped down to follow the movement, and the eroticism of it forced a moan from my lips.

I would’ve been embarrassed about my reaction if he hadn’t swayed on his feet, gulping, and I wanted so badly to lick along the curve of his throat.

It was impossible to say which one of us moved first. One second, we were in an unbreakable standoff, and the next... we were kissing.

11

Jared

This was not the gentle press of lips that one would expect from a first kiss. This was all nipping teeth and gripping hands. And it was the hottest, most explosive kiss I'd ever experienced in my life.

This wasn't what I'd had in mind when I snuck in here to swap out the sugar for the salt, but I wasn't complaining. This felt inevitable, like with every prank, every barb we'd exchanged, we were always marching straight toward tearing each other's clothes off. Which seemed exactly Liam's intention when he wrenched my shirt out from my pants, his fingers searching for warm flesh.

Licking through his mouth, I lost all sense of time and space. It took me a few minutes to register that we were desperately mauling each other in plain view of the sidewalk, if anyone cared to look through the large windows.

Gripping him under the ass, I hoisted him off his feet, and his legs seemed to wrap instinctively around my waist. It brought our erections in direct contact, and he whimpered, bucking in my grip to grind against me.

I was suddenly very grateful for all the time I spent working out as I carried him behind the counter and into the back where we could have some privacy. We were lucky I didn't drop him, because the entire time, he didn't stop kissing me. His hands were in my hair, pulling hard enough for my scalp to sting.

My shoulder slammed into the doorframe, but I couldn't care less. We pinballed off the fridge, then banged into a shelving unit with a clatter of metal bowls across the floor, but it was all in the distant background. My brain was pretty one-track minded right now. My senses were full of Liam—his taste, his smell, the feel of him in my arms. How had I lasted so long without him? I felt like I'd been drowning all this time, and this right here was the first gasp of oxygen I'd had in years.

I thought we were on the same wavelength, but when I went to drop him on the nearest flat surface, he clung even tighter to me. He pulled back just long enough to scold, "No! Not on the counter! I make food here. Over there, the storage room." He pointed vaguely, then moved to lick and bite his way down my neck, trusting me to get us where we needed to go.

Yeah, that was really hard to do when my eyes rolled to the back of my skull. Gods, his tongue. It should be illegal the way he was using it to lave at my pulse point, making me forget my own name. There was a very good chance he was leaving all kinds of bruises, and the caveman part of my brain loved that he was marking me up.

When I reached the door he'd indicated, I pressed him up against it and rolled my hips, dry-humping through our pants. He let out a grunt then bit down on my earlobe, making me see stars. That was probably why I didn't notice him reaching for the doorknob. The door swung inward before I was prepared for it, and we lurched forward. I barely managed to catch myself on a shelf before kicking the door shut behind us. It was too dark to see, and I very desperately needed to see him, so I felt around for a light switch. He must've had the same idea because he beat me to it.

"Clothes... off," I panted, setting him quickly on his feet.

There was no time to be graceful. Shirts and shoes went one way, pants and underwear another. Until we both stood there under the unflattering yellow light in nothing but our socks. For a single second, I was scared that was it. We'd gotten this

far only to come to our senses. I never should've let go of him. But then his gaze dipped down to my cock, painfully hard and dripping precum, and he licked his full lips like he was hungry for a feast.

"Just one time, and then we never speak of this again," he said, forcing his eyes back up to mine. "Okay?"

I was already nodding. It wouldn't have mattered what he suggested in this moment, I was going to agree. He could've asked me to marry him, and I'd have found myself running down the aisle. "Uh-huh. Sure." Then I snagged him around the waist and pulled him to me, our lips clashing once more.

There wasn't much in the way of tables or chairs in here, but we made do with an empty shelf. I set his ass down on the edge, shoved his knees wide, and wedged myself between his legs. Liam reached between us to take hold of my cock in a tight grip, angling it just right. He stroked the head back and forth through his slick then notched it at his entrance.

"Hurry," he whined. "I need—"

That was as far as he got before I surged forward. I knew exactly what he needed, because it was what I needed too. We should've taken time to prepare his hole, using fingers or my tongue, but neither of us could've been bothered to pause long enough for foreplay. That wasn't what this was. He gasped as I stretched him, taking a few hard snaps of my hips to get as deep as I could, until my balls were right up against his cheeks.

I tried to pause there, to give him time to adjust to my girth, but he was clambering at my shoulders. "Move, please, move," he begged breathlessly. But when I obliged, it was almost too much for me. The sensations felt like an electric current zinging straight to my core.

Being slow was never an option for us. Once the brakes were off, all the pent-up frustration had us going full steam ahead. Gripping his hips, I thrust hard enough to set the shelf banging against the wall. Our kisses turned sloppy, all coordination lost to pleasure. He bit my lip hard enough that I tasted blood, but it still wasn't enough.

It didn't take long for the small space to fill with the smell of sex, and I reveled in it, knowing it would linger. Every time he needed a bag of flour or sugar, he would think of me.

"Yes! There!" he cried, leaning back as far as he could so I hit the right angle.

"Gods, you're so fucking hot," I praised, looking down at him. "You take my cock so well."

"It was made for me," he said on a wanton moan, head thrown back. "Fuck, I'm so close."

His smooth chest glittered with a sheen of sweat, and I bent over him for a taste. I hesitated at his nipple, sucking gently, but then I bit down and his back bowed. He came with a cry, his dick pulsing, cum arcing between us and painting our chests. His tight ring of muscle clenched around me in time with the spurts, and I was lost. With a final hard thrust, I came inside him.

When my knot thickened from the base of my cock and forced itself into his channel, he shuddered, and as it pressed against his prostate, a last dribble of cum leaked from the tip of his crown .

I wrapped my arms around him gently and cradled him against my chest in a surprisingly tender gesture after something so carnal. "Who knew childish pranks were a form of foreplay," I teased with a chuckle.

He laughed lightly, his gaze at half-mast as he looked at me. “This doesn’t mean I like you, you know,” he clarified, though I could’ve sworn his sex-addled brain liked me just fine.

My grin widened as I pointed out, “It doesn’t mean you don’t like me either.”

We took a moment to catch our breaths, since we were locked together. Neither of us was going anywhere. Liam sagged against me, sighing as I traced lazy patterns over his back.

Our peace was interrupted by the front door chime. Liam’s head shot up from where it was resting on my shoulder. His eyes were wide and confused. “I thought I locked that... Oh shit, Aubrey! Her shift is about to start.”

“Hello? Mr. Turner?” I heard her call distantly from the front of the café.

Liam slapped my shoulder. “You have to pull out!” he hissed, frantic. “Quick! She can’t see me like this.”

My knot hadn’t deflated enough to make this easy, but we had no other choice. It had to come out. So, wiggling my hips side to side, I eased myself back, catching on the rim of his ass. We both groaned at the sensation, and as soon as I popped free, my cum leaked from his hole. Daaaaamn. I wished so much that I could take the time to admire the view, but there was no time to be had.

I was glad we left the lights on, and not just because that made it easier to find our clothes. My gaze was lingering on his flexing limbs and the glistening cleft of his ass when my shirt hit me in the face. “Keep your eyes where they belong,” he scolded, but there was no real heat in it, and I could’ve sworn his lips twitched with the threat of a smile.

We managed to make ourselves decent, at least, cleaning up the worst of the mess with a roll of paper towel, but even fully dressed, there wasn't much we could do about how absolutely wrecked we both looked. Liam's cheeks were flushed, his curls tangled, and I couldn't imagine I was much better.

"Is it obvious what we were doing?" he whispered at me as he paused, hand on the doorknob.

I shrugged. "I mean..." What was I supposed to say? I didn't want to lie to him.

But then his gaze dipped down to my neck, and he winced. Yep, I'd say it was safe to say he left a mark. Without another word, he took a deep breath and opened the door. "Let's get this over with."

We emerged from the storeroom just as Liam's staff member stepped out of a doorway that I assumed led to their breakroom. "Hey, there you are." She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why was the front door locked? It's the middle of the day."

"Oh, um, because..." Liam's shoulders climbed up to his ears, the tips of his ears turning bright red. He was floundering.

"He ran out of chocolate sauce," I said quickly, bringing the girl's attention to me as I eased past her toward the door. "Couldn't very well stay open without it."

"Chocolate sauce," she echoed with more than a little skepticism, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, so I offered to drop some off for him. Now he can safely reopen without worrying about any chocolate emergencies."

I could see Liam over her shoulder as he slapped a hand over his face at my idiocy, but it was my experience that as long as you said it with confidence, you could get

away with saying the most ridiculous shit and people would buy it—or at the very least, not call you on it. This was one of those instances.

“Hey, Jared, wait up.” Liam followed me through the café. I paused by the door, but he seemed to be struggling to find something to say. I didn’t want to hear him apologize or tell me it was a mistake. My heart couldn’t handle it. He’d already said it was a one-time thing.

I decided to put us both out of our misery.

I grinned. “We’re still not even,” I said, turning to unlock the door.

He smiled back, seemingly relieved that we could go back to our trusted norm. “I couldn’t agree more.”

12

Liam

I flicked off the lights, turned off the open sign, then locked the door behind me, ready to call it a night. I was exhausted. The past few weeks had gotten increasingly busy, to the point that I'd needed to hire even more staff. Now, along with Aubrey taking weekends and evenings, plus Rod on afternoons, I'd also started training Sundar on managerial tasks.

Sundar had recently moved here from Chicago and had tons of experience as a supervisor in a big café chain. I had a good feeling about him. He was calm under pressure, and he was definitely picking up the work like he was born to it. It was a big risk to hire a manager, but I couldn't possibly work open to close seven days a week. What if I got sick? It was going to happen sooner or later, and I would hate to lock my doors because I didn't have someone to cover the shifts.

The sky had turned a gorgeous rose-gold color, and I glanced at Crave as I walked down to where I'd parked. The interior was dark, but it still made my insides churn in a dangerous way.

I gnawed on my lip, thoughts stormy. I had no idea what to do about Jared. Didn't even know how I felt about him, honestly, or how he felt about me. I'd told him the sex was a one-time deal, and he'd agreed. So far, we'd kept our word, and I should've felt relieved about that, but... the sensation in my stomach felt an awful lot like disappointment. Maybe even regret that he hadn't even tried for another round. I'd be amenable to discussing terms for a mutually beneficial casual-sex arrangement.

And though I hadn't seen him, the pranks, of course, had continued—also as we'd agreed upon.

Nothing dangerous, of course. First, Jared had greased the handle of Grounded's front door in the morning before we opened, so that when I tried to open it, my hand had slipped right off. It was a beginner prank, but it had made me smile all the same. After a little bit of soap and water, I'd started to put some real thought into the retaliation.

I'd gone around to local thrift shops, selecting all the creepiest, most haunted dolls I could find. The ones in faded dresses with hand-painted porcelain faces and blinking eyes, the ones giving off that spine-tingling chill. And then over the next week, I'd periodically snuck in during Jared's shifts and left them where I knew he would find them. I had a good imagination, so the mere thought of his reaction made me giggle.

Yesterday morning, I'd shown up to Grounded to find the entire window covered in colorful post-it notes, arranged in such a way that it portrayed a sandy beach, blue sky, and a palm tree. I'd stood there gaping at it for a couple minutes, blown away by how much time this must've taken him. Honestly, it had been quite pretty, and if my plants didn't need the sunshine, I probably would've left it. Instead, I took pictures before I pulled them down.

Regardless of how lovely his prank had been, I wasn't about to let it slide without some payback. So, in return, I'd had people going into Crave all day pretending they knew him, whether it was a long-lost friend from high school, a cousin he wouldn't be able to remember, and then the pièce de résistance, an ex-lover who made a public scene, begging Jared to take him back. I wished I could've been there to see it.

I wasn't sure at what point we would call it even, but I didn't want it to stop. The anticipation as I waited to see what he would come up with next made me feel more alive than I could ever remember. He lit me up inside! Even as tired as I was, I was

disappointed the day was over, and I couldn't wait to come back in the morning to see how he'd get his revenge.

My apartment felt as close to home as I could make it. All my clothes were folded and put away, kitchen utensils in their appropriate drawers, artwork hanging on the walls, but I couldn't get past the feeling that something was missing. Or maybe someone ... It was too quiet, too empty even when full of stuff. It would feel a lot more like a home if there was someone to greet me at the door. For a brief moment, I thought about getting myself a pet. Jared had a dog, though I never got the chance to ask what their name was. Maybe I could manage a cat... But I was already brushing off the idea, because most dogs didn't like cats. I pointedly ignored my logic.

The fridge was stocked with ingredients, in that optimistic way I always had of planning to cook, though I usually didn't have the energy to do it, so when I dragged my ass in the door, I settled for a bowl of cereal and ate it on the couch, mindless reality TV on in the background.

After my dinner of champions, I put my feet up on the coffee table and opened my laptop across my stretched legs. I'd been falling behind in checking my email, since most nights I was too tired to do much more than scarf down some food before passing out, and I groaned when I saw the sheer volume of unread mail waiting for me. As soon as Sundar took over some tasks, I would make sure to do this on the daily. This was going to take me at least an hour to weed through all the junk.

My eyes snagged on an email right at the top, though, marked as important.

I didn't recognize the email address, but the subject heading read "Congratulations! Grounded has been selected" and the first line showed as "I'm so pleased to inform you that Grounded has been voted best new..." My breath caught in my throat, coming out like a wheeze. Best new... what ?!

I couldn't click on it fast enough. My heart was racing, adrenaline waking me up in a way caffeine would never be able to beat. I read through the email, then read it a second time just to be sure. Grounded had won an award for best new business by a local restaurant guide! This was huge ! It would put me on the map, bring in new customers. I'd just gone from cautiously optimistic about my business to wildly confident. I could already see this snowballing, months or years in the future. If I did well enough, I could expand, open a second location.

Trying not to get ahead of myself, I took a long, slow breath, but it did nothing to settle my jittery nerves. So, I did what I'd always done. I called my dad.

Pacing around the open apartment, from living room to kitchen and back again, I read him the email, gushing about how huge this was.

"Oh, Son, I'm so excited for you," he praised. "You had a dream, and you chased the hell out of it. Your pops would be so proud."

I wiped tears from my cheeks. "Thanks, Dad."

We hadn't a chance to catch up much over the past few weeks, so we chatted for a bit, but I kept all my chitchat superficial. I hadn't told my dad about Jared and our little rivalry, not just because he wouldn't understand, but because I didn't want him getting his hopes up, thinking this was like some schoolyard crush.

Even if it kinda felt like it was...

"Now what?" Dad asked. "Do you get a plaque or a certificate to hang on your wall or something?"

"Honestly, I don't know." Even though I'd read the email a dozen times already, I went back to it.

At the end of the email, it said, “I’m so thrilled for you and your new business. Please reach out to me when you have a chance so I can answer any questions you might have.” There was a phone number for the editor of the magazine, someone name Amanda Flushing. I knew I should wait to call her tomorrow, but I was still buzzing with energy. There was no way I was going to be able to sleep at this rate, and it wasn’t that late, I told myself. Not even 8pm yet. If she didn’t answer the phone, I would try again tomorrow.

“Hey, Dad, call I call you back later?”

“Of course. I love you, Liam.”

We signed off, and I immediately dialed the number on the email, then held the ringing phone to my ear, knee bouncing.

“Hello?” a familiar voice said when the call connected, and the eager reply I’d had prepared got lost somewhere between my brain and my mouth. Because that voice was obviously not Amanda Flushing, editor of Delish Dish Magazine.

“Jared?” I asked dumbly.

His chuckle was warm, but I was left feeling a definite chill. “Hey, Liam. I was wondering when you’d call. I guess you got my email.”

“Your—” My brain scrambled to make sense of what he was saying. His email? Bile crept up my throat, sour and burning. I swallowed again and again. “I didn’t win an award, did I?” I asked, deadpan.

“Nope, but it sounds like I had you going for a minute. ”

My eyes stung with tears, but I refused to let them fall. Not yet. “Yep, you sure got

me,” I forced myself to say, but my voice sounded flat to my ears.

“Can’t wait to see what you come up with next,” he said before hanging up.

The hand holding my phone lowered to my lap. I was half numb. I told myself that it was a harmless prank, just like the others. That I shouldn’t be disappointed about not winning an award that wasn’t real, that I hadn’t even known about an hour ago. But try telling that to my poor broken heart.

I grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and curled up with some reality TV. Maybe it would feel better if I could watch somebody else’s drama.

But one thought lingered in my brain.

I don’t want to play this game anymore.

SCREW SCHUSTER AND THE HORSE HE RODE IN ON

BottomsUp: I take back every nice thing I ever said about him. Did you guys see the leaked behind-the-scenes footage? That shithead! I think we can all agree, no omega needs Schuster’s BS.

Dripdrip69: screw that alphahole they deserve better

RimJobbins: Never thought I would find myself agreeing with you guys, but yeah. The shit he was saying about the omegas, not cool. Can they evict him instead? And then when Clark kissed Marty, I was dunzo. Talk about hawwwwt! *fire emoji*

BananaSunday: But the show is literally called Lonely Alpha. There’s no show without the alpha. He needs to pick a winner .

BJz4days: emphasis on the lonely. Schuster can suck it. I hope whoever he chooses turns him down.

MuffinTop: I can't get over what Clark said to Marty, professing his hidden feelings like that! I wish I could be bold like him. I'm still at the tease him and pull his hair stage. I don't have a clue how to talk to the guy I like. He probably thinks I hate him.

BottomsUp: Enemies to lovers is the hottest trope. Have you been a bad boy? I'd pay to get a peek of that action.

CreamyJoe: Sometimes enemies are just enemies, BottomsUp. And quit your teasing, Muffin. You're not in kindergarten anymore. Nobody thinks teasing is hot in real life. If you like a guy, just tell him how you feel! Personally, I much prefer flowers over heartache, and I imagine he does too.

13

Jared

When my alarm went off, I felt... hollow. Like I'd gone to sleep drunk off my rocker. It hurt to blink, my mouth was fuzzy, and my stomach was churning with guilt and regret. No, it wasn't drinker's remorse; I hadn't consumed even a single drop of alcohol. This was worse.

I was pretty sure I took my last prank too far. Not that I had any way of knowing for sure, since Liam hadn't said anything of the sort, but when he'd called me, he'd sounded... different. There was no sign of his usual fire. At the very least, I'd expected him to yell at me, but he didn't even raise his voice. "You sure got me," he'd said, with zero inflection. Something was definitely wrong.

I tried to tell myself it was what we were doing, though. Harmless pranks. Nobody got hurt—or did they?

Since I'd barely slept last night, it took me a while to get going. And since I was running late, I rushed in to work with only minutes to spare. I wished I'd left some time to go over and see Liam in person so I could see how he was really doing, but it would have to wait until after my shift.

"Hey, boss," I said to Hugh as I jogged in .

He gave me a look, apologetic and stressed. "I'm really sorry to do this to you, but I just got word from a friend that the health inspector is making the rounds."

“So?” I asked, confused. “You don’t have anything to worry about. This place is clean.”

“Not clean enough!” he snapped, panic edging in. “I’ve heard this guy is a huge stickler. If he finds even a single speck of dust, he’ll fine me!”

That seemed like an exaggeration to me, but Hugh didn’t look to be in the mood for arguing. So instead, I said, “Tell me what I can do.”

He blew out a long breath of relief. “Thank you, Jared. I’m so glad to hear you say that.”

Hugh then started me a list of things he wanted cleaned. It seemed excessive to me, but he was my boss, and this was obviously important to him, which meant it was important to me. I used an old toothbrush to scrub the grout between the floor tiles, climbed up on a ladder to wipe down the tops of the vents and pipes and electrical boxes. I used a Q-tip to clean out the spouts of each sauce bottle.

I spent almost the entire four hours of my shift cleaning. My back ached, my knees were screaming, and the skin of my hands was red and chafed. It had already been a long week, but this was my last shift of the stretch, thank gods. After this, I could go pick up Lulabelle and cuddle with my pup all weekend.

With just 15 minutes left in my shift, I used my sleeve to wipe sweat from my brow. “Now what, boss?” I asked. At least he looked a lot more relaxed than he had when I came in this morning.

He pursed his lips, thinking. “Hm, just the toilets left, I guess.”

“That was the first thing I did this morning.”

“And nobody has used them since then?” he asked, eyebrow arched .

I threw my hands up in defeat and turned on my heel. Back to clean the toilets a second time. By the time I was finished, I was fairly confident someone could eat off the porcelain bowls, though I doubted anyone would try. There was no way this inspector would give us anything but top marks.

Sighing, I glanced at the clock. This day was officially over for me. Debra was at the counter helping a customer when I came out of the bathroom, so I went in search of Hugh to let him know I was done. I found him in his office with a fresh cup of coffee.

“Hey, boss. I’m all done. Any word on when the inspector is coming?”

He leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee, as cool as could be. “There was never any inspection,” he said, not a single ripple in his placid expression.

I blinked dumbly for a second while I registered what he’d said. “What? Was it canceled?”

He shook his head and set his coffee down on his desk, rising slowly from his chair. “See, I stopped by at Grounded this morning, just to say hi, and Liam seemed really down. It was probably none of my business, but something told me to press for details, and I’m glad I did. See, it seems that he’s been at odds with one of my staff members.”

I opened my mouth to refute that fact, to say that it’d all been in fun, that he’d gotten his share of pranks in too. But then I thought of how he’d sounded on the phone last night, and I closed my mouth with a snap. I hung my head, shame burning my cheeks.

“How could you, Jared?” Hugh scolded, though he didn’t yell. I almost wished he would. I deserved it, didn’t I? “I never asked you to hassle him. In fact, I seem to

remember telling you that there was nothing to worry about, that there was no shortage of customers for the both of us. I'm disappointed in you. "

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, my eyes stinging. "Am I fired?"

"No, of course not, but it's not me you need to apologize to."

I barely remembered walking home. I simply put one foot in front of the other, and it wasn't until I heard a knock at my door that I even realized I was flopped over on my couch, face down in the cushion.

Forcing myself up off the couch, I shuffled my way to the door and opened it to find Ridley standing in the hall. Lulabelle came padding in and jumped up to put her paws on my thighs. "Hey, beautiful," I said to her, only to blink a few times. "Oh shit, I was supposed to pick her up today, wasn't I? Sorry, Ridley. I didn't mean to make you come down here. You should've called me."

"I did, twice, but you didn't answer. Thought I'd better come check on you." He was staring at me with those soft gray eyes of his as he no doubt traced over the couch cushion's pattern pressed into my cheek. He knew me all too well. "What's wrong?" he asked before I could head him off.

"It's nothing. I'm fine," I tried lamely.

He scoffed and forced his way past me into my apartment. "I've never known you to be a liar, Jared. Come on, let's talk."

I didn't have any friends who weren't co-workers, which was what happened when you worked all the time, and if I tried to talk to any of them about how I felt, they would all be biased about the situation. I couldn't blame them for it, either. I'd put Crave's reputation on the line. Ridley, though, should be able to stand back from the

situation, and with nothing to risk, I knew he'd be honest with me.

Ridley made himself at home with Lulabelle on my couch. He patted the spot beside him. "Maybe you've forgotten how stubborn I can be, but it'll be the best for both of us if you just skip ahead to the part where you spill your guts, and then I'll tell you how to fix it."

I laughed, rubbing at my face. "I've missed you, Ridley. "

"I know." He gave me a cheeky smile, and I knew he missed me too.

I plopped down on the couch and did exactly what he'd asked—I spilled my guts, the good, the bad, and the ugly. He cringed when I admitted to letting cockroaches go in the bathroom at Grounded, and he applauded Liam's revenge with the rotten fish.

When I got to the end of the story, telling him about my latest prank and how he'd reacted, Ridley sighed. "Well, there's only one thing you can do," he said at last.

"Move to another country?" I suggested, dropping my head onto the back of the couch.

"No, you ass," he said, laughing as he slapped my shoulder. "You need to apologize."

I peeked over at him. "Obviously, but that doesn't feel like enough. He hates me."

Ridley shrugged. "If he does, then that's his right, though it doesn't mean you don't have to apologize. Besides, I really doubt he hates you. You're too damn nice. We broke up and even I don't hate you. Just try talking to him, apologize, and explain why the whole war started in the first place. Let yourself be vulnerable, Jared. He's earned that much from you."

I nodded slowly. “Okay.” The guilt was still there, but I felt a little better. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Be vulnerable, he said. I could do that.

Ridley nodded with finality, a job well done. I figured he’d leave now, but instead, he curled his feet up under him and turned on the TV. “Have you been keeping up with what’s happening on Lonely Alpha ?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I hate that my answer is yes.”

Ridley grinned. “So... Clark and Marty. Hot, right?”

14

Liam

My stomach was a roiling mass of nerves and guilt, on top of the hurt feelings I'd already had. Fuck. I really hadn't meant to blab to Jared's boss about what he'd been up to—what we had been up to—but he was so damn nice! He'd come in with a bright smile, and I had tried so hard to match his energy, but the smile I'd tried for had simply wobbled and fell. From there, it was only a hop, skip, and a jump before tears were burning at my eyes.

Yeah, try telling an alpha that you're fine after that and expect him to leave it alone. Pfft! Not likely.

I tasted bile as my stomach gave another twist, and I reached for my blueberry Italian soda to wash it back down. My dad swore blueberries helped a sour stomach, but I didn't think there was any cure for guilt. Did Jared get in trouble? Was he mad at me? Maybe I had ruined any chance of seeing him again, and while I might've been butthurt by his last prank, I was suddenly in the forgiving mood. I knew he didn't mean anything by it, not really. I was sure he never would've done it if he'd known how much it would hurt me.

Or maybe I didn't know him at all ...

My sigh was loud in the post-lunch lull. "Fuck," I muttered, dropping my forehead to the counter and giving it a little thunk for good measure.

I had just made up my mind to go home early and tell Sundar to take over when the front door was pulled open. I stood up straight, trying to appear put together for the customer, only to get a jolt when I saw who it was. “Jared!” I gasped.

He looked sheepish, his shoulders hunched, and he held something in his hand wrapped in green cellophane. Flowers? No, even better. He’d brought me a bouquet of macarons, all different colors, each balanced on the end of a clear plastic skewer. “Hey... Is it okay that I’m here? I can leave if you want.”

“Don’t you dare leave,” I said sharply, which brought out a shy smile from him, with the hint of a dimple.

I had to get this out before I chickened out. “Look, Jared, I’m really sorry I ratted on you. I really didn’t mean to. He was just so... alpha, all persuasive, you know?”

His chuckle was rich and warm as he approached the counter cautiously, as if I were a wild animal about to attack. For all he knew, that was exactly what I was. “You really don’t have to apologize for that. I deserved everything I got from Hugh.”

I winced. “Was it bad?”

“Nah. I just had to clean the entire café top to bottom, plus the toilet.” He held up two fingers. “Twice.”

He didn’t seem mad about it, so I let myself relax a little. My eyes moved down to the colorful array of macarons, their delicate aroma teasing me. “Are those for me?” I asked, though I couldn’t imagine who else they would be for.

“Of course! I stayed up late making them myself. I didn’t know your favorite, so I made a few.”

I'd never been very good at making the fussy cookies myself. I always managed to overbake them. "What's that one?" I asked, pointing at a brown cookie with a tan filling.

"Caramel macchiato," he said, plucking the plastic skewer from the bunch and extending it out for me to try.

Biting into it, my eyes closed involuntarily as the flavors exploded on my tongue. It was so fresh, I was impressed it had stayed on the skewer at all. These were way better than anything I'd ever made.

I blinked my eyes open to find him staring at me, eyes focused intently on my lips as I licked off a crumb. There was definite heat in his eyes, and as my cock twitched to life, I knew my cheeks must've been getting awfully rosy.

Jared cleared his throat and came back to his senses. "There was a whole... apology to go with these."

"You don't have to—"

"Please," he said, cutting me off. "Let me." I nodded, so he set the bouquet gently on the counter and then met my eyes with a firm, serious gaze. "I'm really sorry, Liam. For everything, right from the minute I came in here to spy. I never meant to hurt you. It all seemed pretty innocent at first, and I got caught up in it. I just..." He sighed, but he didn't look away. "My boss, Hugh, he's been my family ever since my mom left when I was 17. He gave me a job, took care of me when I needed someone the most. I guess I built up these safe little walls around myself, and as unlikely as it was to happen, the thought of him going out of business was more than I could handle. It's no excuse for what I did, but I wanted to explain it anyway."

My heart broke for Jared. I never would've guessed that he felt so vulnerable, when

he always acted like nothing in the world could touch him. I couldn't stop myself from reaching over the counter for his hand and interlacing our fingers. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you came to spy on me that day."

"You are?" He looked so damn hopeful.

I nodded and gave a self-conscious shrug. "It's a little hard to admit, but... I had fun with our pranks. They made me feel..."

"Alive?" Jared offered, and I nodded. "Until the last one." He seemed to be sagging under his own guilt.

I squeezed his fingers. He'd told me about his past, so now it was my turn to show him mine.

"Please believe me when I say I don't want to hurt Hugh's business. My goal was never to be bigger or better than anyone's café. I just wanted to open a business where I could share my grandfather's recipes and love of good food, good coffee. He... died recently, and I felt so empty without him. I guess it just felt like if I kept making his favorites, that a part of him was still here. It's the inheritance he left me that gave me enough to start the business in the first place."

Jared groaned, dropping his chin to his chest. "Shit, now I feel even worse. Please tell me I didn't ruin your business. What can I do to help? Do you want me to wear a giant foam cookie costume and stand out front, waving at cars?"

The mental picture had me laughing, and the pain in my stomach started to ease. "As much as I would love to see you in that outfit, I promise it's not necessary. I'm doing pretty well, actually."

"Good, I'm glad." He looked much more relaxed now too.

I walked over to the display case and plucked a butter tart out from the rack. “Truce?” I asked, offering it to him.

His grin was everything. Jared took the butter tart, and I took another macaron, this time a pale green one with pistachios crumbled on top, and we tapped our treats together. “Truce,” he agreed, and I watched as he bit into the tart, anticipating the look of rapture as he moaned around his mouthful.

I could watch him eat all day.

“So,” he said, getting serious again. “Would this truce of ours extend maybe to dinner?”

Oh, how I wished I could say yes. “You don’t have to do that, Jared.”

“Do what?” he asked, frowning.

I shook my head. “Look, it’s sweet and all, but I don’t want your pity date out of guilt or because you’re sorry my pops died.”

Jared’s jaw dropped. “What? No! I mean, yes, I’m sorry he died, I really wish he hadn’t, but that’s not why I asked. The best part about pulling all those pranks was the time I spent with you. Not directly, exactly, but for a while, I felt like our lives were overlapping in a way, that I was learning so much about you, and I really liked what I saw. Please, let me take you to dinner and see if we can’t get to know each other without all the retaliation and potential hurt feelings. Dating, the old-fashioned way.”

There was no holding back my smile. I grinned so hard my cheeks hurt. “Okay. The old-fashioned way.”

I was about to suggest we have coffee right then and there, but a short bus pulled up out front, with Golden Years Retirement Center printed across the side in gold cursive. As the bus door opened, a tall, dark-haired man climbed down the steps first. “No pushing!” he called to the seniors as they unloaded the bus, loud enough for us to hear through the glass. “Don’t think I don’t see you, Davis.” He pointed at a man throwing elbows to be first through the door.

“Oh,” I gasped. Looked like I was about to get busy.

“Need help?” Jared offered.

“I actually have help today, but thank you.” I called Sundar up front, and Jared backed away toward the door .

“Call me later,” he said, because of course I already had his phone number in that prank email that I totally hadn’t deleted.

It was a good thing it stayed busy for the rest of the afternoon, because it kept my mind off the total giddy excitement I felt as soon as I let myself realize what happened... I had a date with Jared!

I needed to tell someone, so as soon as I got home, I jumped into the Lonely Alpha chat.

CreamyJoe: Hey, guys, remember when I said sometimes enemies are just enemies? Well, I take that back. CHAT, I HAVE A DATE!

MuffinTop: Hey, me too! Do tell!

BottomsUp: Yessssss I need all the juicy details, the more skin the better.

Dripdrip69: Plz tell me theres skin

CreamyJoe: No skin... well, there was skin, but that's another story, and don't ask. Anyway, I thought maybe he hated me, because we kept pulling all these pranks on each other, but then he came in and apologized using COOKIES! Cookies he made himself! Who does that?!

MuffinTop: Wait... LIAM?

CreamyJoe: JARED???

15

Jared

I picked up the call before the first ring had even finished. The caller ID told me it was Liam, but I would've known without it. "CreamyJoe? Your name's not Joe!" I shouted, laughing, into the phone. I felt light and bubbly, effervescent with this new discovery. Liam and I had been so close this whole time!

"It's a coffee thing. Joe, get it? And I like my joe creamy. What about you, MuffinTop?"

I leaned back in the couch and grinned up at the ceiling where the setting sun was painting an ever-changing landscape of pink and orange. "I mean... I'm a top who likes muffins? And you have to agree that the tops of the muffins are the best part."

"Well, yeah, duh."

I just listened to him breathe for a second, finding a surprising amount of comfort in that sound. I closed my eyes and imagined what it would be like to have him here with me instead, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, breathing the same air. I would reach for his hand, and maybe he might even reach back.

"What now?" he finally asked, breaking my daydream of a possible future, suddenly closer than it had been five minutes ago .

"Now?" I repeated, my dreamy smile widening. "Now I take you on a proper date." I

glanced back up at the ceiling, the color deepening as evening encroached on the day. Both our cafés were early-morning establishments, catering to the eager caffeine-deprived breakfast crowd, which meant our evenings were clear. “Are you busy?” I asked.

A pause. “What, like, right this instant?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not doing anything.” His voice had gone a little breathy.

“Let me take you out for dinner tonight. I don’t want to wait to see you.” An idea began to form in my head.

“Can I... have a few minutes? I haven’t even showered yet.” He laughed, this self-conscious sound, and I swore I could actually hear him blush. I knew the precise shade his cheeks were currently turning. “I might’ve been a little excited when I got home, if you hadn’t noticed all the caps I used in the chat.”

“I might’ve noticed.” I imagined the chat was probably blowing up since we’d both suddenly disappeared. I hoped we’d have good news when we came back.

For the first time in forever, I missed my old truck. When I first got my job at Crave, Hugh had taken the time to teach me how to drive after he found out I didn’t have a driver’s license. For my first vehicle, the old rusted Ford truck was all I could afford, and it had served me well, but it died a few years ago. Since then, I hadn’t minded walking or taking the bus because I had everything I needed nearby. Now, though, there was somewhere special I wanted to take him.

I hesitated for a moment before swallowing my pride. “I hate to ask...” I began, but before I could finish asking if he would mind driving, he interrupted.

“Do you mind if I drive? I get carsick.” Whether that was true or he was just saving me from having to ask, I accepted the lifeline .

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

I gave him my address, and we agreed to meet in an hour. I took a shower too but found myself spending a little too much time soaping up my dick. It hardened in my fist as I thought about Liam, but I forced myself to let go. I didn’t want to give my body the wrong impression about tonight. I’d promised old-fashioned, and that definitely did not include naked time.

“Sorry,” I mumbled down at my aching erection. “Maybe later.”

The second I saw a car slowing down to turn into the parking lot, I was out the apartment door and down the stairs, hopping into the passenger side before he’d barely had time to stop the car.

“Hi,” I said, breathlessly. What was protocol here? Did we hug? I mean, we’d already had sex. Surely we were past shaking hands.

Liam went for a hug as I leaned in for a kiss, and then we both laughed. “Hi,” he said back, then carefully leaned over the console to kiss me softly. It was over too quickly, but I had a feeling if we let ourselves get too invested, I would drag him upstairs to my apartment instead, and that wasn’t what I’d promised.

So instead, I buckled in and gave him directions.

“Turn here,” I told him, trying to hold back my grin as I directed him into the drive-through lane of a burger restaurant.

He shot me an amused look. “When you said you wanted to take me for dinner, I

kinda thought we'd be sitting at a table. Not that I'm complaining. It's a solid choice. GG's onion rings are the best."

"Trust me. There is method to my madness," I said with a wink. "Order anything you'd like. It's my treat." We both laughed, because there wasn't anything on the menu over six bucks.

Five minutes later, the car was filled with the most delicious salty, greasy burger smell, and I fed Liam some of my fries as we made our way to our final destination .

"Okay, pull over here. Anywhere along the curb is fine."

Liam turned off the car, the running lights still cutting their beams ahead of us through the darkness. He shifted in his seat so he could turn to look at me, his face scrunched in confusion. "It's a good thing I trust that you're not a serial killer, because otherwise, I might be freaking the hell out right now. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Not nowhere," I said, biting my cheek to keep in my grin. "Come on." I grabbed the bag of food and the blanket I'd stuck in the back seat, and Liam carried the cardboard drink tray.

He was right that there wasn't much here, just a sleepy residential street lit by a row of lampposts casting cones of yellow light. I gestured to a path that cut through a park and up a slight hill. When we reached the top of the hill, I passed him the food and laid out the blanket. He just stood by watching in confusion as I settled on the blanket, then patted the spot beside me. "You've trusted me this far. What's one more step?"

"Okaaaaay," he drawled, lowering himself into a cross-legged position.

It was fairly dark off the pathway, but our eyes quickly adjusted as I fished through the food to pass him his bacon double cheeseburger and onion rings.

When I didn't give him any further information, he huffed out a laugh. "Okay, I give up. Why are we here? We could've had a picnic in the park by your place."

"Sure, we could have, but look around. Do you see anything familiar?" I unwrapped my mozzarella mushroom burger and bit into it, watching him casually as he turned to look around. I knew the exact moment he recognized where we were.

"Is that... the Lonely Alpha house?" He turned his widening eyes on me. "Like, for real? "

"Yep." I popped the P, pleased as punch at the awe-struck look on his face.

The show had a different filming location every season, and I'd looked it up online to see if it would be doable for us to take a peek. We weren't all that close to the house, but from this higher vantage point, we could just see over the fence into the backyard. The pool was lit up from below, and I swore I could see figures in the water, their limbs tangled.

"Sorry, I should've brought binoculars," I lamented, but Liam nudged my shoulder with his.

"Nah. That would probably make this creepy."

He was so enthralled talking about his favorite episodes that I had to remind him to eat before his food got cold. I shared the rest of my fries with him, and in return, he shared his onion rings with me so we would both have onion breath. That seemed promising for a goodnight kiss at the end of the night.

Even though nothing exciting happened at the house, it was still a perfect evening. We simply enjoyed each other's company, letting the conversation flow wherever it took us. We had more in common than I could've guessed. We'd both been raised by single parents, though where my mother had been without any kind of support system, his dad had Liam's pops.

Liam sat as close to me as he could get, leaning on my shoulder where I'd propped myself up on my hands. "I hate how alone you were," he whispered, nuzzling into me. "I can't imagine what it must've felt like, not having a stable place to call home."

"I don't blame her for moving us around like that," I said, and though I meant it now, that certainly wasn't always true. With age came perspective. "She did the best she could. She needed to go where the jobs were. I can't imagine it was easy for her either."

"Do you still talk to her?"

"Sometimes, but we're nowhere near as close as you seem to be with your dad."

Liam laughed. "Yeah, my dad's great. But honestly, if we hadn't had pops, I doubt my childhood would've been so different from yours."

"I wish I could've met your pops. It sounds like he was a pretty great guy."

"He was." Liam's smile turned wistful as he tipped his head back to look up at the starry sky. "He would've gotten a real kick out of you."

The evening had turned cool, goosebumps rising along my arms, though I still hated for this night to end. But I told myself the sooner this date ended, the sooner we could get to the next one, and the one after that.

We cleaned up our garbage and folded up the blanket, before bidding good night to the few remaining contestants of Lonely Alpha .

Liam pulled up in front of my apartment building, and we sat there for a long moment with the engine idling. This was the moment of truth. He could park, come upstairs, and we could lose ourselves in each other for a few hours. But I felt like I'd only just truly found him, and it seemed too soon to get lost.

I blew out a long shuddery breath. "You have no idea how much I want to invite you in, but if I did, we would probably have sex... really, really good sex. And I feel like we got off on the wrong foot. I skipped too many steps with you. I wish we could go back to that speed-dating event, and we could exchange phone numbers. We could go for coffee and date properly. I could meet your dad, and you could meet my dog. You deserve to be wooed, Liam. You deserve the whole shebang, and I really don't want to screw this up." I leaned across the console and cradled his face between my palms. "You're something special. "

He looked about ready to swoon. "Damn. I was all ready to be pissed that you didn't want to have sex with me, but then you had to say something like that." He put his hands over mine on his cheeks. "You're pretty special too, Jared."

I leaned in and poured everything I had into this one kiss. There would be no regrets this time around. I needed him to know that he was worth the wait.

16

Liam

The acoustics in my open apartment were great for one thing. My dad's humming carried through the space as he chopped vegetables, and the sound was so familiar, so comforting, that it wrapped around me like a hug.

I should've been over there helping, but I was busy being sick. I was currently lying curled up on the couch, facing the back and with a blanket over my head so it was nice and dark. I'd kind of assumed that once Jared and I had cleared the air of all our mistakes, my sour stomach would be a thing of the past, but if anything, it had gotten worse.

Maybe it was food poisoning. I'd been trying out a few new recipes earlier, and I thought one of the cookies was a bit undercooked...

My dad was in town for a work meeting, so he was going to crash in my newly made spare bedroom tonight, but when he knocked on my door, I'd greeted him with a smile—and then promptly took off to the bathroom to puke. Instead of going out for dinner as planned, he'd instructed me to lie down, and then he got straight to work. I had no clue what he was making, but it smelled good .

I heard Dad's footsteps shuffling closer, then the sound of a mug being set down on the coffee table behind me. "I made you some peppermint tea," he said quietly, then he lowered himself onto the edge of the couch and rubbed a hand over my back. "Are you feeling better?"

Pulling the blanket down inch by inch using the smallest amount of movement possible, I peeked over my shoulder at him. “Maybe?”

“Do you want to try to sit up?”

I did a full-body scan to see how I felt, and all the ick seemed to have settled to a low simmer, so I took his hand, and together, we got me turned around, feet on the floor. We both froze, assessing. Dad looked poised to carry me to the bathroom. “It’s okay, I’m okay,” I assured him.

He passed me the tea before heading back to the kitchen, and I sipped at it, grateful for a break in whatever was taking a cheese grater to my stomach lining. It was so strange, here one minute and gone the next. “Dinner smells good, Dad. Can I help?”

“Nope. It’s not every day I get to take care of my baby,” he called across the apartment.

“I’m not a baby anymore, Dad.”

“Don’t remind me.” He threw a wink my way. A few minutes later, I watched him ladle soup into a bowl for me. When I went to get up to sit at the table, though, he shook his head. “I know I was always a stickler for eating at the table when you were growing up, but being sick is the exception to the rule. You stay right there. I’ll even come join you. We can watch some of that show you like so much.”

He pretended to hate reality TV, but I had a suspicion it was all a front. He was a closet Lonely Alpha junkie.

“Sure. I’m a big fan of their alpha this year,” I said, stifling a small smirk as I waited for his reaction .

Dad made a choking sound and nearly dropped the bowl of soup he was carrying over. “Bite your tongue! That Leo Schuster is an ass.”

I let out an exaggerated gasp. “Dad! Did you just swear?”

He just laughed and grabbed the remote.

As soon as the soup was cool enough, I brought the bowl to my lap and breathed in the steam. Mmm, there was nothing quite like my dad’s home-made soup. My pops had obviously taught his son everything he’d known in the kitchen before I’d come along. When I brought the first spoonful to my lips, though, I paused. The spoon wobbled, spilling back into the bowl. My gaze grew unfocused as I swallowed, my mouth watering—and not in a good way.

My dad, parental radar pinging in alarm, snatched the bowl from my hands. “Go!”

I was up off that couch in no time and bolted for the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. I dropped to my knees and threw up the peppermint tea. My insides turned themselves out until tears were squeezed from my eyes. I was totally wrung out, but even when there was nothing left, my body seemed determined to prove me wrong.

Once I had been reduced to a shaking, gasping lump on the floor, there was a soft knock on the bathroom door. “You okay?” Dad asked, sticking his head through the gap.

“Sure,” I muttered, rubbing a hand over my clammy cheeks.

“I’m just going to run to the store for some saltines and ginger ale. Anything else you want?”

I sighed, taking stock of my medicine cabinet. “Maybe some Gravol and a Gatorade?”

“Lime flavor?” he asked. He knew me so well.

I was still in the bathroom when he came back 15 minutes later. I hadn’t thrown up again, and my stomach had settled, but I was scared to move. I’d managed to grab myself a cloth from under the sink and soaked it in cold water from the tub faucet, and it was draped over the back of my neck, slowly soaking into my shirt.

The door eased open, and Dad set a line of products up along the counter. A box of crackers, a can of ginger ale, a neon-green sports drink, and... a pregnancy test. I stared at it for a long moment, letting the idea wash over me. Then I nodded, said, “Okay,” and reached for the box.

“Do you want to be alone?” Dad asked. “I can go home.” I couldn’t glean a single thing about his calm expression. Was he disappointed in me?

“No. Please stay?” I would never not need my daddy.

He nodded, then closed the door to give me some privacy.

He was waiting for me outside the bathroom when I came out, after peeing on the stick. “And now we wait.”

I slid down the wall to sit on the floor with my knees raised. With a little less grace, my dad lowered himself to sit beside me. I leaned my head on his shoulder. He didn’t say anything, didn’t ask about the alpha or say a single word to scold me. I appreciated the quiet comfort.

I thought of how scared my dad must’ve been when he took a test, pregnant with me.

He'd been so young, and his boyfriend hadn't been the type to support him. We were probably better off without him in the end, but that didn't mean I hadn't missed having an alpha dad around.

"How come you never got married?" I asked. I knew he'd dated a few guys over the years because Pops used to babysit me on date nights, but I couldn't remember meeting a single one of them.

He took a long, slow breath, thinking about his answer. "I guess the easy answer would be that I never found someone worth my time. It wasn't just me I had to think about, and even if they were okay boyfriends, I couldn't imagine any of them as your father. I wasn't about to settle for some random guy."

"How do I know if he's worth my time?" I whispered. And then, as tears threatened to spill, I forced out the root of all my fears. "Or if I'm worth his?"

"Oh, sweetheart. You're worth the world, and he's a fool if he doesn't see that." Dad pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "You won't know the answers to these questions until you talk to him."

I brushed the tears away with the back of my hand, sniffing. "I know." Really, though, I was pretty sure I already knew the answers. Jared wasn't the type of guy to run from responsibility. Not after what it'd been like for him growing up with just his mom. Even if he and I didn't work out, he'd be here for me.

But that didn't mean I didn't want him for myself in all other ways...

My moment of introspection was interrupted by the timer, and I forced myself to stand on wobbly legs. "Moment of truth."

I walked slowly into the bathroom, eyes focused on the tiles beneath my feet, then

dragged my gaze to the white plastic stick. “Oh!” My breath left me in a rush, leaving me stunned... and so unbelievably happy.

CAN WE CHANGE THE CHANNEL?

RimJobbins: Who changed the chat name? The answer is no.

CreamyJoe: I did. I need to hijack the chat for a minute.

Dripdrip69: No dealio. All LA, all the time

MuffinTop: Be nice, guys. What’s up, Joe? Everything okay? You can call me, you know.

CreamyJoe: I’m good, just a total coward, and I feel like I might need the support if this goes sideways.

CreamyJoe: I really like you, Muffin. You mean a lot to me. Like... a lot, a lot. More than you should. And I know we were going to move slow and everything, but what would you say if we accidentally skipped like a dozen steps?

MuffinTop: That depends. Do we get to revisit those steps at a later date? I don’t want to miss a single thing with you.

RainbowRob: OMG you two are stupid cute.

BottomsUp: Tell me about it. You guys need a third?

RainbowRob: Shh! They’re having a moment.

CreamyJoe: Yes to revisiting steps if you still want to after you realize how far ahead

we just jumped.

MuffinTop: Wait. What step are we at? Are we going steady? Are we getting married?? Are you saying what I think you're saying????

MuffinTop: Are we happy? Please tell me I'm allowed to be happy!!!

MuffinTop: I'M CALLING YOU RIGHT NOW!!

BananaSunday: Hey, would you two say the show brought you together? It would make for great publicity for the network.

BJz4days: Banana, your suit's showing. No show staff allowed in the chat!

17

Jared

It was a good thing Liam said I was allowed to be happy, because I couldn't imagine trying to tamp this down. Not once he'd confirmed the truth.

"I'm going to be a dad!" I said again in awe, as if I had to repeat it to make sure it was real.

"Hold that thought," he told me, his voice breathy and excited. "I'll be right there."

While I was totally willing (and more than ready) to run all the way to Liam's place to wrap him up in my arms, he said he would come to me instead, then hung up the phone so he could leave straight away. It was getting late, but neither of us wanted to wait. Receiving this kind of news was the time to be together. We had a lot to talk about, but honestly, I just wanted to hold him.

I watched from the window, so I knew the moment he'd arrived, and I was waiting in the hallway for him when the elevator doors opened. Liam's eyes were already teary, and he leapt into my arms, wrapping his arms tight around my neck. "You promise you're not mad?" he asked, his voice mumbled against my skin where he'd buried his face in the crook of my neck .

"Are you kidding me right now?" I spun him around a few times. "I'm thrilled !"

He made a gurgling sound and kicked his legs until I put him down. He looked a little

green around the gills. “Careful,” he warned. “There was a reason I took that pregnancy test. Spin me like that again, and I might provide a demonstration.”

Concern tempered my joy, but only a little. “Come on, let’s see if I can help with that.”

I led him to the kitchen. “Have a seat,” I told him, expecting him to lower into one of the chairs at the small table, but instead, he pulled himself up to sit on the counter, and I secretly loved having him this close. I reached over and squeezed his thigh before getting to work.

He glanced around my apartment with curiosity while I peeled and crushed some fresh ginger and threw it into a pot of water on the stove and set it to heat. “Didn’t you say you had a dog?”

“I do, sorta. I share custody of Lulabelle with my ex, Ridley.”

“Oh. That’s... weird but nice.”

He was watching my actions, but I was mostly watching his face. “You’re sure you’re okay?” I didn’t just mean his nausea, and his gaze flicked up to meet mine.

“I mean, this whole thing is a little scary,” he said. He was trying to be brave, but I could hear the slightest quiver in his voice.

“It’s okay to be scared, as long as you know I’m here for you.” He nodded, and I hoped that he believed me. Next, I took a fresh lemon out of the fridge and started to slice it, the fresh scent filling my kitchen.

Liam took a deep breath and smiled. “I love that smell.”

I cut him a little wedge and passed it to him. “Suck on it.”

“That’s what he said,” he joked under his breath. He arched a brow but took the wedge and put it in his mouth. His face puckered at the sour flavor. “Why am I doing this?”

“How does your stomach feel?” I asked, hopeful for his answer.

Liam blinked a few times as he assessed. “Huh. It might be a bit better, actually.”

I nodded, smug as hell. “Hugh’s husband, Charlie, had really bad morning sickness with both his pregnancies. I’ve picked up a few tricks.”

“What else have you got?” he asked, and I could’ve sworn he was hinting at things beyond the kitchen.

After the ginger tea was ready, we got settled on my couch, with Liam’s bare feet in my lap.

“You’re a miracle worker.” Liam moaned, almost orgasmic, as I massaged my thumb along the ball of his foot and through the arch, tracing the acupressure points for his stomach. None of these tricks were guaranteed to work for morning sickness, they weren’t magic, but I was so grateful that I could bring him some relief.

“Anything I can do at all, consider me at your disposal.” I hadn’t meant it to sound dirty, but now that it was out, there was no pulling it back. Suddenly, my hands on his feet felt so erotic, stroking, squeezing.

Liam’s eyes cracked open, and he gazed at me for a long moment. His hand was resting on his stomach where our child was growing. Just weeks old, it was too soon to plan, but my brain was already conjuring images of what they might look like, of

who they might become.

“I am happy, but... I can’t help but regret how they were conceived,” Liam whispered, his eyes a little glassy. “Hate sex in a backroom, up against a shelf.” He laughed at himself, brushing away a tear before it could fall .

I moved my hands up his legs to hook them under his knees and dragged him toward me until he was in my lap. He squeaked in surprise but came willingly, letting me cradle him against my chest. “That was not hate sex,” I corrected firmly. “It was unbridled passion. Never once did I even consider hating you.”

He gave me a sniffly laugh. “Does that mean you don’t wish we could have a do-over?”

“Well, I mean, we could always have sex again and pretend...” I squeezed his hip, and there was no way he couldn’t feel me stiffening the way he was pressed against me.

He was close enough that I heard his breath hitch, felt it on the skin of my neck. “You mean, you would... breed me?” His eyes flicked up, full of heat and a playfulness that drove me wild.

Without another word, I gathered him up in my arms and stood, taking him with me to the bedroom. If we were doing this, it wouldn’t be on my narrow couch. He wanted it to be done right, and that definitely included being in a bed this time.

I set him down in my bedroom, and he turned in a circle to look curiously around the space. Until he choked out a gasp. He spun around and glared at me, wide-eyed. “You kept them?”

Liam had caught sight of the row of dolls he’d kept leaving in Crave for me to find.

“Was I not supposed to?” I asked in confusion. I would keep anything he gave me, even if it was meant to be a joke. “They watch over me while I sleep.”

“I have no doubt about that.” Liam shuddered and then one by one, turned them to face the wall. “I kinda thought you’d salt and burn them after exorcizing the demons.”

“Aw, seriously? But look how sweet Haunted Holly is?” I picked up a doll in a white lace dress and tilted her back and forth to make her long-lashed eyes blink. “We could put them in the nursery.”

“Never!” he shouted playfully, then leaped at me, tackling me to the bed behind me. I let myself be taken down, loving the weight of him pressing me into the mattress.

Chest to chest, I could feel his heart beating, fast like he was running a race, and then he lowered his lips to press them to mine.

This was night and day compared to our first time. It was slow and patient. There was no rush to enjoy each other, and it was like neither of us ever wanted this to end. The passion was still there, burning us with fever, but it had been leashed. We were the ones in control this time.

Instead of tearing off our own clothes like last time, I hovered over him and undressed him slowly, exposing one inch of flesh at a time. I was determined to kiss every single part of his body before this night was through.

Once we were both undressed, I settled on my stomach between his spread legs and looked along his body at him. This was the only thing I regretted about our first time. We’d been rushed for time, interrupted before I could fully appreciate everything about him.

Now, though, I inspected every crease with great detail. I delved my fingers through his slick crack and probed at his entrance until he moaned. I lapped across his taint and relished the aromatic flavor, teased my tongue across the ridges of his balls, and laved at his velvety-smooth shaft. He was already writhing as I enveloped his length with my mouth, his precum salty in my mouth.

I could very easily spend the whole night here, edging him for hours just to hear all the sounds he would make, but all too soon, his fingers wound through my hair, pulling me off even as his hips arched off the bed, searching for more.

“I need you, Jared,” he panted, clinging at me to drag me up the bed. “Please.”

Moving up his body, I paused to nudge his erection aside to kiss just below his belly button. “Is it too soon to say I love you?” I asked softly, not sure if I was speaking to Liam or our baby. Both of them, I guess, but the love I felt was very real, expanding my heart in my chest until it hurt with the pressure of it.

“Yes, but say it anyway.”

“I love you,” I said as I kissed his stomach.

“I love you,” I said as I kissed his chest over his heart.

“I love you,” I said as I trailed kisses up his neck and along his jaw.

And when I got to his lips, it was Liam who took my face in his hands and said, “I love you, Jared.”

Sliding into him felt like the most natural thing, like it was exactly where I was always meant to be. Like that day when I was 17 and told my mom I was staying behind, it was because I’d had the first glimmer of the future that awaited me here.

Liam and I were never rivals; we were simply not yet ready to see the truth written on the wall.

I was his and he was mine, and together, we were everything .

We kept the pace slow for as long as we could stand it, making love as I rocked against him, stretching him with care. But all too soon, Liam had wrapped his legs around my waist, urging me to go faster, harder. Heat began to build, sweat dripping, gentle hands turned grasping.

“Jared!” Liam tipped his head back and shouted out his release, spilling his cum between us.

When I released my seed inside him, my knot expanding to seal it inside him, I closed my eyes, groaning, and imagined getting him pregnant, a do-over, just like he’d asked. One day , I told myself. We have a lifetime to do this all again, on purpose next time .

Without the risk of getting caught, we lingered, speaking softly and kissing gently, and I stayed inside him even after my knot loosened, cum leaking around my softening shaft. And then once I got a warm cloth and cleaned us both up, I crawled back into bed beside him and pulled the blanket over us.

Liam was draped across me in a way I could easily get addicted to. “Call in sick tomorrow,” I whispered. I was already dreading the moment I had to let him go.

“I already did,” he answered, smiling.

“Oh, thank gods,” I groaned, rolling until he was under me once more, his laugh making me feel so alive.

18

Liam

I'd heard the superstition about not telling people you were pregnant until after the first trimester, and I saw the wisdom in that, but what I really wanted to do was tell every single customer that came into the café. I'd been nervous about Jared's initial reaction, but now that the hard part was over, I was so damn excited. Jared, meanwhile, was fully in the tell-nobody camp, so we'd compromised and agreed that select family members would be allowed into the secret.

Obviously, my dad already knew, since he'd been the one to connect the dots and clue me in. His foremost concern had been about my health since I couldn't eat much, followed by fear that I'd be raising this child alone. Even after I'd convinced him that Jared was sticking around for the long haul, it'd been hard for me to convince Dad not to move here to be my extra support.

The next step had been telling Jared's mom. He hadn't even told her about me yet, so I was understandably worried that she wouldn't like me or that she'd assume I was trying to trap her son. "I promise, she'll love you," Jared said, kissing that spot behind my ear that made me go weak in the knees. "But on the extremely off chance she doesn't, she'll never live here anyway, and we'll hardly ever have to see her if we don't want."

Lucy was out on the west coast right now, working in sales at a cosmetics company, so Jared had set up his laptop on my dining table, and we'd had a video chat. When we gave her the news, first she'd screamed, then clapped, and finally cried a flood of

happy tears. “I’m going to be a grandma!” she’d blubbered, mopping a tissue over her face.

If that hadn’t been enough, what came next was even more terrifying. While Jared hadn’t been worried about his mom’s opinion, I knew how much Hugh’s approval mattered to him. Hugh and his husband Charlie and their kids were more family to Jared now than anyone.

And they’d invited us over for dinner. Gulp . Now my stomach was queasy all over again, and it had nothing to do with morning sickness this time.

I made Jared drive us there in my car because I couldn’t focus, and I figured it probably wasn’t safe to drive in this state. So instead, I repeatedly wiped my sweaty hands on my pants.

“It’ll be fine. I promise,” Jared said, glancing over at me from the driver’s seat. “You’ve already met Hugh. Was he really that scary?”

I shook my head. “No, but that was before .” Before me and Jared were a thing, before the baby. I knew logically that nothing had really changed, but tell that to my wildly swinging hormones.

Hugh’s family lived in an apartment, which was surprising, considering their boisterous family. I wondered if the neighbors downstairs minded the kids’ stomping feet. I could hear their giggling squeals all the way down the hallway.

As soon as we knocked, I heard someone inside call, “They’re here!” and when the door swung open, I did my best not to shrink into Jared’s side. “Come in, come in,” Hugh said, waving us through the door.

Jared squeezed my hand, and I took what strength I could from him. I smiled politely.

“Hi again. Oh, and you must be Charlie. I’ve heard a lot about—oof!” Charlie stepped right in and gave me a hug.

“I am so glad to finally meet you,” Charlie said. He looked a little tired, but his smile was bright. “I’ve been telling Jared for weeks to bring you by.”

I glanced at Jared. Weeks? That was before we were official, but Jared just shrugged. “He swore he knew we were a couple even before we did.”

“Oh, I knew,” Charlie avowed, nodding sagely.

A little boy shoved his way to the front and leaped. “Uncle Jared! Catch me!” he called in warning, and without blinking, Jared did, hoisting him up and hanging him over his shoulder.

I laughed, staring at this upside-down boy. I already knew his name was Huey. He looked like he was almost old enough to be in school already. He had blue eyes like his omega daddy, but that was where the similarities ended. I halfway wondered if he was adopted—not like it mattered. Family was family, and it was more than obvious that Hugh was very much a family man.

Huey smiled wide, showing off a dimple in one cheek. “Hi!” he shouted at full volume. “I’m five!” He held up a hand with all five digits extended to show me how many that was.

“Wow, that’s a lot!” I said with as much awe as I could muster.

When I caught sight of the little angel hiding behind her daddy’s legs, I crouched down to peek at her. “And how old are you?” I asked. She seemed to think about that, looking to her brother for help, and he held up two fingers, which she then copied .

“This is Bella,” Charlie said. She was clearly shy and absolutely adorable. She was the spitting image of Hugh, with dark blond curls and green eyes, and she was already dressed in her unicorn pajamas.

“I like your PJs,” I told her, and she smiled before burying her face against Charlie’s thigh.

“Saves time for later,” he explained. “Though giving her a bath before dinner probably jinxed us. She’s just as likely to need another bath before we’re through eating.”

We were just kicking off our shoes when I heard an ominous cackle, straight out of a black-and-white horror film. “What was that?” I whispered at Jared from the corner of my mouth.

Jared grinned mischievously. “Oh, that would be Dracula.” I felt my eyebrows jump, and he pointed across the living room to a brightly colored parrot sitting on his perch. “No matter what, do not try to pet him. He’s not lying when he says he wants your blood.”

“Not a concern,” I said seriously, taking in the hooked beak. Why would anyone try to pet him? What was wrong with the usual family pets, like cats or gerbils?

Regardless of Jared’s warning and to my own disbelief, I watched the parrot hop down onto the back of the couch and lean in for pets from both kids. Though it seemed my first impression of the bird was wrong, the evil glint in his eye ensured I wasn’t about to tempt fate by trying to touch him myself.

It was a little early for dinner, but when kids were involved, your schedule adapted to theirs. It would do me well to get used to it sooner rather than later. We all crowded around the dining room table, which they’d added a couple leaves in the middle to

extend it to fit us all. It was cozy, not at all formal—and I loved every second of it.

This was what family was .

Huey insisted he sit next to Uncle Jared, so they moved his plastic booster seat around the table. Bella sat in a highchair with its own plastic tray, and Hugh cut up some chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs on his own plate, before dumping the pieces on her tray for her to feed herself, along with a plastic sippy cup of milk.

It was very much fend-for-yourself. It was loud and chaotic, everyone talking over each other to pass various dishes back and forth across the table. It all looked delicious, but I felt awkward just grabbing things, and I didn't want to interrupt anyone to ask. Jared, however, made sure to put a serving of each dish on my plate. "I'm pregnant, not injured. I can do it myself," I teased, but I had to admit, I really loved that he was taking care of me without me asking. He didn't even need to think about it, it was just in his nature.

"I tried to be really careful with the food," Charlie said to me. "No strong smells that might put your stomach off, and it's all stuff that's really healthy for the baby. And if there's anything that doesn't sit well, I promise I won't be offended if you need to spit it out. Or we have extra dino nuggies if you would prefer. Baby wants what baby wants, you'll find no judgment here," he said.

Hugh cleared his throat and arched a brow at his husband.

Charlie's smile turned cheeky. "And when I said me, I meant Hugh cooked everything. But I take full credit for selecting the menu."

I smiled at them both. "Thank you, but you didn't have to go to all that trouble for me. Honestly, I would've been fine with sandwiches."

“Don’t be silly, it was no trouble,” Hugh said, and then he and Charlie exchanged a look full of meaning, then a nod. “I didn’t just do it for your sake.” His smile widened as he turned to look at Jared.

Jared gasped. “You’re pregnant again?” he asked Charlie excitedly.

“Last one, I swear,” he said, beaming .

Hugh smirked. “We’ll see.” He took his husband’s hand and kissed the back of it.

I felt like I was getting a secret peek at my own future. They were so incredibly happy and in love, and while I could’ve felt jealous about all that they had, instead, I felt excited, eager to start my own love story. Jared set his hand on my thigh under the table and gave it a squeeze.

“To growing families,” Hugh said in a toast, lifting his glass of sparkling apple juice.

I lifted my own glass. “To a bright, busy, and loud future,” I added, tapping my glass to the others’ around the table. I even leaned over to tap Huey’s plastic cup, because he insisted he was a big boy, and then Bella’s sippy cup.

Well before the adult meal was over, the kids had reached their limit. There was only so much sitting still they could do. Huey had started fidgeting. “Are we done?” he asked in a barely contained whine.

“Pardon me?” Hugh asked, hinting at his manners.

“Can we please be excused?” His little feet thunked under the table as he kicked wildly. I bit back a laugh and hid my smirk behind my napkin.

“Sure. Wash your hands and you can go watch your movie for a bit before bed.”

“As you wish!” he shouted before running down the hall toward the bathroom.

Hugh laughed. “He’s in his Princess Bride stage.”

“I hope he never leaves it,” Charlie said, grinning as he unbuckled Bella from her seat and lifted her up. “I’ll be back once I get this princess to bed.”

Both kids were passed out by the time we called it a night. I was exhausted, but I’d had the best time .

Hugh gave Jared a big hug, slapping him on the back. “I’m so happy for you guys. Kids are the best, and I know you’ll make great parents.”

“ We ,” Charlie corrected. “ We are happy for you guys.” This time, I was ready for it when Charlie came at me with a tight hug. “I can’t wait to be belly buddies with you, Liam. Seriously, call me with any questions or concerns that pop up. Oh, and I’ll give you the name of my doctor. My old one retired unfortunately, but his grandson took over the practice, and he’s pretty great.”

“That would be amazing,” I said earnestly. “Thank you.”

“Of course! This isn’t my first rodeo.”

We said our goodnights, and Jared and I walked down the hall hand in hand. It felt so different compared to when we first arrived. Every ounce of stress had been replaced by warm contentment.

Jared squeezed my hand as we waited for the elevator. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Not at all.” I smiled up at him. “I think I just made my first friend here.”

19

Jared

Waking up with Liam in my bed, all warm and snuggly tucked into my side, was everything.

Sleeping next to Ridley had always been a constant negotiation, all compromise and no clear winner. Who got to be the big spoon, tugging the blanket back and forth, either too hot or too cold. We were simply too alike, which we'd eventually agreed made us better friends than lovers. With Liam, though, it was so easy the way we fit together, and I never wanted to sleep alone again. He nestled perfectly against me as the little spoon, his ass cradled against my crotch.

It didn't take long for my body to catch up with where my mind was at.

I tried to keep my morning wood to myself, honestly I did, but Liam wiggled his hips as he came to consciousness, grinding back into me. "Mm, good morning to you too," he murmured in a deliciously raspy purr.

How was it possible he smelled so good before a morning shower? I leaned into him, burying my face against his neck and losing all sense. This was a dangerous spot I found myself in. I had to remind myself that this was new, precious and precarious, and just like with the first flicker of a fire, if I came on too strong, I might snuff it out.

I couldn't keep my mouth shut, though. I had the intense urge to hint at where I wanted him to be every morning, tucked against me just like this. "I know it's way

too early to talk about living together, but... can we talk hypotheticals?"

He stilled for a moment before he rolled to his back to look up at me. "Hypothetical? I thought living together would be a given. I just assumed— Sorry, I guess I thought we'd skipped all those steps."

"And I said I wanted to revisit them all. I really don't want to miss a thing with you, and I definitely don't want you thinking you have no options. Just because you're pregnant and I happen to be the father, I don't want you to feel trapped. We agreed to give this a try, but you need to know that no matter what, I'm here for you. But I want you to be with me because it's what you want, not because you think it's an obligation."

Now he rolled over fully to face me, wrapping an arm around my waist, entwining our legs. Our erections rubbed together, hot silky skin with just the right amount of friction for a little dry-humping. "Jared," he said, his voice containing the slightest hint of scolding. He bit a nipple sharp enough to elicit a needy hiss from me, then licked all the way up my neck until I tipped my head back for more. "When I say I love you, do you think you're coercing me?"

"No, but—"

Liam cut me off with a kiss that left me speechless, carding his fingers through my hair to hold me in place. "You know, I should probably work on convincing you anyway. Wouldn't want you to doubt my sincerity." He smirked before rolling on top of me and wiggling under the covers .

I closed my eyes, sinking into the sensation of his teasing fingers, his heated lips. He didn't tease me for long, though. He licked up the underside of my cock, from the base all the way to the tip, where he lapped precum from my slit. Then his warm mouth engulfed me, sliding down the shaft until I felt myself nudging at the back of

his throat. He sucked hard, and the vibration of Liam's moan traveled through me, making my full body tingle and my balls tighten, and when he swallowed, I nearly lost it.

It was nearly impossible to keep still, and I flexed my hips, fucking up into his warm, wet mouth. "You're heaven," I told him. "I don't deserve you."

Liam had just brought his hands up to tug on my balls, rolling them around in his palm, when my phone rang.

My eyes shot open, and the spell was broken. That was Ridley's ringtone.

Liam paused, his lips still wrapped around me, tongue undulating softly inside his mouth. I really, really hated to do this.

The phone blared a second time. "I'm sorry, I have to take this," I groaned regretfully. Ridley was a texter by nature, he never called unless it was important.

Pulling off, from under the sheet I heard Liam ask, "Should I stop?"

I knew I should say yes, that it was totally tacky to be getting a blowjob while talking to my ex, but when it came to Liam, I found I was far more selfish than I ever could've imagined. "No, don't stop."

Reaching for the phone, I allowed myself one last moan before I accepted the call. "Hey, Rid. How's—" When I heard Ridley sobbing through the phone, the awkward history between us disappeared. Worst-case scenarios spun through my head. "What's wrong?" Liam must've heard the panic in my voice because he dragged the sheet back and looked up at me with concern .

"It's Lula," Ridley blubbered hysterically through the phone, and I sat up in a rush. "I

swear I only left the room for a minute, and it was on the counter, I thought there was no way she could get up there with her little legs. It was an accident and I—”

“Ridley, what happened?” I snapped, my heart racing.

“Lulabelle got into the baking chocolate. I’m at the vet.”

“I’m on my way,” I said, already leaping out of bed. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

I pulled on last night’s jeans and a t-shirt. “I’m sorry, Liam. It’s Lulabelle. She ate some baking chocolate, and it’s toxic to dogs. Ridley took her to the vet. I need to go.”

“Of course! You can take my car. Or do you...” Liam cleared his throat, staring down at his hands in his lap. “Do you want me to come with you?” When he dragged his gaze up to mine, it was filled with this strange mix of hope and worry. He wanted to be there for me, but he wasn’t sure what his role was. We were still feeling our way through this.

“I would love if you came with me,” I told him.

“Yeah?” His soft smile dissolved as he registered what that meant; we were in a hurry. “Oh! Okay, let me get dressed real quick.”

In under five minutes, we were out the door, racing for the car. Dr. Mayle’s office wasn’t far, and in no time, I was bursting through the door to the vet clinic, with Liam right behind me. I was familiar with the man at the desk, and he’d obviously seen me coming.

“It’s okay, Jared. Lulabelle’s gonna be okay,” Kel said immediately, cutting to the information I needed to hear most. He’d been working here longer than I’d had Lula,

and he always made a point of knowing everybody's name—no matter whether they had two legs or four.

"She's okay?" I asked again to confirm, sagging on the desk as the adrenaline leached out of me .

"Lula's going to be just fine. Dr. Mayle made sure I had an update to give you as soon as you got in." He smiled softly, and I felt Liam's hand on my back, offering me quiet comfort. "Ridley didn't know how much she ate for sure, so they gave her something to help her bring it back up. We'll want to keep an eye on her, and she probably won't feel very well for a bit, but Ridley got her here in time."

I blew out a long breath. "Okay... okay, thanks, Kel." My legs were shaky, so I pointed to the row of chairs behind me. "I'll wait over here."

"Sure thing. Ridley will be out soon."

I collapsed into a chair and dropped my head back on the wall, waiting for my heart to return to its normal rhythm. Liam sat down beside me and took my hand, rubbing his thumb in soothing circles. I rolled my head to the side to look at him. He seemed to feel a little out of place, peeking at the people with their pets, in carriers or on leashes, spread out around the room, waiting their turn. I appreciated that he'd come, even though there wasn't anything specific for him to do. This was what being in a relationship was. Supporting each other, being there no matter what.

I just watched him in profile until movement caught my eye. Ridley came from the back room, his eyes red-rimmed, shoulders sagging. He saw me straight away and came over. I stood from my chair, and Ridley collapsed against my chest, crying fresh tears. "I'm so sorry," he sobbed, his voice muffled in my shirt.

"Hey, it's okay," I said cautiously, bringing my hands up to give him a hug. "You had

no way of knowing she could get up there. It was just an accident.” I glanced over at Liam to make sure this was okay, but though he’d stood from his chair when I did, he was now avoiding my eyes, biting his lower lip.

When Ridley pulled back, he followed my gaze. “And you must be Liam. Thank you so much for coming, for being there for Jared.” Ridley threw himself at Liam next, not the least bothered that Liam didn’t hug him back. He seemed stunned to have my ex-boyfriend embracing him.

At that point, Dr. Mayle came out to talk to us. He assured us that Lulabelle was in the clear, but that he wanted to keep her overnight just in case.

“Can I see her?” I asked.

Dr. Mayle nodded. “Sure, but make it a quick visit. She’ll need her rest.”

I laced my fingers with Liam’s and brought him with me into the back. Brent, one of the other techs, pointed me to the right room, and I found my girl resting in a kennel, the door open. “Oh, baby girl,” I whispered, and her tail gave a weak thump.

“This is Lulabelle,” I told Liam, dragging him closer. “Lula, this is Liam.”

Liam brought his hand up for her to sniff, and she gave him a gentle lick. He huffed a laugh. “Hey, sweetheart.”

I watched the two of them for a minute, and my heart settled. My worlds had finally come together, and it felt right. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

Liam raised his brow. “I should be asking you that.”

I shrugged. “I’m okay. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t overwhelmed by

everything.”

He chuckled. “Everyone keeps hugging me.”

My smile widened. “Yeah, sorry about that. I didn’t know he was going to do that. Is it weird for you?”

“No! No, it’s fine. I’m fine. Ridley seems really nice.” He pinched his lips together, biting back what he actually wanted to say. I just waited him out, massaging behind Lula’s ears, and sure enough, he couldn’t hold it in. “I really don’t want to be the insecure new boyfriend, but can you please just tell me you’re not still hung up on your ex? Cause he’s really hot, and I’m not sure I can compete with him.”

There was zero hesitation when I shook my head and pulled him closer to kiss his temple. “I’m not even a little hung up. It was a mutual breakup with no regret, and I promise, it’s no competition. There’s only you, Liam. I love you.”

He melted into me, and we stayed like that, petting Lulabelle, until her eyes started to drift shut. “Okay, baby, I can take a hint. You feel better, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” I dropped a kiss on her soft forehead.

Ridley was in the hall, still talking to Dr. Mayle when we came out. We said our goodbyes, but Ridley looked past me anxiously to where Lula was sleeping. “Would it be all right if I hung around the waiting room for a while? Just to make sure she’s fine?” he asked the vet. I knew the guilt was riding him hard.

He nodded. “Of course. I’ll come find you when she wakes up.”

“Thanks, Doctor Mayle. I really appreciate everything you did.”

“Please, call me Beck.”

There was a pause as the two of them shared a long look, and I couldn't possibly be imagining the heat kindling between them. I peeked at Liam to see if he was catching the vibe too, and he was working hard to smother a smile. "Right, we'll just leave you two alone then," I said as Liam and I extricated ourselves from the conversation. "Call me later."

Liam didn't have to worry about Ridley holding a torch for me either.

20

Liam

I came into my apartment—make that our apartment—still dripping from melted snow. “If it gets much colder, I’m going to need to buy a bigger coat,” I told Jared, setting all my shopping bags down at the door before taking off my boots and setting them on the plastic tray that helped keep our floor dry. Already my winter coat could barely cover my burgeoning belly, and I had many more inches to gain.

“What’s all this?” Jared asked, picking up the heavy fabric shopping bags and peeking inside to see what I’d picked up on the way home. “More baking supplies? You should’ve just told me what you needed. It’s my day off, I would’ve picked it up for you.”

“I know you would’ve, but I didn’t know I needed it until the craving hit about half an hour ago.”

That was partly true. It was my holiday tradition to bake tins of goodies to give to all my family and friends every Christmas, and I’d been working my way through them for the past few days, one recipe at a time. Peanut brittle, dark-chocolate almond bark and cashews drizzled with white chocolate, and of course, Jared’s favorite, my butter tarts. What I hadn’t known, though, was that my unborn baby had a request. No, scratch that—they had a demand. Baby wanted Pops’s ginger cookies, complete with the secret ingredient, which I still hadn’t managed to work out.

Jared helped me set up in the kitchen, then he went and put on some classic holiday

music—John Denver and the Muppets. It was the perfect soundtrack for my childhood memories of Pops.

Humming, I got to work. First, I tried a batch adding cardamom, but as they baked and the apartment filled with the aroma, I knew even before tasting it that it wasn't right. The next batch, I tried swapping dried ginger with fresh grated gingerroot, and that definitely wasn't right. It threw the texture right off.

By the third batch, this time with nutmeg, my back was killing me. My rounding stomach was making it difficult to sidle right up to the counter, so I was bent over at an awkward angle, and my muscles were screaming in protest.

Jared moved in behind me and set his hands on my hips. "You're making faces," he informed me.

"I can't help it. I'm getting frustrated," I growled, tossing the wooden spoon into the bowl of batter.

"No, they're not frustrated faces. I have spent months now watching you, and I'd like to think I have a PhD in interpreting your emotions. You're in pain." He said it with such certainty, and I was about to argue the fact, but he moved his hands until his thumbs dug into my lower back.

There was no choking back the orgasmic moan that slipped out. "Yeah, right there." I leaned back into him and dropped my head on his shoulder. "How are your hands so strong," I purred.

"Comes from kneading dough." Lucky dough .

We stood there in the kitchen for a few minutes, with Jared rubbing his hands slowly over my body before settling on my stomach. He hummed along with the music,

rocking me back and forth, lulling me into a warm, cozy dream—at least until the timer went off.

I groaned, ready to take the latest batch of cookies out, but before I could even reach for the oven mitts, Jared had set his hands on my shoulders and turned me toward the living room. “Go, put your feet up. Let me have a go at the cookies for a bit.”

“Okay, but you’ll never get it,” I teased. “How can you possibly get the recipe right if you’ve never tried Pops’s cookies?”

“Have a little faith,” he said, giving me a quick kiss and a pat on the ass to get me going.

Instead of going to the couch, though, I sat myself at the nearby dining table so I could keep Jared company. I did put my feet up, though. My ankles had begun to swell when I spent too much time on my feet. I could only imagine what it would be like in the coming months. I would need to hire even more staff at Grounded .

While Jared finished the batch of cookies I’d been working on, we talked a little about our current living situation. We’d slowly been moving Jared’s stuff to my apartment, since his lease was running out, and between the two of us, covering rent on my two-bedroom apartment wasn’t a problem, but it was a temporary solution. We would need more space.

“Did you look at the listings I sent you?” I asked from my perch.

“Yes, but none of the houses felt right to me. The blue one was too far from downtown. We would end up spending most of our time on the commute. The yellow one with the porch was nice, but it didn’t have a yard, just a tiny patch of gravel and a garage.” He peeked at me as he put the tray in the oven and set the timer. “There’s no rush. We can make the second bedroom into the nursery for now.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “I had hoped we’d have the extra room for when Dad comes to visit. I just want everything to be perfect.”

“It will be, no matter what that looks like. As long as we’re together, that’s all that matters.”

Jared washed out the big mixing bowl, dried it, then set up for a new batch. I held a hand up to get his attention. “Make sure you sift all the dry ingredients. It really does make a difference.”

He smirked at me. “Are you trying to tell me how to do my job?”

“Sorry. Don’t take it personally. I trust that you know what you’re doing.” He’d been doing this for years, and his macarons were the best. I was sure he could handle following a recipe. Even still, I had to bite my tongue every time I saw him doing something that wasn’t how I would do it—which was everything. He stirred with his left hand instead of his right, changed the temperature on the oven by five degrees, and I was pretty sure I’d just seen him add chili powder to that next batch of cookies.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” I grumbled as he used a spatula to flip the cookies in the air before setting them on the cooling rack.

He winked at me. “Maybe.”

It was a good thing I loved him so much. “I know it’s silly to worry about this. I mean, the cookies are delicious on their own, even if I can’t figure out what his secret ingredient is, but...” I trailed off, feeling dejected.

Jared came and lifted my feet off the chair so he could sit down, then put his feet back in his lap, giving my toes a massage. “But you miss your pops, and if we could figure out this one ingredient, it would feel like he was here.”

I smiled through my stinging eyes, my vision going watery. “Yeah, exactly.” I was so grateful he understood.

“Your grandpa would’ve been so proud of you, Liam. Every time you remember him, he’s here.” Jared leaned forward and set a hand over my heart .

His words sent my tears rolling down my cheeks, but they were a happy kind of tears. I missed my pops more than I could explain, but having an alpha like Jared, our baby, our future... He was right, Pops would’ve been so happy for me.

Jared lifted my feet so he could get back to the kitchen. He washed his hands, ready to start again. “You got flour on my socks,” I pointed out, but I couldn’t reach to brush them off. Oh well.

“What if we made them with chai spice next?” he suggested, opening our spice drawer.

I frowned. “No, that’s definitely not the missing ingredient.”

“No, but they would taste amazing.” He smirked over at me. “I’m going to make you a dozen different option, and then your Christmas baking will be done. Two birds, one stone.”

Fair enough. I sat back in my seat and let go of control. We talked about everything and nothing over the next hour, while Jared made umpteen batches of cookies, all just slightly wrong. With each ding of the timer, I got to try another cookie. Some were spicy, some rich, and he was right, the chai cookies were incredible. I started making notes about them in a little chart on my phone, what ingredients we used and whether they were worth making again.

When I bit into the next cookie, though, I froze mid-chew, the flavors mingling on

my tongue. “Jared,” I said cautiously, scared to hope, then louder. “Jared!”

He was immediately at my side. “What is it? Is it the baby?”

“No!” I waved the cookie at him frantically. “This one! What did you put in this one?”

“What batch is it?” he asked, scanning the rows of cooling racks, trying to decide where I got this one from.

“Um, seven,” I said, consulting the chart .

He counted down the row until he got to the corresponding rack. “That one was... pepper.”

We shared a look as intense love filled me. This incredible alpha, man of my dreams, father of my baby, just baked a dozen different versions of my pops’s recipe just for me. “PEPPER!” I shouted, and the baby kicked in excitement right along with me.

Jared loaded up the entire batch on a plate then came and took me by the hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, heaving myself off the chair and following along.

“We’re going to celebrate your pops, obviously.”

We lay in bed together with our plate of cookies, and with each bite, I told our baby a story about their great-grandfather. I told them about his love of crossword puzzles and how he could’ve won Jeopardy if he’d ever cared to try. About how he’d introduced me to his favorite soap opera, Days of Our Lives , and I’d introduced him to Lonely Alpha—he was all about the drama.

“And he would stop at every payphone and vending machine to check the return slot for loose change,” I said to my stomach. Our baby would probably never even know what a payphone was. “He bent down and picked up every coin he found, and he kept it all in an old coffee can in the cupboard, convinced that one day he would have enough for a trip to Hawaii.” My dad still had the coffee can; neither of us could bring ourselves to cash it in.

“Why Hawaii?” Jared asked.

“That’s where he met the love of his life,” I said softly. “My mimi was a real sweet lady. She passed when I was just a baby, and I know Pops missed her more than he could ever say. I hope they’re together now. ”

I took another bite of the perfect cookie and rolled to look at Jared. His hands immediately went to my stomach, getting as close to our baby as he could, always hoping to feel them move. “Jared, would you... come work at Grounded?”

His hand stilled. “You want me to work with you? Won’t you get sick of me?”

I didn’t hesitate to shake my head. This had been my dream when I was younger, but now my dream was so much bigger than a café and bakery. It was building a family and a future with this man, and I wanted to share this part of my dream with him. “I miss you when I work my long days, and you’re incredibly talented. I understand if you don’t want to, and I don’t really want to ask you to leave Crave either, because Hugh is your family. But... maybe you could come bake with me on Saturdays? Only if you want, and I would pay you, of course.”

Jared cut off my rambling with a kiss that tasted like molasses, warm and sweet, just like him. “I would love to share your kitchen with you.”

My kitchen and so much more.

21

Jared

I took my time getting out of bed. The blankets still held Liam's warmth and delectable scent, but that wasn't why I lingered. Liam was an early riser and had gotten up for a shower, and I was listening carefully to his off-key singing. I lay there in silence until the first stutter in his voice. Because he didn't know that I'd set things in motion last night, preparing.

For April Fools' Day.

I listened to the muffled cursing and allowed myself to laugh. When the bathroom door clicked open, though, I wrestled my face into a stoic calm. "Good morning, love," I said evenly, turning away to grab my phone from the side table since I couldn't look him in the eye and keep a straight face.

Liam stepped out, dripping all over the carpet, hair wet and still covered in suds. Because of course he wouldn't have been able to rinse, seeing as I'd put soap inside the showerhead.

"Jared." He said my name like a curse, and the corner of my mouth twitched.

"Yes, dear?" I remained a picture of innocence .

He took a long, slow breath, and I chanced a peek at him. The towel didn't even wrap all the way around his waist at this point, just two weeks from his due date, and he

clutched both ends at his hip. Soapy water ran down his body in rivulets, but he seemed determined to ignore it. He glared at me, his eyes flashing. He wasn't mad, though someone who didn't know him well might've thought so. But he was sure as hell planning to get even.

After we'd ended our little café rivalry, we'd called a truce, and we hadn't pulled a single prank on each other in all the time since—but by unspoken agreement, this one day, all bets were off.

“Did you have a nice shower?” I asked cheekily, tempting fate as I smirked broadly at him.

Liam's eyes narrowed. “Just lovely, thanks. The shower's all yours.” He dropped the towel, giving me a look at how excited our little rivalry got him, before turning toward the closet and giving me a glorious view of his ass.

The first thing I did when I got into the bathroom was clean out the showerhead. Then, I checked the contents of the shampoo bottle, the toothpaste, and the shaving foam to confirm they hadn't been tampered with. After getting ready for the day, I paused at the door, listening. All was quiet, but my guard was up. I didn't know what form Liam's revenge would take, but that was half the fun. The anticipation got my blood running.

I eased the door open carefully, peeking out a narrow crack. No sign of Liam anywhere. I shook out my clothes before I put them on, half expecting itching powder or maybe a cockroach for old times' sake. Hmm, nothing. That did nothing to calm me.

I found Liam in the kitchen, setting out a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and cheese scones. “Coffee's fresh,” he said .

“Thanks, babe,” I said as casually as I could while wound up this tight. I kissed him on the cheek. “I could’ve made breakfast.”

“I know, but I wanted to.” He smiled at me, and I wondered, was that a friendly smile? Or a devious one?

Grabbing a mug from the cupboard, I poured myself a cup of coffee from the pot, fresh and warm, but when I went to add a spoonful of sugar from the jar, I paused, staring down at the crystals. I glanced over my shoulder at Liam and swore I saw the corner of his lips twitch as he pretended to read something on his phone. Mm-hm. I wasn’t born yesterday.

I quickly took a pinch of the “sugar” and tasted it, expecting salt, but it was sweet. Huh. Okaaaaay... I went ahead and scooped the sugar into my coffee then took a sip. I sputtered, choking.

“Salt!” I burst out, rounding on Liam.

He cackled, his careful mask splitting in a wide grin. “Sucker! I knew you wouldn’t trust the sugar, so I put the salt straight into the coffee!”

“Oh, you got me, fair and square,” I said, laughing.

Liam laughed hard enough that tears leaked from his eyes, but he sobered suddenly, standing from the table, hand under his belly. “Uh-oh, gotta go.” I knew that face. In fact, I’d gotten quite used to it by now. Laughing paired with a squished bladder had him waddling off to the bathroom as fast as he could go.

This was the moment I’d been waiting for. I held my breath, but it didn’t take long. I heard a sharp shout, and Liam came stomping out, more astonished than anything. “Saran wrap over the toilet? Seriously? That’s just mean!”

Now it was my turn to laugh. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself.” I held both hands up. “Don’t worry, I always intended to clean it up.”

“You’re just lucky it wasn’t a number two,” he muttered, chuckling as I made my way to the bathroom to clean up the mess. This was the cost of pranks, but it was so worth it to see the way it made him shine.

Since Liam owned his business, he didn’t get a designated paternity leave exactly, but I’d made him promise to take more days off as it got harder for him to stand for long periods of time. Hugh had agreed that I should put in more hours at Grounded than Crave, since that was where I was needed most right now, so that was where we were headed this morning.

I was just brewing a fresh pot of coffee—salt-free this time—as Liam outlined what we needed to get done. “I need to go over the schedules and make sure all the shifts are covered, plus backups in case I…” He got a strange look on his face.

I paused, mid-pour. “In case you what?” I asked.

Liam gasped, round eyes darting up to mine. “The baby’s coming.”

“Nice try,” I said, walking over to the couch and plopping down, putting my feet up. “How gullible do you think I am? As if you’re in labor. Pfft!”

Liam gawked at me. “I’m serious! I just felt a contraction.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.” I sat back, sipping my coffee as I tried to ignore the niggling unease in my gut. It went against every one of my instincts not to react. Especially when he started rubbing his stomach like that, rocking back and forth.

“What if I told you I’ll crown you the king of pranks? How about emperor? Would

you believe me then?” His voice was starting to hit a very convincing pitch, and my confidence wavered.

I took in the sweat dotted along his hairline, the tightening around his eyes. “You’re really serious?”

“Yes!” he shouted. And then, just to prove his point, he gasped and looked down, his pants darkening as his water broke and soaked into the material.

I was off that couch so fast, darting across the room to his side in an instant. “If this is a prank, you’re taking it a bit too far,” I joked, laughing shakily, my heart racing in my chest. This was it, the moment we’d been waiting for.

“What do we do now?” he asked, his breath a near pant.

“Now we take a breath,” I told him gently, pulling him into my arms. “In and out, nice and slow. There’s no rush, we have time.”

Liam’s breath caught, and he leaned into me hard, grunting. After he caught his breath, he looked up at me. “Can we maybe rush just a little?”

Dr. Zappek had told us once contractions started, we could take our time at home where we would be most comfortable until they got closer together, but if his water broke, we would need to go to the hospital. “I’m sure we have time to put on some dry pants at least,” I suggested, and he nodded.

It should’ve only taken us a few minutes to get ready, since our bag was already packed, but we had to stop twice for contractions. That worried me a little, but I kept calm. That was what Liam needed me to be right now, even if my blood pressure was rising.

“Okay, time to go,” I said, leading him toward the door. “You call Dr. Zappek’s office while I drive, okay?”

But when I went to put my shoes on, I found the laces tied together in knots. Another prank! I held them up to show Liam. “Really?”

He laughed through his pain and worry. “I’m sorry! How was I supposed to know the baby was going to come early?”

“Well, I guess the joke’s on both of us then. ”

Luckily, the drive to the hospital was clear of traffic, and we got there before the doctor did. The clinic was closed today, but that just meant he was on call at the hospital. Liam was already dressed in a gown with his legs up in stirrups for the nurse to check his progress by the time Dr. Zappek walked in. He looked a bit rumpled as he struggled to pull on his gloves, his scrubs askew.

“Morning, daddies. What a beautiful day to give birth.” He was incredibly young, having recently taken over his grandfather’s practice straight out of university, but Charlie swore the man knew what he was doing. The doctor’s wide smile disappeared between Liam’s legs as he sat down on a stool to take a peek. He popped back up quite quickly, smile strained. “Yes! Great progress... Have you felt the urge to push, by any chance?”

Liam glared at him, his hand crushing mine with the force of his contractions. “You could say that,” he panted.

“Right, well... then let’s do that, shall we? You’re good to go!” He gave us the thumbs-up, the rubber glove flopping where he hadn’t quite managed to get it on properly.

I exchanged a look with Liam. It was too late to change doctors now.

We didn't need to worry, though. Labor went on without a hitch, and when it came down to it, Dr. Zappek did a great job. He came across as a bit goofy, but it actually helped lighten the mood in what was naturally a tense environment. It didn't help that Liam was too far into labor for any real painkillers.

After about 20 minutes of pushing, Liam brought our daughter into the world with an almighty roar, bearing down hard. Liam flopped back on the raised bed, his chest heaving as he caught his breath. A nurse helped set the baby across his chest as I cut the cord. Then they took her over to a warmed area to get her cleaned up and check her over.

Her reedy cry was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard.

"Our daughter," Liam whispered, opening his arms to accept the swaddled bundle as they brought her back to him.

I perched on the edge of the mattress and leaned over to get as close to cuddling as I could in the narrow bed. "She's so beautiful," I said, wiping away my tears with the back of my hand. "I'm so proud of you, Liam."

"I'm kinda proud of me too," he admitted with a sleepy smile, his blinks slow with exhaustion.

Stroking a finger over her cheek, I said, "I was thinking about her name." We'd decided not to know if we were having a boy or a girl, and although we'd discussed a few names we liked, mostly our favorite cast members from Lonely Alpha , but there was one clear winner in my mind that had never even made it to the list. "Maybe we could name her Pepper."

Liam's whole face turned golden as he beamed up at me. "Our very own secret ingredient. I love it."

22

Liam

I sighed, exhausted. This was the fourth house of the day, and that wasn't including the six we'd looked at yesterday or the ten we'd gone to see last weekend. I was starting to lose hope that we would ever find the home of our dreams.

"I'm so sorry to keep dragging you out to these houses," I told Ridley.

He laughed. "It's literally my job. Trust me, I don't mind. Besides, how often can I bring my dog to work? And playing with a baby too? This is the best!" He passed Pepper back to Jared, and he tucked her into her car seat.

Jared had been worried that I would find it weird that his ex was our real estate agent, but it really wasn't. Not only did I genuinely like Ridley—we'd even had a viewing party for the season finale of *Lonely Alpha*, where Leo Schuster got the shaft from both Clark and Marty, the last remaining omegas, just like our fan chat wanted—but I also trusted that he knew us better than another agent would. He could easily look at a listing and rule it out immediately if it wasn't a good fit for us or for Lulabelle. He was just as invested in us finding our home as we were. He would never try to sell us something unworthy .

"I have one more to show you and..." Ridley pinched his lips together before he could finish the sentence, but he couldn't hide the excited gleam in the eye.

Jared narrowed his eyes at him. "Just spit it out. You know there's no point in trying

to hide anything from us.”

Ridley did a little shimmy. “Let’s just say, I saved the best for last.” Refusing to say any more, he climbed into the back of my car so he could play with Pepper, and Lulabella eagerly hopped into the other side. Where Pepper went, so did Lula. It was so stinking adorable.

I shared a long look with Jared. “One more?” I asked.

“One more,” he agreed, kissing my temple.

Every house we’d looked at had been acceptable. They were all the right specs on paper. The right size, fenced yards, close enough to downtown but not right in it. But each and every time, Jared and I had been in total agreement—they weren’t the one.

There was no hurry, I told myself as I followed Ridley’s directions to the final house on the list. We were happy enough in our apartment. Pepper wasn’t even crawling yet, and even if we never moved, we would make do. But... I’d always been a dreamer. I wanted a house like Pops had, with history steeped into its bones, somewhere not just to live but to thrive. And Jared, well, putting down roots was fundamental for him. It meant stability, a future he could count on, and I wanted that for him.

Ridley leaned between the seats and pointed at a bungalow. “It’s just up here on the right, number 79.”

I pulled up along the curb, peeking through the dense trees to get a look at the house. I couldn’t see much from here, but there was an inviting brick sidewalk that cut between two large blue spruce trees, their boughs trimmed to create an archway over the path. It was cozy, and I was already halfway in love .

We piled out of the car, and I swore there was an electric anticipation in the air that left my skin tingling. I tried not to let myself hope, but the thought was already there, waiting in the wings. This is the one .

I took Lulabelle's leash while Jared tied Pepper into a wrap across his chest since she'd decided it was naptime, then we followed Ridley through the archway. He was busy outlining a few of the neighborhood's features, but I was barely listening. I was too busy drinking in the house as it came into view.

There were huge ferns in the front garden beneath a bay window, and through the glass, I caught a glimpse of what was probably the living room. Was that a fireplace?

"There's a great school just a ten-minute walk down the street, and right next door to the school is a community center, with a playground, a baseball diamond, and in the winter, a skating rink."

"Really?" I asked dreamily, as I pictured us sitting on the sidelines of Pepper's soccer games or pushing her on the swing set.

Ridley gave me a sly smile. "Yep. And there's a public pool in the other direction." Unlike the other houses we'd looked at where the key was kept in a lockbox at the door, this time Ridley reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, unlocking the front door. "After you," he said, sweeping out his arm.

My breath caught in my throat as I stepped into the entryway and was greeted by honey-colored hardwood floors that creaked under my feet. The walls were plaster, with a simple crown molding, and I swore the air smelled like decades of baking.

"It's beautiful," I said, keeping my voice at a whisper, but not just because Pepper was sleeping. The house itself felt like it was slumbering, just waiting for its new owners to make it a home.

The house wasn't new, built back in the late 60s, and that was one of its best features, in my opinion. The houses in the new neighborhoods that had been popping up in the city's suburbs were nice enough, but this one... it had a soul. I could feel it.

The open living room/dining room was to the left, but I turned and headed down the hall to the right toward the bedrooms. The master bedroom was lit with muted light, shaded from the giant trees in the front of the house, and there was an en suite bathroom. I could already see where we would put the bed, the dressers, the bookshelves.

At the next room, I paused in the doorway, breathing in a deep, shuddery breath. "This would be Pepper's room."

Jared came to stand beside me, rocking side to side and rubbing his palm over Pepper's back. "Look up," he said.

I did and found myself grinning and reaching for Jared's hand. Someone had painted big puffy clouds on the ceiling, floating across a blue sky. It was like it was meant to be.

"Let's put in an offer," I said.

Ridley chuckled. "But you haven't even seen the kitchen."

"Fair enough. Let's go see the kitchen."

We passed another bedroom and a bathroom, but I barely gave them a glance. In my mind, it was a done deal.

I knew even before we got to the kitchen that it would be perfect, and sure enough, it was. A skylight had been added as a recent addition, and the room was flooded with

natural light. There were lots of cupboards and counterspace, with relatively new appliances that Ridley told us came with the house.

And through the back window, I saw the huge yard, a perfect place for Lulabelle. I looked down at her, sitting at my feet. “What do you think, girl?” She wagged her tail in reply.

Someone had loved this house and taken good care of it. Updates had been put in here and there, making it even more comfortable .

“Can we afford it?” Jared asked Ridley, bracing himself for the worst news. He was squeezing my hand just as hard as I was his.

Ridley smiled as he pulled a clipped stack of papers out of his messenger bag. “I wouldn’t have shown you the house if you couldn’t.” He passed the paperwork over to us, and we looked at the amount.

I rubbed my eyes, making sure I wasn’t seeing things. “What’s wrong with it?” There had to be some major flaw for the price to be so cheap. Although, this would just as likely turn into a bidding war and end up at twice the price.

Ridley, though, was shaking his head, that same mysterious smile on his face. “I promise there is nothing wrong with the house, beyond a few creaks, maybe some dents and dings. The owner is a friend of the family, and after his husband died, he’s decided it’s time to move into an assisted living facility. He doesn’t care about the money. He told me it was more important to him that the house went to a new family just started out. They raised two children in this house, and he just wants to know that the rooms will be filled with laughter for years to come.”

This all felt too good to be true.

“I’ll give you guys a few minutes to talk it over.” Ridley headed out of the kitchen and left us alone.

I didn’t even realize I was crying until Jared brushed the tears from my cheeks. “Hey, it’s okay. If you don’t want the house, we can keep looking.”

That made me laugh, and I pulled my sleeve down to wipe my face. “These are happy tears, silly. Of course I want this house! It was made for us.”

“Thank gods,” he said, grinning. “Because I love the house too.”

He cupped my face and leaned in so he could kiss me softly over Pepper’s head. Our daughter sighed in her sleep, and I took that as a good sign. “This feels right. Let’s sign the paperwork.”

I nodded. “Okay.” We took turns penning our names to the form, setting our future in motion.

So much had happened over the past year, it was enough to make my head spin. I thought it had been a big dream to open my café and bakery, but here I was a father, about to be a new homeowner. There was just one last title I was hoping for...

Jared was looking out the window. He was still rocking, in the rhythm that seemed to come naturally to him to keep our daughter calm. He did it without even thinking, which made me know he was the right one for me.

“Jared?”

“Hm?” He turned to look at me, the sunlight gilding his features and making him look almost angelic.

“Will you marry me?”

I hadn't planned on asking today, so the ring I'd bought was still tucked in my sock drawer at home, but then Jared beamed at me. “That depends,” he said and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small box. “Will you marry me too?”

Crying, I fell into his arms, mindful of the baby between us just beginning to stir. “I love you so much,” I said, frantic to get as many kisses as I could before I had to feed Pepper—or before Ridley kicked us out.

“I love you too,” Jared said, resting his forehead on mine, sharing a breath in our new home. “You're my forever.”

Too soon, it was time to leave, but we knew it wouldn't be long before we got to move into our new home. Lula was straining the leash as she tried to sniff every tree on the way back to the car, and she peed right in the middle of the yard, marking her new territory. I guess that meant it got her seal of approval.

“Can we give you a ride back?” I asked Ridley when he didn't follow us back to the car.

He smiled, blushing a little. “Thank you for the offer, but... I have a ride.” He nodded over to where a black car was waiting. As we stood there, the door popped open, and a man stepped out, waving.

“Is that Dr. Mayle?” Jared asked, confused to see the vet outside of his clinic. Lulabelle plunked herself down behind my legs, hoping her doctor wouldn't see her.

“Yeah. Beck is taking me out to dinner.” Ridley's blush deepened. “If you'll excuse me.” He walked over to meet Dr. Mayle and greeted him with a PG-13 kiss.

I wrapped an arm around Jared's waist, and he pulled me close, kissing the top of my head. "Aww, they make a good couple, don't you think?"

"I do," he agreed.

I wondered how long it would be before we could say those words too.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED...

CreamyJoe: After much discussion, Muffin and I have decided to extend an invitation to you all for our wedding.

MuffinTop: But please, don't feel like you have to come. Seriously. Don't come.

RimJobbins: Hells yeah! Clothing optional, right ?

MuffinTop: Never mind, we take it back. We were just kidding. You're uninvited.

Dripdrip69: 2 late. We R allllll coming

RainbowRob: Yassss!

BJz4days: Woot!!!!

BottomsUp: It's only fair since we're the reason you're together in the first place.

CreamyJoe: I wouldn't go that far.

BananaSunday: FYI I'm bringing a film crew.

CreamyJoe: What have I done? *face-palm emoji*

The Staff

Emily beckoned Conner over to her side of the front desk. She patted a tall stack of plastic totes that had been dropped off by a man he'd recognized as working at the café down the street. "Monsieur Holland needs you to bring these to the kitchen."

Conner narrowed his eyes at her. She might've been his supervisor, but that didn't make her the boss. In fact, he'd heard Monsieur Holland ask Emily to move these totes herself. And he would've pushed that fact, too, if he hadn't been so damned curious about all the goings-on in the hotel today.

The collection of people who'd been streaming in toward the banquet hall had been such a ragtag, mismatched bunch, he'd been getting more and more curious as the day wore on. It had started off innocently enough, with a familiar-looking couple and their baby who'd been meeting with Monsieur Holland, and along with them were their family members—a mom, a dad, some siblings or cousins, a niece and nephew maybe. Conner heard them talking about the celebration that was about to begin.

But then things began to get interesting...

The guests began to arrive. First, a tall, slim man had come in wearing a fitted navy pin-striped suit, though without a shirt beneath the jacket, offering a glimpse of his smooth, freckled chest beneath. He'd paired the ensemble with neon-pink high heels and a matching feather boa, eyes hidden behind oversized shades even though he was indoors, strutting down the hallway as if it were a catwalk. Another man, bulky with muscle, with nearly every inch of his exposed skin covered with intricate tattoos, and when he winked and smiled at Conner (making him more than a little hot under the

collar), there'd been a flash of a gold tooth.

There were no similarities between the guests, as far as he could tell. Not blood relatives, certainly. He'd heard it was for a wedding, but that didn't seem right. Who had a wedding ceremony at a hotel? A reception, perhaps. Although he was pretty sure he'd seen a pastor.

And when the man in a tuxedo turned up with a camera crew in tow, Conner decided there was no way he could resist taking a peek. So even though it was Emily who'd been told to cart those boxes to the kitchen, Conner smiled and said, "Sure thing."

The kitchen was its usual brand of chaos. Cherie ruled over her staff with an iron fist, throwing in some colorful language for good measure. Even with her yelling and cursing, there was a light, festive mood to the bustle. Turned out it was true, everyone loved a wedding.

"Where do you want these?" he asked, raising his voice to be heard over the din.

Cherie pointed toward a long stainless-steel counter that looked to have been cleared for just this reason. "Can you unload the totes over there? Carefully!"

Conner didn't mind being roped into unloading the totes because it gave him more time to satisfy his curiosity. When he pulled the lid off the first tote, a sweet aroma emerged that had his mouth watering. He got to work lining the counter with all kinds of baked goodies. Decadent cupcakes piled high with buttercream, golden-crusted tarts filled with raisins and nuts, and a colorful array of macarons that two of the servers, Benny and Delia, got to work lining on a five-tiered display.

"Which one's your favorite," Benny asked Delia, "Grounded or Crave?" He said it with all the gravity as if he were asking whether she preferred life or death instead of her choice of café.

She hummed. “Depends. I prefer Crave’s lattes but Grounded’s baking. You?”

Benny shook his head, his hair long enough to flop into his eyes. “I’m the opposite. Have you tried the cheese scones at Crave? What they really need to do is combine their forces so we can get the best of both worlds in one easy location.”

“Isn’t that what this wedding is?” Delia laughed. “The merging of empires.”

Ah! Conner realized. That’s where I recognized the couple from .

The door leading to the banquet hall swung open, and the owner of Grounded snuck in, looking over his shoulder for signs of pursuit. “Quick, what can I do to help?” he asked, descending on the table between us. He was dressed to the nines, looking mighty fine for his wedding day, his curly brown hair wrestled into submission with product.

He’d barely had time to dress one row on the platter, though, before the door swung open again, this time his groom, golden-brown eyes narrowed in a mock glare. The image he was going for was made less effective with the baby he had propped on his hip, dressed in a frilly dress of pink-and-white tulle. “Liam,” he drawled, prowling closer .

Liam grinned as wide as he could, holding his hands up in surrender. “Jared! I was just checking on their progress. I’m not working, I swear.”

“I don’t believe you for a second, Husband .” Jared leaned in with a teasing smile and pecked his lips quickly before taking one of his hands and leading him from the kitchen. “It’s our day. No work allowed!”

In all the commotion, Conner was tempted to take one of the desserts for himself, but Cherie must’ve had some crazy mindreading skills, because she smacked his hand before he could do much more than think about it. “Hands off! Make yourself useful

and go restock the bar. Shoo!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, following the grooms out onto the floor, where a whole new kind of chaos was just ramping up.

Conner overheard someone talking about the beautiful ceremony held on the rooftop terrace, overlooking the city, but now it was time for the reception. The guests had begun to filter into the banquet hall as fast as the elevator could spit them out, coming down from the terrace, and the DJ had put on some upbeat music to get things started.

Timothy was the bartender for the event, but he looked relieved when Conner came over. “Hey, Cherie mentioned I should come help restock the bar?”

“Thanks gods,” he gushed. “The way some of this crew is already drinking, I’ll be running out of booze within the hour. Here, you man the station for a minute. It’ll be faster if I go since I know where everything is and what we need.”

“Oh. Right. Okay.” Conner didn’t mention that he wouldn’t turn 21 until next month and he couldn’t legally serve alcohol until then. All he would have to do was stand here and convince people to hydrate with the non-alcoholic essentials before getting into the booze .

Conner wiped the counter down, trying to look busy while people watching. Timothy had been right, the crowd looked to be up for a good time. The dance floor was already filling up, even before the cake had been cut. It was easy to see the extravagant three-tier cake from here, though it wasn’t like any wedding cake he’d ever seen before. It had a rolled fondant icing, but it looked to be decorated with spices instead of flowers or lace. Cinnamon sticks, cardamom pods, and star anise were set in stunning patterns. And were those... peppercorns?

Movement caught Conner’s eye, and he turned to see the man from earlier heading over, his hands behind his back. Conner greeted him with a smile. “Liam, right?

Sorry, I can't remember your last name."

"Well, it was Turner until about half an hour ago. Now it's Klein."

Liam was smirking slyly and from behind his back he brought a folded napkin which he set on the bar top. "I couldn't help but notice you drooling over the macarons. I didn't know what flavor you would like, but this is my favorite." He slid it across from counter toward Conner.

"For me?" he asked. "Oh, I shouldn't. I'm not allowed to..." He trailed off as Liam shrugged.

"If your boss gives you any trouble, you send him my way. His husband and I go way back." He nodded to the vibrantly pink cookie with yellow icing peeking from behind its layers. "Go on. One cookie won't get you fired. It's strawberry lemonade."

With a quick dart of his fingers, Conner popped the entire cookie into his mouth in one bite, and the sweet-and-sour flavor exploded in his mouth. "Ohmywff," he mumbled around the cookie, trying his best not to spray crumbs.

"Right?" Liam said, clearly pleased with his reaction. "I really won the lottery when I met Jared, even if I was too blind to see it right away. "

Conner reluctantly swallowed, then poured Liam a glass of water for something to keep busy. "I've heard there was a little rivalry between the cafés. So, which one of you made the cake?"

Liam's smile was blinding. "We both did. Turns out, we make a pretty great team." Maybe there was some truth to what Benny had said about the cafés joining forces.

They were interrupted when a large camera was shoved in their faces. The flash went off before Conner could turn to see what was going on. "Don't mind the cameras,"

the man in a tuxedo said from off to one side. “Just smile, pretend he said something funny. Ha-ha-ha.” He wasn’t actually laughing, just trying to offer a cue.

Liam rolled his eyes. “We never should’ve invited you, Banana Sunday,” he said as some sort of private joke, but there was a trace of amusement in his voice that was impossible to miss.

“Are you bothering my husband, Elijah?” Jared came over and hooked an arm around Liam’s waist, spinning him around once before dipping him back and giving him an obscene kiss.

“I would never. I’m a fly on the wall, Jared,” Elijah said, before whispering to the cameraman. “Did you get a shot of that kiss?”

Jared and Liam were beyond caring who was watching at this point. “Time to cut the cake, Husband.” Then he quickly pointed at Elijah. “Just please, stay out of the way, and promise you’ll send me all the footage of the wedding.”

Elijah put his hands up in defense. “Hey, that was the deal we made. Free wedding photography in exchange for the publicity.” He blew them a kiss as they walked away. “Don’t forget, you never would’ve met if it weren’t for me.”

Conner was insanely curious about what kind of publicity he meant, but Timothy had returned with a cart loaded up with cases of beer and bottles of wine, champagne, and top-shelf whiskey, so Conner supposed that meant his job at the bar was done. He wasn’t ready to head back to the front desk, so instead, he grabbed a dish bin and decided to make a pass of the room, picking up the empty glasses left abandoned on tables, and in one case, in a potted plant.

As the happy couple made their way to the cake table, the tuxedoed man and his camera crew circled the room. He whispered directions to them. “One of you get to the front, the other, get a wide view from this angle. Hustle, I don’t want to miss

this.”

The DJ turned off the music and called for everyone’s attention, and the crowd turned to watch, offering catcalls and shrill whistles in appreciation. With exaggerated care, Liam fed a forkful of cake to his new husband, but then, he brought his other hand up and smeared a big gob of icing across his face. “Gotcha,” he said, before grabbing him by the front of his tux and kissing him hard, getting icing all over himself in the process too.

It was a sticky, sugary, lovey-dovey mess, and Conner’s heart gave a heavy thump at how absolutely stinking adorable they were together. He would find his own omega someday, his own happily ever after. He had plenty of time, and in the meanwhile, he would pay close attention and learn from others how to best love his own hypothetical future husband.

Elijah sidled up to Conner and sighed in dreamy bliss. “They’re perfect together, right?”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

“I did that,” he said smugly, tapping his chest. “They’re only together thanks to Lonely Alpha , ya know. I’m the director, Elijah Campbell. Are you a fan of the show?”

Conner winced, thinking of the cheesy, over-the-top reality show that featured ridiculous drama and lots of bare skin to lure in their rapt audience. “Uh, not so much.”

Elijah seemed to deflate a little, but he quickly rallied, turning to gaze adoringly at the newly married couple who were now passing out squares of cake to the awaiting guests. Conner swore he could see that same yearning for a happy ending in the director’s eyes. “Oh, well... just wait until you see what I have planned for next se

ason. I'll make a fan out of you yet."

Behind closed doors at The Scarlet Hotel, anything can happen... even healing a broken spirit.

Being an FBI agent means risking your life to save others, but alpha Peter Brown had never given any thought to what would happen if he survived . After being critically injured on the job, Peter isn't sure who he is anymore, but he knows his future as a field agent is over. Through surgeries and treatment, the life he used to know fades away, leaving his body weak and scarred—his spirit broken. Now, his doctors are telling him it's time to get back up, but after living in shadows for so long, he isn't sure how he will ever find the light.

Omega Casey Winslow knows not to get overly attached to the patients who come to him for physical therapy. This is just a stage of their lives, and soon enough, they always move on. That's the goal of their treatment, after all. But when Casey first meets Peter, he isn't sure the man even wants to move on. Peter is haunted by demons, and Casey finds himself getting too invested, not just with his treatment but with the future he believes they might have together.