

SECOND CHANCE  
CHEF ROMANCE



# Tasty

EMMA BLAKE

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TASTY

Second Chance Chef Romance

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# Chapter 1

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## *Cal*

Sunlight streamed through the window and slanted over the dusty surfaces and tool-covered floors. I stood back from the wall, sighing and looking over the day's work. It was already late evening, and any sane person who ached half as much as I did would call it a day.

Will confirmed my theory where he was crouched next to his toolbox. "So, that's all for today?" he asked.

His face was white with dust and shiny with sweat, and the white vest straining over his linebacker shoulders was now streaked brown from dirt and grime. I had no doubt I sported the same look.

"Nah, I want to tackle that last wall." I glanced at the enormous stretch beside us and deflated a little inside. But I'd promised myself I wouldn't leave today until I was finished with all the walls. There wasn't much time left to take things slowly. After the wall, I needed to finish the floors, install the refrigerator, and... Damn, I had a headache coming on just thinking of all I had left to do to get this place up and running. "You go on. I can handle it."

Will scoffed and stood to his imposing height, wincing a bit. "You're a big idiot to think I'd leave you here all on your own."

A lump formed in my throat, but that was probably from all the dust, not the fact that my best friend in the world had just declared he'd stick by my side, despite our grueling task. "You don't have to. You've already given up most of your day off. The least you can do is enjoy the evening you have left."

Will scoffed. "I'm going home to an empty apartment. No one will miss me." He stomped over to me and slapped my shoulder. "Let's get to work."

"If you say so." I walked up to the last wall we needed to fix to get the area to look less atrocious.

So far, we'd transformed all the walls and windows to look less like an abandoned building, which it was before I bought it, into a semi-decent interior. It wouldn't make jaws drop, but it may convince decent folks to sit and have a meal, and that's what I was banking on.

This last wall, though, I only hoped would be less of a challenge. But I doubted it. Every single repair we'd tackled in this building over the past couple of weeks seemed to trump the last in terms of difficulty. And I was done believing anything would come easy.

Worst still, a heavy gray cloth hung over this section, and I had a feeling it held worse than we'd seen so far.

"Ready?"

Will nodded grimly, and on the count of three, we grabbed the edges of the cloth and yanked it down. Dust rose into the air, and I raised the bandanna around my neck to shield my nostrils. I'd already breathed in a desert's worth of dust over the past few days; it was a surprise I wasn't bedridden and running through several boxes of tissues each day.

Through the dust fog, I could hardly make out my friend.

"Will?"

Almost immediately, an answering sneeze hit my ears, and I winced.

"You okay, bud?"

"I'm golden," he sneezed out.

No one would do this amount of work for free, and I couldn't reward his help with illness.

"Hey, man. We can just call it a day..."

"Cal, shut your face. I'm good." The dust settled a bit, and I made out his face. "See?" He splayed his hands and shook out his body. "Doing great. Now, let's see what we've got here... Oh, shitcake."

My gaze went to the wall, and my stomach fist-bumped the ground. Moss and crawling insects had made their home across it.

"Looks like an ogre barfed on it," Will murmured.

"Smells like it, too." My nose wrinkled.

For the umpteenth time, I doubted myself. The realtor who sold me this building even tried to talk me out of it; that's how bad it was. And anyone, namely my family, who learned I chose to set up my restaurant here looked at me like I was baking cookies over a campfire.

"Hey, we've got this."

I hadn't realized Will had drawn so close until I felt his hand clasped on my shoulder. I blinked and cleared away the whispers of



regret.

"Hmm? We'll be done in no time," he prompted, gaze leveled on mine.

"No time?"

"Well, some time, but it'll come out great."

I forced my head to move in the affirmative. "Alright. Let's get to it."

The next two hours were a nightmare. Cleaning the wall took up a better part of an hour, and once we finished, it became clear just how bad the wall was. We plastered over it and proceeded to paint, then put up a board to cover it—a nice flat surface for decoration.

Darkness had crept in as we worked, and since the building didn't have electricity yet, we turned on large spotlights and continued.

Will huffed at the other end where he was drilling the board into place.

"You good?"

"Yes, Mom."

I smiled. "Okay, kid. If you get a boo-boo, tell me, alright?"

"Prick," Will said.

My shoulders shook with laughter as I worked at my end, but then I sobered up quickly.

Life was less bleak at this point, but a while ago, I wouldn't have believed I'd find any reason to smile, let alone laugh.

Working as a sous-chef in Chicago in one of the biggest and most respected restaurants was a dream. Until that dream shattered when the restaurant owner and head chef got the crazy idea I was dipping my ladle in his wife's soup—I wasn't. But he wouldn't believe me and kicked my ass to the curb. One moment I had a great job, and the next, I was counting down the months until I had to vacate my apartment. Other restaurant owners got wind of the scandal and blackballed me. I did something bold and probably stupid, now that I was covered in sweat and dust and thinking about it.

I decided to come back home to Hannibal and start my own restaurant.

I torched my savings to obtain this rundown—albeit now less so—building and ordering the supplies I'd need. The elevated farm-to-table restaurant that would emerge from this rubble would certainly

get rave reviews and attract people from all over the Midwest to dine on my delicious meals.

I pictured the opening in Technicolor with fireworks and cheers, but my family refused to get behind it. They thought it was foolhardy, and the only person who saw the dream clearly as I did was Will, and he showed up to help me set the place up as proof.

“Mother—” A tool clanged onto the floor.

I turned to Will and started to offer help but stopped. Will had this, as he'd told me a million times, and if I asked again, I had no doubt I'd earn a good-natured headlock. Those hurt like hell coming from his beefy arms.

“What?”

I shrugged. “Just picturing you in a short skirt and waving pom-poms.”

He eyed me.

“You know, 'cause you're my biggest cheerleader, and every time you curse, sounds like the best chant I've ever heard.”

“I can get on that, you know.” Will struck a pose, sticking out his hip. “How do I look?”

“Nope.”

“What about this?” He held out both hands and pouted, throwing his head to the side.

“You're making me want to bleach my eyes.” But I felt a smile curving my lips.

“Really? So, Halloween gold?”

“I'd never speak to you again if you dressed as a cheerleader, Halloween or not.”

He laughed, going back to the board. “I'm doing it.”

“I believe you.”

By the time we finished, it was a wonder I was still standing, but I managed to move ten paces back and stare at the refurbished wall. A smile cracked my face, and an answering one came on Will's.

“We should totally become carpenters,” he said.

“Your family—” I thought for a second “—and probably the whole of Hannibal would murder me for taking away their favorite cop.”

“We can combine it,” Will said as we organized the tools in a corner. “I'll be a cop carpenter, and you can be a carpenter chef.”

“Will...”

“I already have your slogan.”

I shook my head as we stepped into the cool night air. “Shoot.”

“Shelving gourmet meals.”

“I would go out of business in a minute.”

“Wood you care for dessert?”

“What?”

“Speaking of dessert, my stomach feels empty. We should grab a pizza,” Will said as I locked up.

I couldn't help my snort. “What are you? Ten? We need a real meal.”

“Or...a quick meal.” Will slanted his head.

I chuckled. “I'll make a quick and real meal, I promise.”

We got to my place in no time, and Klaus raced to the door, skipping excitedly for his complimentary belly rubs.

I crouched and played with him for a second. “You've been a good boy, haven't you?”

Seeing we were two, the Labrador retriever bounded over to a laughing Will for some more attention.

Without dawdling a second longer, I changed out of my soiled shirt and got started on dinner. Will took a beer from the fridge, popped it open, and idly watched the news while I cooked. He seemed pretty mellow, but from knowing Will since childhood, I was sure if dinner didn't turn up ASAP, he'd tear apart the apartment. And probably gobble up furniture just to fill his belly. As if on cue, he looked over at me, and his eyes narrowed.

“It'll be quick,” I reassured him.

He grumbled and brought the bottle to his mouth, drinking half of it.

I kept my laugh low as I took out the chicken, prepped it, stuck it in the oven, and then started on the rice and vegetables.

As the news turned to a local arrest, Will sat forward, his brows furrowed. I kept half an eye on the screen, and soon, the culprit appeared. He wasn't anyone I knew, but like me, he was covered in tattoos and had long hair. Where mine was packed into a man bun, his hung in a stringy mess around his face. He wrestled with two

police officers, and they dragged him away. Will glanced at me, and I looked back at the simmering veggies.

The difference between Will and me was like day and night—I was the latter. He was the golden boy of Hannibal, and I was the man in the grocery store moms steered their kids away from. It never bothered me much. We'd been friends long before I turned my skin into a canvas and gained a reputation as an asshole. And I'd left Hannibal to move to Chicago anyway. But now, I was back, and I had to face the judgment and conclusions from people I'd grown up with. I shook off the thought. They didn't matter. Those who mattered helped me renovate a rundown building and shared dinner with me.

“And...done!” I announced.

Will scrambled off the chair so quickly that Klaus skipped up from his perch on the kitchen mat and hid between my legs. I reached down to scratch his ears and assure him the raving hungry man wasn't after him.

Said man rounded the table, gazing down at the plates of steamed rice, veggies, and chicken. It wasn't a formal dinner by any stretch of the imagination, but I found myself pausing, waiting for his thoughts. Will inhaled a bite, his big chest expanding, his face transforming, and then he clapped slowly.

“You're a master chef, Cal Younger,” he praised. “Can I stuff my face now?”

I laughed. “Be my guest.”

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## Chapter 2

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## *Allie*

The post office was so silent I could almost hear the footsteps of the mouse scurrying across the floor to dive underneath the newspaper-covered table to get to the crumbs of bread there. For one fascinating second, the mouse—I named her Bertie—cleaned up the bread crumbs, and her nose was to the ground again, seeking new food. Bertie sniffed around, then ran left, deeper into the post office's storage rooms. If my supervisor saw that, he'd flip out. Me? If I could, I would hand an Oscar to Bertie. She was the most exciting thing that had happened all week.

With her gone now, my eyes went back to the giant wall clock opposite my desk. I slouched deeper in my chair and counted the minutes until I could leave. The clock was a torture device—no one could tell me different. Of all the empty walls in the post office, they chose this very spot, right in front of an employee's chair, to stick the clock, like, "Haha, look at this. You're not getting out anytime soon."

I groaned and sunk a little deeper in my seat, willing anything remotely exciting to happen. Even Bertie chose not to scurry before me again. Lucky Bertie. She could dive through the underbelly of Hannibal and enjoy new sights without feeling the pressure to do anything special with her life. Wait...could a mouse have an existential crisis? Was Bertie running all over because she needed to get away from shit bugging her mousy mind?

A rumble vibrated through my chest, and I eyed the clock. I'd give an arm and a leg for 4:45 p.m. to come. The clock still ticked on idly. Would it be okay if I climbed a stool, adjusted the clock, and went home?

Home to what?

I shook my head, refusing to think about how my empty apartment was worlds worse than this echoing post office. Here, I met a few people during the day, and Bertie ran around entertaining me. But at home, I'd sink into my lumpy couch, forced to acknowledge that nothing was going according to plan. Well, it was, just not fast enough.

My eyes turned up, and a burst of energy zinged through me. "Yes!" I hopped to my feet and did a little jig, grateful no one was here to see my quitting time dance.

Throwing my bag over my shoulder, I pranced over to the desk next to the door and signed out.

"Goodbye, office! Bye, Bertie." I blew a kiss over my shoulder as I exited the building. "I hope I don't come back because I'm out living my dreams."

No one answered, and once I hit the sidewalk, the giddiness turned into a quiet calm. I wouldn't go chasing my dreams overnight, and I'd surely be back, but it was nice to believe every time I left was the last.

I glanced left, then right, wondering which route to take today. Hannibal was as predictable as a dog barking at the mailman, so every day after work, I pushed myself to find some new and exciting aspect of the town. Seriously, I needed the novelty. If not, I'd run in front of a parade float during the next Steampunk Festival just to rid myself of the mind-numbing drudgery of seeing the same stuff every day. I sent a quick prayer skyward, hoping I'd be long gone before the next festival came around. But a niggling in the back of my head and my accurate knowledge of the amount in my bank account told me that probably wouldn't be possible.

Sighing, I turned right and started the long walk home. There were shorter paths, but a longer one promised more to see.

Hannibal was, in the world of small towns, filled with culture and history. It had character. But I knew it too well, like the fit of my most comfortable boots. It provided security and familiarity, but I needed more. More excitement. More challenges.

The only thing challenging about living here now was avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk. I leaped over one now, then resumed my leisurely pace.

What was I doing?

Walking home was usually the brightest part of my day. I wasn't going to ruin it with my negativity. Lifting my face to the waning sun, I pulled in a deep breath. I couldn't let myself be beaten down with how things were with me; I needed to find a sliver of hope in every

ray of light. With a smile, I added a spring to my step and said “hi” to the folks I walked past.

People smiled at me, and I managed to stretch my lips for their sake, but deep down, I felt like a sinking ship. Their lives were what they hoped they would be. Instead, I had all these dreams of living and working in a big city keeping me up at night, and making me dread each day I woke up in good old Hannibal. I had so much to be grateful for that I kept my dissatisfaction to myself most of the time.

No one would understand what it felt like to watch your friends and those you grew up with getting married and having kids while you plodded on haplessly.

*Then get married and have kids yourself*, I could almost imagine my mom saying.

Only, a husband and kids were far from what I wanted. Wedding invitations flew all around Hannibal, followed closely by baby showers and first birthday parties, but none of that appealed to me. Whenever I attended one, it'd turn into inquiries about my love life, and when they realized I remained single, the pesky matchmaking began with people I'd known my whole life. If I planned to fall in love and marry one of the Smiths or Browns, wouldn't I have done so by now?

I groaned, and the elderly lady in front of the flower shop turned to me with a worried frown.

I pasted a smile on my face. “It's all good. I'm just so happy.”

She didn't look convinced as I marched away, but I was too tired to give it more thought.

I didn't want to wake up in a town where everyone knew everyone. I wanted out and into a big bright city. I wanted to land a job with my marketing degree, put on a pencil skirt and classy jacket, and talk strategy and reports and whatnot. I wanted different.

If I was in a musical, I probably would have broken into a wistful song and had the whole street dancing with me. Sadly, my life didn't have a soundtrack that guaranteed despite my obstacles, I'd still have the happy ending I desired. My shoulders slumped, and no extent of persuasive positive self-talk made me feel less shitty.

I could almost picture it, clear as day, getting stuck in Hannibal forever. Being that old biddy who gossiped about everyone and their



families, going back five generations. I didn't want to be that biddy, so I ran over my plan mentally one more time. It always calmed my nerves about getting stuck here, and it was pretty simple: make enough money to leave and get out. The first part was the hardest. Hannibal didn't exactly offer high-paying jobs, so I improvised and sold baked goods on the side. Not only did I enjoy the process of making tasty treats from flour and eggs, but it also enabled me to put away more money and save faster. Soon, very soon, I'd be able to walk these roads one last time and say goodbye forever.

Feeling better already, I turned down the next lane, humming to myself. By now it was getting dark, but the streetlights lit up the road and sidewalk, and I couldn't keep the smile from my face. It was like walking into a dream, a dream I'd envisioned a thousand times and was bored of, but still, it was pretty. I slowed my steps and took it all in, lingering by one lamp to watch the insects flit around the light. I may be sick of Hannibal, but it still had its bright spots.

I glanced left and stopped, staring at my reflection in the glossy window. My loose jeans, crop top, and a beanie that hid my hair was pretty much my usual go-to outfit. Then I met my eyes, and my shoulders slumped a smidgen.

"We will get out of here, Allie," I said to my reflection. She smiled back, and I breathed in deeply. I would do this.

I started to turn back to my path when a thought bit at me. It'd been a while since I took this way home, but I couldn't remember seeing this window. Last I remembered, it was boarded up. Taking two long steps backward, I squinted at the building. Something was different. But what? A more careful scan had my brows going up. No longer was it boarded up, but now, elegant windows were present.

Someone was renovating it!

Excited, I darted closer and pressed my face against the glass, peering in. It was dark, but the light piercing through the windows confirmed my thoughts. Wooden boards lay scattered around, and the wall opposite me looked fresh and new.

"Nice..." I breathed.

Finally, something new in Hannibal! I could whoop with joy right now, but instead, I pulled back to admire the building renovations. The decrepit old sign that belonged to the former owners was gone,

with nothing in its place yet. But I could bet a million bucks it was a new restaurant opening up. Two years ago, the former owners passed on—from old age, nothing too tragic—and none of their kids stayed here in Hannibal to take over the building. So it remained untouched until now.

A smile framed my lips. Someone had probably bought this place and was bringing new life to Hannibal. Yes! Finally. So glad I walked this way. My heartbeat was already pumping faster, thoughts of who the new residents could be. Our town needed fresh faces for sure, and a restaurant would certainly draw in more out-of-town folk.

I spun on my tiptoes and headed home. Even if I wasn't going to be in Hannibal much longer, new faces and a fresh new restaurant would breathe life into the days I had left.

Fingers crossed this turns out great!

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## Chapter 3

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## *Cal*

The renovations at the restaurant were progressing nicely; my sore muscles were a testament to that. Last night, I decided to take a break from manual labor since I was always there from dusk to dawn and take on another aspect of the business instead—quality local ingredients. And where better to find them than at the local market?

I woke up with the sun on Saturday morning, cleaned my apartment, fed and walked Klaus, then headed out. I was like a kid at Disneyland, except my Disneyland was the quirky town of Hannibal.

Fifteen years ago, I'd zoomed out of town, excited to go to culinary school, and I'd never looked back. I came home once in a while to see family but never long enough to truly take in the sights. And they'd changed a lot. It almost felt like a strange dream where I knew what came next, but half the time, it was different than I expected. The corner store that once belonged to Alfred, the best baker ever, now housed a tiny café. The park where kids used to run around on the green lawn now sported a fountain and wooden benches, and cultured adults having conversations. Huh.

I crossed the road, went into the next lane, and sighed. Not even this area was what I remembered it to be. Most of the signs had changed, and storefronts I'd never seen in my life lined the street. Hannibal didn't pause in time because I left. I needed to stop expecting the past and get used to the present.

So I pushed aside my expectations and discovered the new Hannibal. The road got busier and finally brought me to the farmer's market. It was bigger and more alive, and my eyes darted all over the place, trying to make sense of everything. Kids raced past me, and I skirted out of their way. They ran headlong to the river flowing gently past and fed the ducks bread. Some things never changed.

I faced forward and joined the shoppers perusing the offerings today. Ever since I'd returned, I'd kept my shopping to one or two stores to save me time, but today, I stuck my hands in my pockets and took in the bustling activity around me, content among the sights and smells and sounds.

“Is that the Younger kid?”

My head whipped around, looking for the source of the voice. It sounded familiar and left an uncomfortable itch at the back of my neck. Since I'd been back, I ran into many people who knew me from when I was much younger, and not all of them were pleasant.

“I swear it was him I saw,” the voice went on.

I ducked behind a stall and peeked out. The familiar brown hair came into view, and her pinched, disapproving eyes darted around. Mrs. Penning.

“Where did he go now?” she muttered.

I'd seen her once a few weeks ago. She'd blocked my path in the street and recounted her version of what I was like when I was a boy, then went on to contrast that with who she assumed I was now. Her “expert” conclusion was that I was worse off now, since I'd grown out my hair and covered my arms in tattoos. The encounter taught me very quickly that even if it felt nostalgic to run into people from my past, not all of them would leave feeling grateful I had returned.

Keeping an eye out for her and any other troublesome folk, I weaved around shoppers and took in everything I could, but my heart was set on the produce section. I spied a bunch of greens and nearly let out a sigh. I'd been walking for quite a while, and it was great to finally see some fresh food.

I headed that way, and in my periphery, I caught sight of vibrant artwork. I turned fully to the stall that stood in the corner with brightly colored paintings, and I felt my feet move of their own accord. A few shoppers converged on the stall and were speaking with the blond seller. My senses itched to move closer and take a look. The restaurant would need to be decorated, and nice paintings were an excellent place to start. But that wasn't what I came here for.

Shaking my head, I continued on my initial course, making a mental note to return and check them out when I was done.

The stall with the green leafy vegetables was large and displayed baskets with different varieties. I leaned over them, picturing all the delicious dishes I could make if I could just finish setting up the restaurant kitchen.

“Cal?”

I dropped the eggplant and turned to the man at the other end. My forehead knotted. The gray eyes and deep smile lines were familiar, but why couldn't I place him?

"It's me." He dropped a basket of red cabbage and drew closer, his eyes brightening with a smile. "Your school bus driver, Reggie."

My brows hit my hairline, and an answering smile stretched my face. "You sell vegetables now?" I clasped hands with him, and he clapped my back before stepping back.

"Living the dream." He waved at his stall.

"I'm glad you are," I said. He was the friendliest bus driver ever and knew every kid by name, checking up on those who didn't show up.

"I heard you were back. Wondering when I'd see ya." He went on organizing the produce.

I chuckled. Word spread fast in Hannibal. "Here I am. If you heard I'm back, you probably can guess why I'm here."

"Mm-hmm. Starting a new restaurant. How's it going? I haven't been over that way, but I know the building has been out of commission for quite a while."

"I'm making it work," I said.

"I'm proud of you, son."

I swallowed and focused on the turnips. "So, what do you have for me? I'm scouting the market to meet suppliers for when I get the restaurant up and running."

"You're in the right place." Reggie put on his seller's voice. "I've got broccoli, celery, eggplants, olives... Whatever you want. Just name it."

"What about dandelion greens?"

Reggie beamed. "Of course, you big city chefs will come with the fancy requests."

I laughed. "It's quite common."

"Not around here, it isn't. But I can get it for you. What else?"

Reggie listened as I ran through the veggies I'd like to feature on my menu, and for those he didn't have, he grabbed a pen and paper and took down notes.

"When you're ready, I can get them for you."

"Thank you, Reggie." I scanned the market. "Can you recommend a good fruit vendor?"

"Of course. Lou's the best." He left the cover of his stall and gestured down another lane. "The last one on the left. It's the biggest fruit stall, and Lou's always blowing bubblegum. You can't miss her."

After thanking Reggie, I headed in Lou's direction, still looking out for any fruits that may capture my interest. I came to the last stall; indeed, Lou's was the biggest with the most variety.

"Hello, handsome," Lou grinned, bubblegum smacking loudly. "Can't say I've seen you around here."

I smiled back. "Haven't been around here for very long." Lou was new, and she didn't remember me from long ago. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

"Ah, well, new folk are always welcome. How can I help you?" she said.

Good thing, I supposed.

Like Reggie, Lou had most of what I needed, save a few exotic fruits. She promised to make an order for them.

"And how much of these fruits would you be needing weekly?"

I paused, thinking. Back in Chicago, we ran through supplies so quickly that we needed three or more vendors supplying a particular ingredient to keep up with the demand. But here, not only was I starting up a new restaurant, but it was also a smaller town, and it may take a while to pull in that kind of crowd.

"Just a little at first to test the reception."

Lou nodded meaningfully. "Sure. I wish you the best..."

"Cal."

"Hmm, Cal. I'm Lou. I don't want to be a Nosy Nancy, but I hear so much in the market..." She inclined her head like she was sharing some big secret. "Are you by any chance one of the Younger sons who was a good kid when he left and came back a little..." Whatever she saw on my face had her pausing. "Not that I share their opinions. I'm just curious."

My teeth ground together. I could imagine the likes of Mrs. Penning telling anyone who'd listen talk shit about me, even someone who had no idea who I was. "I'm Cal Younger, yes."

"I always like folk who break the mold. They're the ones who make a difference."

I observed the older woman, then slowly said, "Nice to meet you, Lou. I'll reach out when I'm ready."

"Have a nice day, Cal."

I wanted to ask for a meat vendor recommendation, but I wasn't sure where I stood with Lou yet. I liked my business private, and so far, Hannibal was making my life a public affair. While Lou gave her approval of me, which I couldn't remember asking for, I didn't know if she was another Mrs. Penning.

Forging ahead, I decided to do some window shopping. I'd surely stumble onto the meat section if I walked long enough. I turned left, and *oof!* The wind left my lungs as I collided with someone. I gazed down at the beanie-covered head, and my hands instinctively reached out to capture them by the upper arms before they fell. Soft, smooth skin met my palms and my brows furrowed, my head dipping to make out the face I had yet to see. The head whipped up, and I failed to swerve fast enough; it clipped my chin, and I shut my eyes and grunted.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry." The voice was light and soft. A woman.

My eyes peeled open, and I forced a smile. "It's nothing. It's just..."

Wide brown eyes stared at me, heart-shaped lips slightly parted, her chest rising and falling.

"Wow," I murmured. "It's just..." Why does she look so damn familiar?

"Just what?" she breathed, eyes roaming over my face, scrutinizing me as I did her.

"Allie..."

"Yes?" she replied, eyes searching mine, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"You're Allie," I said past my parched throat. "Casey's girlfriend."

She blinked rapidly, then tore away from my arms as if my hands burned her. "Cal. Hi."

I smiled—or tried to. "Hi, Allie."



It'd been years since we last saw each other. She was at our home frequently until the day Casey, my little brother, broke up with her. She'd been crying, with tears running down her red blotchy face that day. A very different picture from the woman now gazing at me unsurely.

"Wow, um, you're here."

"Yeah, I came to the farmer's market to...buy stuff."

"Oh, yeah. Me too," she said, then looked down.

I followed her gaze and the overturned bag of fruit on the ground had me crouching. "Sorry, didn't see you there." I picked up the oranges and put them in the bag.

"No, it's fine." Allie joined me, picking up the apples. "I should have been watching where I was going."

We replaced the items in the bag, and I handed it over as we stood.

She clutched it close to her chest. "So, you're back in Hannibal to stay?"

"You heard."

She shrugged. "Gossip is Hannibal's oxygen."

My lip twitched. "Yeah, I am. I'm opening a new restaurant."

"Oh, hey! That's great news. Where?"

"On Broadway."

"That old building?"

"Hoping I can fix it up," I said, "But yeah, that's the one."

"Oh." Allie's face fell.

I frowned. "Just 'oh?'"

"Oh, no, I mean, that's great news." She smiled. "I just thought... Well, never mind."

"If there's something wrong..."

"Nah, it's nothing."

"Do you think the building is haunted or something?"

"What?" Allie's laughter carried through the air. "That's ridiculous, no. It's great what you're doing, and I'd love to come by and see how it's going."

"Anytime. I'm always there."

She slanted her head, giving me a look.

"Well, not right now. I can't be in two places at once."

“Hmm, except your ghost is there haunting the place.”

I chuckled. “Good one, but no, nothing that extraordinary is happening there.”

“I’ll come and find out,” she said, eyeing me.

“My ghost and I will be expecting you.”

Allie flashed me one quick smile before walking off. Only when she cut into a different lane did I realize I’d stood in the same spot, watching her walk away.

Throwing a glance around to make sure no one saw me, I went in search of that meat vendor and tried to put my brother's ex out of my head. But try as I might, thoughts of Allie stayed with me throughout the day.

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## Chapter 4

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## *Allie*

Don't look back, don't look back, don't look back.

I turned down into the next section of the market and sighed, pressing a hand to my chest. Whew. I'd heard that Cal Younger was back in Hannibal, but I hadn't listened long enough to learn the exact details of what he was doing here.

Ugh, so he was the new restaurant owner. No new blood, just recycled Hannibalites. My hands still shook a little, and I stuffed one in my pocket, the other clutching my bag tightly. A bag Cal had touched. I chalked up my dancing insides to the girl I used to be back in high school.

Cal used to be hot as hell. *And what is he now?* I hummed to myself, refusing to think about that. For one long minute there, I hadn't put two and two together and remembered he was Casey's brother, but no one could blame me; it'd been years, and even though they were brothers, they didn't share the same features. It was like Cal had gotten first and best pick of the gene pool, and Casey...

Mmm, nope, don't do that. Why am I even comparing them?

I shook my head, my memory bubbling up with how it'd been then. Cal had been way older than us. The kind of guy parents warned their daughters to stay away from, but they flocked to him anyway. Teenage me was in love with Casey, but thinking back, I got Cal's appeal for the girls. He flouted the rules, rode a motorcycle, and was the proverbial middle finger in human form.

And it wasn't only the girls falling over themselves for Cal. Casey, too, had worshipped the ground Cal walked on. If I sprayed whipped cream on them, he'd have gladly eaten Cal's shoes. He always regaled me with stories of his awesome older brother, but when Cal would come home, they'd butt heads like bulls in a ring. It didn't make sense then, and it didn't now, either, as I idled by, perusing the spices in the stall next to me.

I hadn't thought of Casey in years, but now I realized many of my teenage memories revolved around their home. And the ones

featuring Cal and their dad weren't always pleasant. I flipped through my brain. Make that *never* pleasant.

Their dad was a bit of a hot head, and his sons took that from him, but Cal bothered him the most, and they seemed to be fighting all the time. At first, it worried me to hear the screaming matches, but then I pretty much expected it when I was over there. It became just one of the things to expect when I was at the Younger's.

I paused. Even though Cal was older than us, he was still a young person. How did he cope with his dad's animosity toward him? I glanced in the direction I'd left him, my brows knitting. Hopefully, he was doing better now he was older.

The last time I heard about a quarrel between Cal and his dad was right before he left town. I wasn't there for that fight because Casey and I were already over, but you didn't have to be present to get the full gist of anything happening anywhere in Hannibal. Stories always got around.

And more trickled in over the years. Cal going to culinary school and becoming a successful chef in Chicago. Then most recently, his getting fired and returning because of a scandal. What happened, no one knew. So far, I'd heard that he spat in a customer's meal, went to work drunk, and stole money. None of it added up. Why would a successful chef do any of that? So, I believed none of it.

I moved on from the spices stall, walking slowly and looking at wares even though my mind wasn't really there. What could be the reason Cal got fired? Not that it was any of my business, but I didn't picture him as the kind of guy that'd throw away his career.

Wait, am I rooting for him? I barely know the guy!

"There you are," a familiar voice said behind me.

I turned. My best friend, Mia, bounded over, a smile on her face. Finally, a reprieve from my thoughts. "Mia! Good to see you. Tell me about your day."

"Hey, Al." She pulled me in for a quick hug. "Okay, let's see... I ate, took a shower, left home, and showed up here, ready for our mead-guzzling date."

I smiled. "Okay, I get it. Silly question."

She eyed me, then nudged my side with an elbow. "Anything exciting happen to you today?"

Cal's face flashed in my head. Blue eyes, pale skin spattered with freckles, blond-brown hair that looked so damn soft I wanted to ask him for his hair routine right after I ran my fingers through it.

"What?" I gulped. "No. Why would you say that? Nothing special. Nothing at all."

"Huh." Mia frowned. "Why are you acting weird?"

"I'm not acting weird. You're acting weird." I took her hand gingerly, tugging her along. "Let's find that mead stand ASAP. I'm thirsty."

Finding the mead vendor was easy. The hard part was filling the walk over there with conversation, so Mia didn't ask me why I was acting weird again. I'd been looking forward to today all week, and a run-in with Cal Younger wasn't going to ruin it for me.

We stopped in front of the mead stand and took in the table covered with bronze pitchers and fancy glasses.

"Hello, ladies. What can I get you? I've got mead, mead, and more mead," Jagger, the mead-brewer, said by way of greeting.

"More mead, please," Mia replied.

"Have a seat." He grinned and pointed to the sitting area.

Mia and I took our spot at a table for two, and almost immediately, Jagger placed our very own bottle and glasses before us. We poured our drinks, and the first taste that hit my tongue made me sigh with pleasure.

"We don't do this enough," I said.

"Mm-hmm," Mia said around a mouthful. "Where will you find mead when you go to the big city? We should do this every day so you won't miss it so much when you leave."

"If I did this every day, I'd never work and never leave Hannibal."

"It's worth a shot." She winked.

"Mia..." I drawled.

"Come on. I love having you here. We have so much fun. What am I supposed to do when you're gone?"

I bit my lip. "Well, I'm still around for the foreseeable future. Why don't we focus on the present?"

"So wise," she muttered before taking a swig.

"It's the mead. Opens up my hypothalamus."

"Does it do that?" She paused.

I choked on my drink. "I don't know."

"Wait, because I really do feel my brain opening up. My head feels lighter."

"That's called getting drunk, Mia."

She threw back her head with a laugh. "Whatever. My hypothalamus and I love mead."

"Hear, hear," I cheered, and we clinked glasses.

The conversation turned to Mia's week. Unlike me, she loved being in Hannibal. She fit right in with the town, and she lived for the little tidbits of stories that dropped about...everyone. Just now, I'd received two updates from previous uncompleted stories and three new ones that popped up.

"Oh, did you hear?" Mia leaned in. Leaning meant juicy, so I pulled closer. We were halfway into the pitcher, and Mia's eyes took a second too long to blink. "Cal Younger's restaurant—"

My heart flipped. "Mm-hmm."

"—is coming along pretty well and soon, the place will be all fixed up, and we'll have somewhere new to dine."

"That's awesome." I drained my glass.

"Oh no," my friend said. "I shouldn't have brought him up, right?"

"What?"

"I know you dated Casey, and he's a bit of a dickhead now, and you don't like talking about the Youngers..."

"Mia, it's fine." I touched her arm, looking into her eyes and steeling my voice. She usually had extreme emotions when she got drunk. "I don't mind at all. Is that why you didn't tell me about Cal coming back?" I had to get bits and pieces from others.

She nodded, her lower lip trembling.

"Look," I refilled her glass. "I don't mind. It happened when we were teenagers. Heck, Casey is not on my mind at all." *Well, now the older Younger brother is.* "He's not!"

"I got that the first time you said it." She eyed me.

"Yeah, sure." I exhaled. "All I'm saying is, don't feel guilty, and you can tell me anything, okay?"

Mia smiled. "Okay."

A glass of mead later, she was showing me a Scandinavian folk dance and somehow got the others around us to clap and cheer

while she stumbled around. Applause filled the air, and she eventually collapsed onto her seat.

“How did I do?”

“So great, we’re done with our mead date,” I said.

“We’ll do this again next week?” Mia asked as I herded her out of the market.

“Sure.”

Once I got Mia home, I made my way back to my apartment. The walk reduced the tipsiness until only a light buzz remained. I locked the door behind me and tossed my bag of fruit onto the kitchen counter. An apple rolled out. Cal.

I shook my head, ridding myself of that thought, and made my way to my bedroom. A good long shower would clear my head and leave me feeling fresh after the walk home. I peeled off my clothes and ended up in the bathroom underneath the shower's warm spray.

The water caressed my body and glided down my skin. I exhaled and leaned against the cool tiled wall, enjoying the decadent feeling. I massaged my scalp, then my neck, then my hands drifted to my chest. A tingle rushed through me as my fingers brushed across my nipples. My back curved a little, and a lazy smile lifted my lips. I got a little horny when I was tipsy.

I captured the peaked nipples between my fingers and tugged until my breath gasped out of me. I twisted slightly, and a moan left my throat, then I dragged my right hand down to the throbbing between my thighs. I widened my stance, leaving my clit untouched and going instead for my wet pussy. Warm moisture surrounded my finger as I gently caressed my center. My eyes rolled back, and my lips parted.

It felt good to give myself pleasure, but it would feel even better if someone else was doing it. I pictured a man with strong arms and ripped abs leaning into me, pushing my hand aside, and working his bigger, firmer digits into my center.

My inadequate smaller middle finger found my entrance and slid in.

“Oh...” My other hand’s fingers closed around my left nipple, and I teased both pleasure points.



He'd kiss my right nipple and ask me if it felt good. His voice would rumble out, hot and heavy. He'd say my name... "Allie."

"Cal..." The name fell from my lips before I could help myself, but there was no taking it back now. The nondescript man in my head was now Cal Younger, and I was too far gone to stop and pick apart what I was doing.

I bit my lip and worked my fingers faster, more feverishly. The heel of my hand brushed against my clit, and I bowed my back, making pleasure course through me.

The picture in my head of Cal kissing my neck, trapping me against the wall, replacing his fingers with his hard throbbing cock forced a cry from my lips. My thighs shook with the thought of him sinking deep inside me, breathing against my neck, telling me I drove him crazy.

"I won't last long, Allie. You feel so good," Imaginary Cal said.

"Don't hold back. Come inside me," I murmured.

Where the hell did that come from? As Imaginary Cal filled me with his cum, I came so hard on my fingers that I fell to my knees. My cry echoed back to me, my fingers pumping in and out, stretching out the best solo orgasm I'd ever had.

As the feeling subsided, I slumped against the wall, breathing deeply. "That is never happening again," I promised myself.

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## Chapter 5

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## *Cal*

Sunday morning sunshine pierced through the see-through curtains covering my window, waking me up. I rolled over and stared at the white ceiling, considering hiding my face under the pillows and getting another hour of peaceful, oblivious sleep. Before I could make that decision, a ball of black fur hopped onto my stomach.

"Klaus!" I turned over and dislodged him. I couldn't be mad seeing his drooling, excited face. "How are you, boy?" I rubbed a spot behind his ear. He leaned into my touch and woofed. "Should we stay home or go out?"

Klaus skipped and spun in place, his gaze bouncing between the door and me.

I chuckled and hauled my ass out of bed. "Alright. Out, it is."

After a quick shower, Klaus and I had breakfast, and then we were off to the restaurant. The walk from my apartment to Broadway took twenty minutes and made Klaus happy.

His tail twitched as I unlocked the doors and let us into the building. He ran the length of the space, sniffing everything. I probably should bring him out more often. Working in the restaurant had occupied so much of my time I only took him out for his daily walks. I'd make sure to change that.

I shrugged off the backpack containing my lunch and Klaus's treats and walked around the space, skirting past tables and chairs and debris to take in the walls. I breathed deeply, satisfaction pooling in my chest, but also stuffy air. Hastily, I opened the windows, letting more light and air in. Much better.

With a smile on my face, I found my toolbox and got ready to tackle my task for today. Since Will wasn't available to assist with the heavier stuff and my back still needed to recover, I stuck to cutting, sanding, and staining the boards for the shelves.

I looked around and found Klaus in a corner, an old rag between his teeth.

"Wanna help?" I gestured to the wood and the saw lying across the table.

My dog blinked at me and then returned to his rag wrestling match.

"Fine," I said, "We'll just put on some music and ignore each other."

I found the Bluetooth speaker Will brought over the day we started working on the restaurant, connected it to my favorite station, and turned up the volume. The thumping beats gave me a burst of energy, and I got started with the sawing. Halfway through, sweat pooled on my back and underarms, so I took off my shirt and sighed at the cool air that met my skin.

I cut the last board, stood aside, and observed my work. At this pace, I might be able to install the shelves today. Breathing deeply, I looked around for Klaus. The rag lay where he'd been sitting, but he was no longer there. He probably was doing some exploring, but a little hint to where he was would set my mind at ease before I went on to the next phase of my work. I turned and jumped out of my skin.

Allie stood in the open doorway, and when our eyes met, she bent over, shoulders trembling with laughter. The music drowned out her voice, so I flipped it off and walked over to her.

"Were you trying to give me a heart attack?"

Her laugh sounded like music itself; it made me think of sitting by a clear stream, listening to the water flow gently over the rocks. I shook the thought off, watching her try to catch her breath.

"Oh my. You should have seen your face," she wheezed.

"I'm happy I amuse you," I said, not the least bit annoyed she took so much pleasure at my expense.

"It's too easy to spook you." Allie sighed and leaned against the door, eyeing me. "Okay, I'm done."

I smiled and shook my head. "What's up? Why are you here?"

"Oh." She blinked rapidly. "Well, um..."

"What is it?" My feet moved a step closer of their own accord. Her look reminded me of the one she'd worn when I told her I was opening the restaurant here. And it didn't seem pleasant.

"It's nothing, really." She waved a hand, stepping past me into the restaurant.

My next breath was filled with a floral scent that had to be jasmine.

“Great work here so far.” She spun in a circle, eyes darting over everything.

“Thanks,” I replied, a smile framing my lips. “You didn't answer my question.”

Allie rolled her eyes. “So my deflection didn't work.”

“Nope.”

“Too bad. I'm great at deflecting.”

“Not as great as you think.”

“Oh, but I am.”

“Still not an answer.”

She giggled. “Fine! I said I'd come around, didn't I?”

“Yeah.” I skirted around the table stacked with chairs, which was the longer route to the spot where I was working. Anything to avoid a whiff of jasmine again. I had no idea why, but that scent was still swirling in my brain. “But I imagined you would wait until the restaurant was all set up.”

Allie stuck both hands in the pockets of her high waist jeans, toeing the floor with the tip of her sneakers. Whatever she wanted to say clearly wasn't coming easy, so to give her space, I went on with stacking the wood in preparation for sanding.

“I just want to help,” she said.

I raised a brow and looked at her face. “Really?”

She nodded, her auburn curls bouncing around her shoulders. The beanie still covered most of her hair, but the exposed, lustrous strands caught the light and mesmerized me for one long moment.

“Can you do any carpentry?”

“Can I do any...” She pressed both hands to her slender waist, her eyes indignant. “Did you really just ask that? I'll have you know that I know next to nothing about carpentry apart from labeling a hammer, but I'm a quick study.”

“What?” Laughter burst from my chest and echoed through the room. Klaus came over, probably sensing it was a good time to ask for a back rub. I gave him a quick one and went back to Allie, who was eyeing me with a smug look. “For one second I believe I misspoke.”

She shrugged, grinning. “So, can I help?”

“Probably. How good are you at taking instructions?”

She looked away so quickly, I must have imagined the redness covering her cheeks.

"I'm great at...doing that." Her answer was muffled as she bent under the table to pet Klaus.

"Good enough," I said. "You'll just need to wear some gloves and help me stain the wood. Fine with that?"

"Yep!" She sprang up, looking more relaxed. "Where do I start?"

I finished sanding one of the boards and laid it out on another table, then brought a can of wood stain and a brush to Allie. After I showed her how to apply the stain, she took over and did it quite well.

"Are you sure you've never done this before?" I went back to sanding.

She shook her head. "I could say the same for you. How does a chef know how to renovate a building?"

"The internet," I replied.

Allie laughed. "That's very resourceful."

"Mm-hmm." The conversation lulled a bit as we worked, not that I had nothing to say. Questions bubbled in my head, but I wasn't sure which were appropriate. We'd chatted at the market, and now... Did that make us merely acquaintances or more?

She was around my home a lot while she was a kid, but that was different. I hardly ever had time for anything more than hanging out with my friends and causing trouble. And when I came home, I was too busy ignoring everyone while in my room or yelling at Casey to pay attention to his little girlfriend. But a few things stuck—like how she'd ride her purple bicycle over and look so cute when asking after Casey. Or the day she cried in the corner when I was arguing with my dad. She was the only reason I stopped yelling that day. Or how she'd join us at dinner and try to alleviate the tension by talking about her school clubs.

"Is this enough?"

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked over the board she had finished staining. "Yeah, it is. Good job."

A big smile lifted her cheeks, and she moved on to the next plank of wood.

The kid she was then was very different from the person she was now. If she was going to be assisting me, I wanted to learn a little more about her rather than just remembering her as Casey's high school ex-girlfriend.

"So, what do you do?"

Allie sighed. "I promise, it's not cool."

"Whose job is cool? We just do what's necessary to pay the bills."

"I work at the post office." She gazed at me as if waiting for a negative reaction.

"Great," I said, "What's the best part about it?"

"Clocking out." A pause. "And Bertie."

This time, I couldn't hide my smile. "Who's Bertie?"

"A mouse. She runs around most days looking for food."

"You're kidding."

Allie laughed. "I swear, I'm not. You should come see her; she's great."

"Is that an invite?"

Her mouth opened and closed. "No... I meant... Just..."

I chuckled. "I understand."

Allie went back to her staining, a smile still lingering on her lips. The knowledge that I was part of the reason it was there warmed me.

"So what would you rather be doing?"

"Getting out of Hannibal, for sure."

Now this piqued my interest. "Why?"

"This town's dead." She rolled her eyes. "It's been the same since I was little. I just want different, better. You know?" Her gaze met mine.

My heart fisted. I knew it all too well, and I'd had it in Chicago for a while, too. I had thoughts about leaving and tackling the world alone, but Allie wasn't asking about me, so I simply listened.

"I went to Mizzou for my degree in marketing, which was great, but then I had to come home to save money before I could live my dream of getting a job in a big city and moving away." She staired idly, her mind far away. "That's what I want. It's the reason I'm here crashing your one-man party. I'm working on a 'get out of Hannibal fund.' Once I save enough, and I get a marketing job, I'm leaving."

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes leaving mine briefly. “I’m hoping I can help you, and you might help build up my fund.”

My brows went up. Now it made sense.

“If you don’t want to, I get it.” Allie gestured at the wood. “A five-year-old can do this with their eyes closed, and you probably don’t need so much help. I just hoped I could find something extra to do and—”

“Hey. I understand.”

Her eyes met mine, and her lips moved in a small smile. “I promise, I can learn pretty quickly.”

“I bet you can.” I rolled over the idea in my head. Having Allie here often, helping with less heavy-duty tasks, would relieve a lot of my burden and make the work move along quicker. But another part of me, one that still recalled how she’d felt in my arms when we ran into each other and the scent of her skin when she walked past me, was considering accepting for a whole different reason. I wasn’t going to let my mind go there.

Against my better judgment, I stuck out my hand. “You’ve got the job.”

Allie’s brown eyes widened, and her face glowed. “Great!” She walked two steps to place her smaller, gloved hand in mine.

I should have let go in two pumps of our clasped hands, but my mind wandered to how well her small hand fit in mine. And even through the glove, I could feel how delicate it was. Only when Allie’s eyes skated downward did I remember I was sweaty and bare-chested, and this was probably getting weird.

I stepped away, breaking our contact. “Welcome aboard!”

She smiled. “So I’ll start on Monday after my shift.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“I should probably finish this board I’m working on.”

“Alright.”



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## Chapter 6

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## *Allie*

I drummed my hands on my desk and tapped my feet eagerly. With the volume of noise I was making, I wouldn't be surprised if Bertie didn't show up today. But it didn't matter. My mind wasn't in a blank, dreary state, eager for anything to fill it. I had many thoughts, and most revolved around Cal Younger and the work I'd be doing around the restaurant.

Gosh, I couldn't believe he'd let me work for him based on my promise to follow instructions and learn quickly. I crossed my legs under the table and cracked my knuckles. I didn't need thoughts like that clouding my head. Working for Cal and getting paid for it would surely bump up my savings and get me out of Hannibal faster. That was where my focus should be.

So I focused on my plan and willed the clock to speed up, but it didn't. Ugh, fine. At least at the end of today, I had a new activity to look forward to other than walking to maybe catch a glimpse of something new in Hannibal. Plus, I was going to be paid for it!

I leaned over to my bag and peeked in, recounting what I'd carried and making sure it was everything I needed. A T-shirt and yoga pants I wear when cleaning, comfy tennis shoes, an old beanie to keep the dust off my hair, and a mask for my nose. All set! I danced in my seat, eager to clock out and get on with my second job. Not only would I make money, but I would also get to see how a restaurant was built. My degree was in marketing, and I planned to work in that line, but no knowledge was wasted.

Especially with Cal as the instructor.

I shook my head, ridding myself of the picture of his tattooed masculine torso and bulging biceps. Worse still, he'd been glistening with sweat and the sun falling through the window added to the glow and made me hot underneath my crop top. Was it wrong to picture rubbing myself all over him?

Wait, I shouldn't be doing this. Don't think of him that way. Bad Allie.

"Allie, honey."

My head whipped sideways, and the sight of my parents striding through the doors doused my heated flesh in seconds.

"Hi guys." I smiled.

"Are you okay?" My dad asked as they stopped before my desk. "You look red in the face."

"It's the heat, Charles," my mom said.

"Is it?" He shot his gaze around like he could see the temperature. "Feels pretty cool."

"We've been outside, and it was a bit windy. Maybe it's just warmer in here."

"You think?"

If I let them, they could go on and on, arguing about nothing just as long as they were talking to each other. Bless my mom's heart for that excuse because I had nothing apart from picturing a very hot man, but I couldn't go on listening to their back and forth. "Mom, Dad!"

They spun to me.

"You're here to send your cards, right?"

Argument promptly forgotten, Mom pulled out the enveloped parcels. "Yes, dear. Let's just make sure we have all of them."

I waited patiently as she read out the recipients one after the other and handed them to Dad. This part, I didn't mind. It was a ritual now. Every last Monday of the month, my parents sent out greeting cards to family all over the country. What happened to emails, text messages, and calls? No idea. Sending cards the old school way was how they chose to communicate, and I was here for it.

"All done?" I asked when Mom finished.

"Yes, honey." She handed me the envelopes, then tucked back her graying auburn hair, looking from Dad to me.

Dad kept his brown eyes wide like he had no idea what Mom was up to.

"Charles!" Mom gaped. "You were the one who suggested bringing it up. You can't throw me under the bus now."

"I mentioned it. I didn't know you'd go through with it."

"What is it? I'm right here. Just tell me." I stared between both of them. They were never short of words, but when it came to me, sometimes, they liked to skirt around topics. Such as me not moving

back into their house when I returned from college. It took a whole month for them to finally get it out. And I still stood my ground. Even though I was saving up and every penny was important, I loved living away from my parents. Being back in their home would mean living by their rules again.

Mom sighed, and Dad looked away.

I thought for a second. "Is it because I didn't show up for dinner yesterday?"

Dad's face perked up like I'd saved him the hassle of forming the words himself.

"All right. I'm sorry. I got carried away with...other stuff."

"We understand you're a grown-up now, Allie," Mom said gently. "And we're proud of you."

"And we will miss you when you eventually leave Hannibal," Dad added.

My heart squeezed.

"But please make time for us when you do get the chance, okay?"

I pictured being cities away and receiving a postcard from my parents. My eyes watered, and I rounded the table to pull them into a group hug. I breathed in their combined scent that spelled comfort and home, and for one moment, I basked in it.

"I will, I promise." I pulled away and looked between them, seeing myself in both of their faces.

"Thank you, honey." Mom kissed my cheek, and Dad patted the top of my head.

I chuckled, shaking my head. He never stopped, not since I was fifteen and said I was too old for head pats, and I doubted he ever would. But I found that I was okay with that.

"We'll be on our way now." Mom took Dad's hand as they walked out.

"Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad!" I waved to their backs.

Though they could be a handful when they chose to, I still loved them like nothing else. I'd make time within the week and check in on them.

Thirty minutes after I left work, I turned onto Broadway. My route was a straight one today, with no detours, and I probably was

walking a lot faster than I usually did because of how excited I was. I tightened my hands on my bag straps as I neared the restaurant to give my slightly trembling hands something to do. When I decided to work with Cal, I underestimated how fascinated my mind was with the man. It was blowing everything out of proportion. Wanting to replay each eye contact, every smile, every word.

"You're here to work, Allie," I reminded myself. Those words put things into perspective, but I was confident, from experience, that my focus would only last five seconds before it went back to Cal.

Oh well.

I drew close to the restaurant, and from my vantage point, the building stood tall and stately, if a bit gray. How would Cal paint the exterior? He'd put so much work on the interior he had to have a plan for the outside.

With that tumbling through my head, I continued forward until I passed a large red truck in front of the restaurant. Cal's, I guessed. Klaus emerged from behind the car, chasing a pink ball, his ears flapping in the wind. My lip lifted, and once he saw me, he raced over, dancing around my feet. I chuckled and squatted, rubbing his fur. He rewarded me with happy pants and a lick on my hand.

"Okay, boy." I tossed his ball. "Go get it!"

He raced after the ball, and I was freed up to find his owner. I dropped my bag containing my post office uniform by the tire and headed in. No music blared from the interior today. And it was easy to find him by the sound of a saw tearing through wood.

I stopped by the door, and like the previous day, my heart climbed into my throat as I took the man in. He had his back to the door, muscles flexing as he worked by the table. My mouth dried up, and I looked away, but my eyes came back pretty quick. *Did he have something against shirts?* I thought for a second. If I had a muscled back with intricate tattoos, I probably would go shirtless, too.

I paced the doorway for a few seconds, trying to get my racing pulse under control. He couldn't see me all hot and bothered. Not only would that be super awkward, but he could also decide I shouldn't work under him. Sensation shot between my legs. Under him? Why the hell did I think that?

I slid away from the door and stood aside, breathing in deeply. That first time when I touched myself and ended up picturing Cal, I assumed it was because I'd been drinking and had loose inhibitions. But nothing could excuse my reaction now. Except my inhibitions were permanently loose now. If that was the case, I needed to tighten them up ASAP.

Think of something else.

Klaus ran around with his ball, and I zeroed in on that. Happy dog. That should calm me. It took a minute, but I was no longer wondering what it'd be like to be under Cal or have him slide his digits between my legs like in my fantasy, and then—

I slapped a hand to my face. The sound brought Klaus rushing back with his ball, which he deposited at my feet. I collected it and tossed it. He ran like the wind, chasing it down.

Press pause.

Even if my thoughts of Cal had some merit, and say he found out, and we decided there was something worth exploring between us, could we? I was Casey's ex. It was back in high school when we were kids, but it still stood. We were an item, and I couldn't get into anything with his older brother, right? Was it bro code or something? I wasn't sure, but that sounded reasonable.

Klaus brought back his ball again, and I tossed it idly, my thoughts cementing in my head.

Thinking of Casey cooled my attraction to Cal a lot. I'd found the magic wand to discourage my attraction to ex's brothers who were off-limits. Yes!

Blowing out a breath, I adjusted my beanie and stood in the doorway once more. Cal was still singularly minded on his sawing, and I paused for a different reason than my sex-deprived self.

I couldn't imagine what it took for him to take on such a large project, in Hannibal, of all places. Even if he had to do the job of ten men, he was making it work. It gave me a boost of hope that anything was possible as long as you set your mind to it. And my mind was set on leaving Hannibal, and that was what I was going to focus on.

While it would make me chuckle to see Cal jump from fright, I was feeling pretty generous and didn't want to scare him again. And

I shouldn't be watching him so the thoughts I'd managed to push off came sliding back in.

So, I cleared my throat and called out.

He turned, and a brilliant smile covered his face. The clouds chose that moment to skirt aside, so golden rays of sun fell on him.

I gulped. "Hi."

"Thirsty?" he asked, then tossed a bottle of water my way.

I was too distracted by the light playing over his sculpted skin that it took me a few tries to finally hold the bottle in a firm grip. "Thanks," I said.

Whew, I was doing this. I was working for Cal Younger. Here goes nothing.

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## Chapter 7

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## *Cal*

Allie had shown up for work every day since Monday, and I'd begun anticipating her arrival. By the time the sun fell as evening drew nearer, I'd keep an eye out, and when she turned up, even if she didn't say a word or made no sound, I would know it was her. It boggled my mind how having her work beside me gave me a boost of energy even though I'd been busy all day. Her smile was warm and her tone was eager as she tackled every task I assigned.

At first, I worried she wouldn't be able to handle it. She worked her other job the entire day; toiling away all evening might prove too much. Plus, she didn't sound like she enjoyed working when she'd said the best parts were a mouse visitor and leaving at the end of her shift. A low chuckle vibrated in my throat anytime I thought of that. While it was cute, it may have been proof she wasn't too ambitious. But she changed my mind that first day.

Her nimble feet crossed the restaurant back and forth so fast I got whiplash. Before I knew it, the lumber I asked her to stack was cleared and in the appropriate place, and then she was bouncing on the balls of her feet, asking what to do next.

Seeing her determination to work and complete her fund grew my respect for her. She had a fire in her, a fire I set gasoline to, and since then, the work on the restaurant snowballed. Now I anticipated Allie's face as much as the new stretch of floor space I was fixing up.

After the second day, she started showing up with a basket.

"What's that?" I drew myself off the floor I was working on and made my way to her side.

I didn't need to. The restaurant was quiet, and the sound carried easily, but my body wanted any excuse to be close to her. I told myself it was because she was a ball of energy that spiked my own, but the scent of jasmine floating around her made blood flow to only one member of my body. Thankfully, I was constantly distracted from exploring those thoughts.

"Snacks." She pulled on the cloth covering the top and revealed a variety of treats within.

"You bought these?"

"Made them." She handed me a cupcake.

I raised a brow, curious about when she had the time and even more surprised she never told me she could bake. The first taste had me groaning to the ceiling. "This is...so good," I said around a mouthful.

Allie's face reddened, but her eyes were bright. "You think so?"

"Hell, yeah!" I went for another. "Seriously, how did you learn to make these? They're delicious."

"The internet." She winked.

"Touché." I threw the last piece of cupcake in my mouth and debated going for another.

"What do you need me to do today?"

I cast my gaze around and gave her something to do while I looked in the basket, seeking what new treat I could try.

Allie laughed from somewhere behind me. "Just take any you like."

I huffed. It wasn't so easy. Her delicate hands had made these. I needed to treat them with the utmost respect. They deserved it. Eventually, I settled on a jelly donut and went back to work.

As we worked around each other, I realized I didn't want her to leave. She had to remain here, working next to me in some way. Even if she only did menial tasks, her genuine care for how the restaurant turned out was apparent in the way she took her jobs seriously, far more than the amount I paid her required. And she'd ask curious questions and make valuable suggestions.

I started to bring it up one evening, then stopped myself. She was leaving. This was a step on her ladder to move up and away from Hannibal. I couldn't attempt to hold her back. Fixing up this place and making a renowned restaurant out of it was my dream, not hers. How selfish would it be to ask her to forget what she truly wanted to support my goal? I couldn't do that to her. So, the best thing was to enjoy the moments she was here.

And those moments flew by fast. Normally, it seemed like forever to get to the weekend, but with Allie, Monday turned to Friday, and the workweek was over.

I closed up the restaurant, Allie next to me, looking up at the stars. Discreetly, I watched her through my periphery—something I'd been doing way too much lately.

"Can I drop you off?" She never accepted, but I kept asking.

"No, it's a good night to walk."

As I expected. Hannibal was safe, so I didn't push it. "Tomorrow's Saturday." I turned toward my truck.

"I'm not working. Are you going to be here the whole day?"

Was that a hint of excitement in her voice? I shook off the thought. "I'm taking a break. We've covered a lot this week. You have the day off."

Her smile was small. "Great. Thanks."

"Goodnight, Allie." I climbed into my vehicle. "See you Monday."

Will had a day off on Saturday and boasted about the fantastic trails we needed to hike in the park. As a kid, the only reason I went into the woods was to find a hidden spot to get drunk and goof off, but after living in Chicago for years, I'd grown to appreciate nature even more. There was something peaceful and calming about being surrounded by grass and trees and not buildings and cars.

"Great, let's do it."

The next day I was up early and filled my backpack with water and snacks and a collapsible water bowl for Klaus, then I drove us to the park and stopped outside the gated area. Will was already waiting with a similar backpack over his shoulders and a giant smile on his face.

"Ready to walk till your knees give out, city boy?"

I scoffed. "When you were studying your heart out back in high school, I was exploring these woods."

"Oh, you sure you didn't just linger around the edges?"

"I'll show you the spots."

"Lead the way, then, my good man." Will gestured.

We headed into the woods. It was green with leaves, brown with tree bark, and smelled like vegetation. I pulled in a deep breath and remembered Allie gazing up at the moon and breathing deeply. Was the night air her version of the woods? Did it bring her peace and make her feel centered? If we were at the restaurant now, I'd work

the question into our conversation and hear her bubble over with answers for me.

“Watch out!” A firm hand gripped my bicep to the point of pain.

I shook out of my thoughts and looked down at the path. I’d nearly stepped into a jagged root that’d no doubt have made me fall over or stumble around.

“Thanks, man,” I said to my friend.

He let go, giving me a questioning look. “Where’s your mind?”

I pictured Allie’s warm brown eyes, her lovely pink mouth, and her pointed chin. Sometimes, I wanted to trap that chin between my index finger and thumb, tilt her face up and—

“You’ve been quite distracted lately.”

My eyes came into focus, and I made out Klaus running ahead of us on the trail.

“Worried about the restaurant?”

Partly, but it hardly featured on my thoughts now, seeing they were clouded by Allie. But I needed to give Will something. “Yes, that.”

He laughed. “How like you. You’re almost done. In a couple of weeks, I’m sure you’ll be up and running, and I can freely pig out there whenever I want. And pay, of course, but pig out, nonetheless.”

I chuckled. “You’re always welcome, Will.”

He slapped my shoulder before taking over and leading us deeper into the woods.

“There are clearings around here somewhere. We should be able to stop for a break soon,” Will said after we’d been walking for over two hours.

“Already tired, local boy?”

“Ha! I’m trying to save you. Don’t want you to collapse on me. If you do, I’m not the one who’s going to move your truck-sized body.”

“I’m truck-sized?” My mouth fell open. “You’re built like a mountain.”

Will’s laughter reverberated through the woods.

I shook my head as we arrived at a clearing with logs organized in a circle. “You’re in denial. Aren’t the ladies falling all over you?”

Will fell onto a log with a sigh, and I took the opposite one, swallowing my relief.

"They don't. It's the badge keeps them coming."

"If only I had that superpower." I unzipped my bag and withdrew the water and snacks.

"You don't need it, seeing as the Harmen girl is all over you."

I froze, then shook my head. "She's all over the restaurant, not me."

Klaus was already lapping from his bowl as I poured from the bottle, and I placed a paper plate next to it and poured out treats.

"Mm-hmm, keep telling yourself that."

"Tell me about your chick-magnet job. How many perps did you catch this week?"

That successfully distracted Will, and he went on a long tale about his unit and their work. I was grateful Hannibal had such dedicated officers, so I didn't have to worry about Allie walking home alone at night.

By evening when we made our way out of the park, my feet were killing me.

"How was that? Knees giving out yet?" Will teased.

"Nah, I could go for another walk. Wanna bet?"

He laughed, eyes squinting. "I know you, Cal. You don't admit defeat. Anyway, thanks for coming along." He stretched a hand out and clasped mine, pulling me into a bro hug. It lasted for thirty seconds before he pulled away, sniffing. "I love having you back here. Fifteen years was too long."

Guilt squeezed my heart. "I'm here to stay."

He smiled. "Great."

We broke apart, got into our separate trucks, and drove in different directions.

"Have fun today, Klaus?"

My worn-out dog huffed.

I laughed. "I did, too." Folks said I was way too serious, but with Will's goofiness, we always had a fun time. I was glad I came back.

As we turned onto the stretch that led home, I could already picture my bed. Tonight's sleep would be deep and rewarding after the great day I had. But just as I turned into my driveway, that hope shattered. My brother, Casey, was sitting on the porch steps, a bottle at his feet, his shaggy hair in his hands.

Back stiffening, I got out and let Klaus out, too. As the door banged shut, Casey looked up. His dark eyes pierced mine. Ever since I came back to Hannibal, I learned two things: my brother was volatile as a live wire, and half of his angst was directed at me.

I wasn't ruining my day with his shit. "What do you want?"

"That the way you folks say hi in Chicago?" His voice was scratchy, slightly slurred.

"What the fuck do you want?"

His laughter grated my nerves as he rose to his feet. He stood a few inches shorter than me but was tall enough to hold my gaze.

"Money. Just a little, and I'll be on my way," he said easily.

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Do I look like a damned ATM? If you need money, go do some work." I started to move past him, but he grabbed my arm with surprising strength.

"I'm family, Calvin. This how you want to treat me?"

I tore my arm away from him. "Don't you dare lay the blame on me. Everyone tried to help you, but you pushed them away because you enjoy feeling sorry for yourself."

"Always the fucking douche with a sermon. Think you're better than me because you started a stupid-ass restaurant? Think Dad is going to approve of you now?"

"Get the fuck off my porch!" I yelled back, anger stealing through me.

"You're just like us, Cal." He picked up his bottle and drained it, then tossed it in the flowerbeds. "Nothing special about you."

I squeezed my hands into fists, forcing myself to keep calm.

"This truck?" My brother kicked the tire. "The restaurant? You'll lose it all. Bet me. Just the way you lost your job." With that, he was gone.

I didn't have a good night's sleep.

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## Chapter 8

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## Allie

I attributed the slight queasiness of my stomach to the many, many donuts I'd eaten that Monday afternoon. It wasn't like I was anxious or anything. *But you only gorge on treats when you're anxious*, a part of my brain echoed. I shook my head to rid myself of the thought but only managed to upset my beanie. I paused, adjusted it, and closed the distance between myself and the restaurant. *I am not anxious*. Why would I be? I'd enjoyed a nice long weekend and a Sunday with my parents, after which I returned home and baked my pastries. See? No reason. I firmly gripped my basket and stopped outside the restaurant's sliding doors.

Wait a minute, those weren't here last week!

My stomach flipped for a whole other reason than the man who owned the place as I pushed aside the door and made my way in.

"Oh my goodness!" I gaped at the polished interior sparkling back at me.

All the dust, grime, and tools were cleared out, revealing shiny walls and smooth, sturdy floors. I placed my basket on one of the tables and spun in a circle, taking it all in. Tipping my head back, I was awed by the fancy lights hanging from the ceiling and the cool lamps surrounding the area.

"Amazing," I breathed.

Feet plodded somewhere in the back, and I turned. "You've been busy today." My voice faltered on the last word as my eyes met his bare chest. I brought my gaze up to his face real quick. "Hi."

He grunted a reply and moved a table left of the space.

Gulping, I focused on everything else but his flexing back muscles. "How were you able to finish this all in one day?"

"Just did."

"Did Will come around to help?"

"No."

"You did a great job."

Grunt.



I turned back to face the man, my brows furrowed. The one-word replies were unlike him. Not that Cal said too much. We could work for long stretches in silence, but usually, he asked me how my day went, and sometimes inquired about Bertie. Then he'd raid the basket for snacks. And today, I'd made sure I had more of the ones he usually favored. Maybe that'd bring him out of his...mood.

"I have some snacks if you want."

His eyes lifted and locked on the basket three tables away, but then he turned back to the one he was organizing. "Thanks."

Okay, something was up.

"Hey, did something happen?" I drew closer to him, not because I wanted to see the strength in his arms as he worked. Nope. Definitely not that.

"Why do you ask?" he muttered.

"Well, you're kind of quiet." I cast my gaze around the restaurant. "And it seems there's a lot to be excited about." Even with all the clutter last week, I would watch Cal pause mid-work and admire the restaurant, like he saw a future version where guests were seated, enjoying his cooking.

"I'm just working, Allie."

My stomach clenched. That sounded a lot like "stop bugging me," but I also never listened. "Come on!" I stood next to him now. "Just tell me. What's up?"

His eyes came up and met mine, his lips moving as if he wanted to speak, but then he stopped, looking at my mouth.

I inhaled deeply and waited, forcing myself not to lick my suddenly dry lips or get transfixed by Cal's gaze.

"Come with me to the kitchen," he rasped.

My insides curled, the feeling skating downward. "What?"

"You're here to work, aren't you?"

"Uh...yes." I nodded. "Sure."

"Taste cocktails with me." Cal spun in one smooth move and headed straight for the door that led to the kitchen.

I forced myself into motion, wondering what the hell had just happened. My brows met my hairline as I walked into the space. Like the main restaurant, the kitchen was cleaned out, and the cabinets were all redone. Cal must be exhausted if he did all of this between

Saturday and today. He looked anything but, his muscled body moving as he organized the bottles of liquor, mixes, and glasses on the table.

“Ready?” he asked.

I stopped opposite him, the table separating us. “Yes.”

Cal poured two different liquids into a cocktail shaker, then after placing the lid on the mixer, he shook it for a minute, poured the concoction into a glass, then he handed it to me.

I took the glass, keeping my gaze locked on his over the rim, and took a sip.

“Good?”

I played with the liquid on my tongue for a bit before swallowing. “Not...bad, per se.”

“So...terrible.” Cal took out a notepad and pen from his pocket, scribbled on it, and crossed out the writing.

“I said it wasn't bad.”

“I need excellent. Exquisite. A burst of flavor.”

“Okay, next one.”

The next two were okay but not good enough for what Cal needed since he crossed them out. But the fourth was.

I rolled it around in my mouth and swallowed. Heat curled in my belly, a heady feeling making my eyes squint. “It's a bit strong.”

Cal's brow went up, and he glanced at the bottles he used to make the drink.

“Not *bad* strong,” I said, but by the look on his face, I realized it didn't help much.

“I'll just try it.” He collected my glass, and I wasn't sure what was happening until he tipped the glass over into his mouth and drained it, his Adam's apple bobbing.

The spot between my thighs pulsed, and my heart rate spiked.

When he spoke, his voice was smooth and warm. “It's great. I like it.”

The next three cocktails turned out just as good, but that was probably because my head was starting to swim. I pressed a hand to my forehead, trying to steady myself. How would I get home in this state? I poked around in my purse and found my phone. It was nearly 9 p.m. Time to head home.

Cal was still scribbling in his notebook. I rounded the table to stand by his side and leaned close to his arm, peeking at his notes. His gaze lifted to my face and caught my eyes.

He'd been irritated when I came in, but the cocktails, and hopefully, my company, had managed to loosen him up. But now, his brows were furrowed again, his eyes moving over my face.

I smiled softly, then my gaze skated to his lips. My heart thrummed in my chest, insisting I close the distance between us. So I leaned in a bit.

Was it my imagination, or was Cal closer, too? So close I could make out the swirls of color in his eyes and the slight curve of his lips.

My eyes pressed shut, and I leaned forward, eager to have his lips on mine. A tender kiss brushed my mouth, and I knew Cal wanted the same thing I did. A groan left him, and before I knew it, his hard body crashed against mine, and his firm hands were rubbing up and down my back, turning me to jelly.

Something about this wasn't right. Something— "But... Casey," I whispered, pulling back to see Cal's blue eyes had bled to black, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

His eyes darkened further; he cupped my neck and brought my lips to his, and I promptly forgot Casey existed.

His body trapped mine against the table, and as he moved against me, I felt the hard length of him rubbing against my belly.

The spot between my thighs clenched, eager and needy for him. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing up against him as our tongues danced. Tilting my hips up, I pressed my core to his cock, where I needed him most, rubbing against him. Cal swore and pressed into me.

My back arched, and I cried out, the pressure awakening my entire being.

"Cal, more," I gasped.

He broke our kiss long enough to place me on the table, then he stepped between my legs, bringing us closer. This position allowed me to feel more of him, but since there were layers of clothes between us, every brush felt like both bliss and torture.

As if thinking the same thought, Cal went for the drawstring on my joggers and pulled them loose. I lifted my hips and he yanked them down. Only when my bare butt hit the cool wood did I realize he'd taken my panties, too. Before I could process that, he was tugging on my shirt.

"Off," he commanded.

I lifted my hands, and the shirt and my sports bra came off; I was naked before Cal. Nerves caused goosebumps to raise on my arms, and I brought up my hands to cover my chest, but Cal captured them.

"Let me see you." He trapped my hands in his, eyes devouring my body and looking hungrier by the minute. "You're beautiful."

"We didn't finish tasting the cocktails," I choked out. "Maybe we could..."

"Yes," Cal said.

He released me long enough to pick up an opened bottle and hold it between us. "Lean back."

I laid back on my forearms and watched, eyes widened as he tipped the bottle over my pebbled nipples and then my center. Breath shuddered out of me, my body clenching up, anticipating what would come next.

Cal leaned over me, dragging one nipple into his mouth. I threw back my head in a cry, and a savage grunt left his lips, vibrating over my skin. He licked his way to my other nipple, his hand covering the one he had just left. The assault on my senses was becoming too much, and my back bowed, legs opened, desperate for him.

Cal followed the rivulets of liquid, licking his way to my belly button, then over my mound and clit. His open-mouth kiss sent my hips jackknifing off the table, but he caught me in his firm grip, holding me steady as he groaned against my center, swirling his tongue around my sensitive flesh. Then his tongue traced my slit, and I saw stars.

"Oh, God. Cal!" My thighs shivered, clenching around his shoulders. "I'm going to come."

"Not yet, baby girl." He pulled away, and I sagged against the table, frustration welling inside me.

But as he went for the zipper of his shorts, that frustration turned to anticipation. I brought my hand to the spot between my thighs, stroking myself to the sight of his glorious body.

Cal's shorts and boxer briefs fell, revealing muscled, hairy thighs and his long hard shaft jutting between them. I gulped. He was so big. Could I take him?

He leaned in and kissed up my neck, sending a shiver through me. "Don't worry, baby girl. You can take me. You're wet enough. So hot and ready for me, huh, gorgeous?" His hand went between my legs, batting my own away, and two long digits breached my entrance. My cry had him curving his fingers, stroking my sweet spot, making my eyes roll back. Just when I was about to come apart, his fingers disappeared, and a blunt smooth length replaced them, stroking its way in.

We both exhaled as he bottomed out inside me. Cal didn't move for a long minute, and I opened my eyes. He was staring right at me, a frown on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Feels too fucking good."

My heart clenched, and I looped my arms around his neck, kissing him. "For me, too."

After that moment passed, Cal started pumping in and out of me, rotating his hips, slowly at first. His hands captured my ass and brought me closer to match his quickening thrusts, and I held on for dear life. The slaps of our bodies coming together were loud in the kitchen, only rivaled by the trembling of the bottles on the table and our heavy breathing.

Cal leaned into me, and this angle had his pelvic bone grazing my clit. My eyes closed, and I cried out his name.

His voice was smug, satisfied. "Good girl, Allie," he moaned. "Now come for me."

He didn't have to ask twice; my body was already bowing to his request. His deep strokes had me babbling incoherently, my whole body shaking. Almost immediately, he pressed a groan into my neck, and he came, too. His hard thrusts didn't stop until we were both wrung out and collapsing on the table.

Then I remembered. Casey.

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## Chapter 9

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## Cal

I rolled over in bed, peeling my eyelids apart to stare at the ceiling of my dimly lit bedroom. My head hurt only slightly, a lot better than it used to years ago when I drank. Now I required more than a few glasses to get me drunk and hungover. And despite not being drunk last night, I *did* do something pleasurable.

A huge grin curved my lips, and I traced my hand down to my cock. Palming my hardening length, I stroked idly, thinking of Allie on the table yesterday. Her body bare, soft and supple, responding to my touch, coming for me. My cock pulsed, and I contemplated finishing myself off just to take the edge off, but then I reconsidered. Starting the day with those kind of thoughts would only leave me hungry for more, so I withdrew my hand and sauntered to the bathroom.

I re-emerged with a washed face and clean teeth. My head was clearer and...holy shit!

I fucked Allie.

The realization settled like a rock in my guts. We had a great time; no argument there. Even now, as I vaguely remembered it, blood pumped downward. But that was dangerous territory. Allie had made it crystal clear she was leaving Hannibal soon. And I was facilitating that by having her work for me. It should have been the first thing on my mind, but once I took in her plump pink lips and her soft jasmine scent, I could think of nothing else but her. Wanted nothing else but her body close to mine.

She was worth it.

Nothing more could happen between us, even if she were to stay. She was Casey's ex. And my brother was a sore subject all around. Plus, it would complicate our working relationship, and I didn't have time for a personal relationship. The restaurant needed my full attention, and getting caught up with a woman now, no matter how sweet and willing, was foolhardy of me.

A memory flashed in my head—Allie working her hips, her pert breasts jiggling with the effort, her thighs pressing into my sides, lips

parted, eyes hazy with lust.

I left the room for the kitchen, determined to put those thoughts out of my head. Klaus greeted me with a tail wag, and I bent to rub his furry body.

“How are you, boy? Hungry?”

He moved around the kitchen as I rummaged in the cabinet for his breakfast. Once I had his food, I dumped it into his bowl and made a mental note to pass by the store later in the day and get more dog food for him.

I made a cup of coffee and settled into a chair by the kitchen table. Naturally, my head filled with thoughts of Allie. She'd worked her way under my skin in the week since she worked at the restaurant. That seemed the most plausible reason why I tossed caution to the wind and got lost in her last night. But no more.

Hot coffee scalded my throat on the way down, but it was a minor discomfort compared to the worry starting to rattle in the back of my head. Last night was a onetime thing. A small, tiny lapse in judgment. I'd been mad as hell at Casey and threw all my energy into finishing up the restaurant he said would fail, but even that hadn't calmed me enough.

And then she was there.

With her bright brown eyes and killer smile that undid me. I almost told her about Casey showing up, but then decided against it last-minute. We usually talked, but always kept it casual. I didn't want to drag her into my family problems. She'd seen enough to last a lifetime when she was a teenager. The cocktail thing was supposed to be easy work compared to what we'd been busy with for the past week.

But then I ended up fucking her on the table.

I brought the “chef of the year” mug to my lips, but the now lukewarm coffee did little to detract from the growing bulge in my briefs.

Onetime thing, I reminded myself.

Did Allie know we couldn't be anything more? Doubtful. Last night when I dropped her off, she'd turned back when she reached her door to see if I was watching, then waved shyly. So adorable. My heart squeezed.



No. I couldn't pause and think about shit like that. Allie and I were over. Not like we'd made any commitment for more, but...

Sighing, I made my way to the sink and rinsed out the mug. I'd have to tell her, I decided. Nothing could happen between us again.

Resolved, I went in and got ready for my day at the restaurant.

The sun shone brightly, and the air was cool and crisp as I drove through town, and a few folks waved at me. With a smile, I waved back. Today was looking good. Hopefully, it'd stay that way after I told Allie my decision and she'd take it in stride.

As I turned onto the street in front of my building, my eyes fell on the smashed glass, and my stomach plummeted. I hit the brakes, hopped out of the truck, and raced to the scene. Glass crunched under my foot as I drew closer. A window next to the door was in jagged edges, and the offending stone lay a few feet into the restaurant, surrounded by more shattered glass.

*The restaurant? You'll lose it all.* Casey's words echoed in my head.

Fucking hell. "Casey!" His name left my mouth in a growl.

He did this. No one else would stoop this low but my idiot, vengeful brother. All because of my refusal to give him money? Darkness bled into the corners of my eyes. I wanted to punch him in the face.

I started back to the truck when my phone tumbled from my pocket and dropped onto the ground. "Fuck." I snatched it up. A passing glance assured me the screen was intact. I started to pocket it, then I paused.

What if I found Casey and hurt him now? What good would it do? He could file a report against me, but how would I prove he broke the window?

I should have installed cameras, dammit!

Gritting my teeth, I slid a finger across my phone screen and dialed Will. The five seconds it took for him to answer had me pacing.

"Hey, Master Chef." He paused. I started to speak, but then he cut in, "Cal the Cook? Wait, no." He hummed thoughtfully. "Food Bender? Cal of the Kitchen? Come on. Help me out here. Tell me when I hit the million dollar name."

“Someone smashed my restaurant window.”

Will’s jovial tone disappeared immediately. “What?”

I let the silence linger.

“Shit, man. I’m so fucking sorry. I’d come over right now, but I’m a bit caught up in a pile of paperwork. Did they get in? Take anything?”

The hole wasn’t so large, but who knew what folks would do out of desperation? Who knew what my brother would do? Following Will’s prompting, I walked through the restaurant, taking stock of everything. It was as I left it yesterday. Including the table Allie had stretched out on and let me lick cocktails from her body.

“They didn’t take anything,” I reported back.

“Really? Weird.” Keyboard keys clattered from his end. “So they just broke your window? Who would do that?”

Casey Younger, the fucking idiot. “Don’t know. And there are no cameras around.” I went back out and gave my surroundings a cursory glance. I hated being right in this moment.

“I’m sorry, man,” Will said. “But don’t mess with the crime scene. Cops will be out there in a minute to take samples and ask questions, okay?”

Even before I officially opened the restaurant, it was already a damned crime scene. I clenched my teeth and grunted a reply.

“Good. Just take pictures and forward them to me, and I can start working on my end. See what I can find, alright?”

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” Someone spoke in the background. “Gotta run.”

The call ended, and I did as Will asked, taking shots of the scene from all angles. The longer I looked at it, the more rage boiled through my blood. Clenching my teeth, I looked away and called the insurance company. Even though I hadn’t installed cameras, at least I’d gotten insurance immediately after I bought the building. They picked up, and I started to describe what had happened.

After an hour and multiple inquiries from the police and insurance company representatives later, I watched the cars drive off, and I turned back to the mess. After all their intervention, it was my mess, and I still needed to clean it up. I got a broom and swept up the glass shards, but the gaping hole was still there, mocking me. I clenched

my teeth, counted to five, and searched for tape and plastic bags in my car.

Armed with those, I covered up the hole. The business owners next to my restaurant were questioned, but none offered anything helpful. Now, they watched me, sympathy on their faces. I hated it.

I kept my head down, finished up, and went back into my truck. I sunk against the headrest, breathing up at the roof. This rough morning worsened the hangover I believed I was growing immune to. I massaged my skull and let out a long sigh.

Picking up my phone, I typed out a text to Allie, telling her to forgo work today. I wasn't hanging around to do any work, either. It would make me crazy to look at the broken window all day and force me to approach Casey, which would be bad for us both.

So, I revved up the engine and headed home. A long sleep should rid me of the skull-splitting headache and alleviate my annoyance toward my brother. But I didn't hold out hope for the latter.

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## Chapter 10

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## *Allie*

My phone beeped in my pocket, cutting into my thoughts. I started and realized I'd stopped halfway to the storage unit, lost in my thoughts. Huffing out a breath, I charged on, determined to keep my mind on task.

Today had started out less than great. From the moment I opened my eyes, I knew I'd messed up. Not only by getting tipsy on cocktails but by giving in to my desires and having sex with Cal Younger. The spot between my legs was pleasantly sore, but what I'd done was...ugh, unthinkable! I'd slept with Casey's brother, and I remembered long enough to hesitate, possibly avoiding that colossal mistake, but I just didn't care. It was hard to care about anything when Cal's strong arms were wrapped around me, his kiss drugging me and his thick length pressing into my core and bringing me pleasure.

My face burned, and I looked left and right to ensure no one saw me getting flustered at work. Sighing, I released my death grip on the envelope I was holding and calmly shelved it.

It was only sex, I chanted under my breath as I made my way back to my desk. It wasn't like we'd spoken much after the fact. He'd taken me home, and that was it. The soft glances and private smiles didn't mean anything. Of course, he was nice to me; we'd just had sex!

Damn it, I was going in circles with this thought pattern.

Close to my desk, I recalled I had a message. Distraction, yes! Digging my phone out of my pocket, I expected to see something from Mia. She was the only one who texted me aside from my parents. It was Cal.

My heart jumped into my throat. Why was he texting me? What did he want? Tapping my foot and biting my nails didn't help ease my worry. Cringing, I clicked on the message.

**Don't come to work today. Cal.**

I squinted at my phone. Surely I hadn't read that right. That was it? I slid a thumb across the screen, uselessly maxing out the scroll

limit. There should be more, right?

Dropping into my chair, I waited, staring at my phone screen, hoping a second message would explain the reason for this brush-off because that was the only way to describe this. But no more messages popped up.

I dropped my phone, shut my eyes, and took a deep breath. Calm down, Allie.

A second later, my eyes popped open. "What the hell?"

Yes, I partly regretted what happened, and I wasn't really looking forward to seeing him today, but this text? So uncalled for! If he felt as uncomfortable with what happened as I did, a conversation would have solved it. I wasn't thrilled about the situation, either.

Or maybe he wasn't willing to talk because he'd gotten what he wanted. So now he needed me out of the way for the other women he had lined up.

Once that thought took root, there was no shaking it off. It followed me like a cloud all day, taunting me.

*You should have known better, Allie.*

*He's a womanizer, Allie.*

*Why did you get entangled with a player, Allie?*

By day's end, I was exhausted but also pissed off as hell. Work wasn't all that great on a typical day, but today, it was because of Cal and his dismissive text.

As I packed up my bag to leave work, my gaze fell on my after-work clothes. I gritted my teeth and pushed them further into my bag, hiding them from view.

After I'd gotten home last night and sobered up, anxiety about what happened between Cal and me kept me awake, so I baked a few dozen cookies. I'd sold almost all of them, but looking at the basket and the remaining treats I'd usually share with Cal made anger thrum between my shoulder blades. Forget his smiles and warm baritone voice; he was still the same man who'd left Hannibal all those years ago.

Out of spite, I gave the remaining cookies to my coworkers before heading out. I started to turn toward the path that led to Cal's restaurant. I wasn't a confrontational person, but I needed to get everything off my chest so I could sleep peacefully and start the

process of forgetting him, but I halted in my tracks. He probably wouldn't be at the restaurant. Most of the renovations were already taken care of. And if I walked past it, I'd only find more things to remind me of Cal and make me feel worse.

Huffing out a breath, I spun in the opposite direction, walking as fast as I could. Everything my eyes fell on reminded me of Cal somehow, even things I'd never associated with him before. When I passed a store and glimpsed a Lab on a poster, I thought of Klaus and the dog's antics. Cute dog. Too bad he was stuck with an asshole owner.

Once I entered my home, I breathed a relieved sigh. I headed straight into my bedroom and collapsed onto my bed. Late evening sunshine filtered through the blinds and fell across my face. I pulled in a deep breath, soaking in the warmth. I couldn't remember the last time I came home so early. Usually, staying out calmed my nerves, but not today. Cal had suddenly clouded everything. Thankfully, nothing in this room...

A thought skipped into my brain, and I groaned.

I'd climbed under these covers and pleased myself while thinking of him.

"Damn you, Allie!"

Picking myself up from the bed, I changed out of my work uniform into a T-shirt and shorts, then headed into the kitchen and yanked open cabinets, tossing ingredients on the countertop. If I couldn't think away my troubling thoughts, I'd bake them away. That always worked for me. And what could be more engaging than trying a new recipe?

I scrolled through my phone, found the saved video, and turned on the volume. The baker's warm, motherly voice filled the kitchen as she explained her process. After checking to make sure I had all the ingredients, I propped the phone on its stand and followed her direction.

Halfway through, I checked in with myself, glad to be feeling a bit better. The bread dough was soft and malleable and would make the sweetest cinnamon rolls for sure. Once I was done mixing and letting them rise, I put them in the oven, set the timer, and dropped into a chair, pleasantly exhausted.

Still, in the quiet of the kitchen, those worrisome thoughts threatened to reappear, so I called Mia. She was always a force of nature, and getting caught up in her fun craziness would distract me from my own mess.

“Hey, boo. Whatcha doing?” Mia asked.

“Baking.”

“What happened? You okay?”

“Mia, I bake even when I'm happy.” I sat back, feeling called out.

“Yeah, but usually, you're walking the whole of Hannibal right about now.”

Sighing, I let my shoulders slump. “Fine, you're right. I'm not in the best mood. But I'm getting better.”

“Okay, bestie. Need some company?”

I accepted gratefully. “You don't mind?”

“Of course not. Especially as you have something delicious baking in your oven.”

I chuckled. “Sure. Come on over.”

Ten minutes later, Mia breezed into my apartment, singing, “I'm here.”

I gave my friend a once over, a smile pulling at my lips. She was in a black pencil skirt and button-down shirt that was neatly tucked in, low heels, and her hair pulled back, looking every bit the middle school teacher she was.

She shrugged off her coat, tossed it on the couch with her bag, and joined me in the kitchen. “Here.”

“What's that for?” I collected the rose, brought it to my nose, and breathed in. “Sweet.”

“For you, my pretty!” She tweaked my cheek.

I smiled, shaking my head. “Thanks. You seem pretty chipper. Good things happen at work?”

“The best.” Mia beamed. “My drama students won the funding over Coach Rob's gym class.”

I grinned. “Great for you.”

“Mm-hmm.” She went to the oven and peeked in. “I'm starving. When's this going to be ready?”

“In five minutes.”



“Kay, kay. I can be patient.” She dropped into a chair and crossed her legs primly. “You won’t believe what happened at school today.”

“Apart from the awesome funding you won?”

“Apart from that.” My friend smiled, her eyes shining.

That meant a lot to her, and I found myself smiling in return.

“My kids are wild,” she said.

I laughed. “What?”

“Seriously. Barry brought his mom’s jewelry to class as a gift for Celia.”

The kitchen was filling with the aroma of the cinnamon rolls, and I went to the oven to check them. “Wait, Celia, Aunt Lucy’s niece?”

“Yes, apparently, he has a thing for the new girl.”

“Oh, God. How did you find out?”

“He gave her the gift, and she didn’t want it, so she brought it to me. Imagine my horror when I held a gold necklace.”

I gasped. “No way!”

“Yes, way.”

We burst into laughter.

“Why weren’t we that brave when we were kids?”

“I’m telling ya.”

The timer dinged, and I slipped on my oven mitt, opening the oven. I pulled out the tray carrying bronzed cinnamon rolls and placed it on the countertop.

Mia inhaled audibly. “Get yourself stressed more often, boo. It’s like you bake your best treats when you’re mad.”

I laughed but sobered up. If only she knew.

As if sensing my discomfort, Mia told more stories about her preteen students. I set out two plates with cinnamon rolls and some tea.

We ate and talked about everything but the reason I called her in the first place. That was what made Mia so special. She understood me in a way no one else did, never pressuring me to be anything but who I was. Never compelling me to divulge anything I wasn’t ready to, and even when I did, she offered only support, no judgment.

Three cinnamon rolls later, Mia leaned back, tapping her tummy. “God, that was good. I’ll probably need a giant salad to counteract this goodness tomorrow, but damn, it’s so worth it.”

I placed our dishes in the sink. "Right? I've been eating way too many treats."

"Oh, no wonder."

"No wonder what?" I threw a look at my friend.

She shrugged. "I see a booty coming on, that's all."

"What?" I twisted around, checking out my ass.

"Look at you!" She laughed. "Tangling yourself like a pretzel. You're good, boo."

My shoulders sagged, and I reclaimed my seat. "Don't do that."

"What? It's fun to mess with you."

I smiled. Silence wrapped around us, warm and cozy, the residual smell of sweet cinnamon rolls in the air, the springboard for sharing bothersome secrets. But my throat wouldn't form the words, and my head remained scrambled.

Mia knew my deal with Casey and how I avoided anything that connected me with him or his family. How would she feel if she learned I was now intimately connected to his brother?

"I should go." Mia's voice brought my gaze to her. Her eyes were soft and open, allowing me to choose whether to confide in her or not.

I bit my lip, considering. She'd already done more than enough coming to check up on me after a full day. I shouldn't keep her or burden her with my issues. I was the one who knew Cal's reputation and my connection to Casey, and I slept with him anyway.

"I'll see you off."

She smiled softly. "Alright."

While she put on her coat, I found a jacket in my closet and followed her out the door. I wished I could keep going and not have to go back in so I could escape my confusing thoughts. But I knew I'd return, and thoughts of Cal would still plague me.

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## Chapter 11

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## *Cal*

My cell beeped, and I picked up before checking the caller ID.

"Hello."

"Cal Younger? I'm Tracy Hadleigh from your insurance company. I'd like to ask you some questions about the recent damage to your property on Broadway. Is this a good time?"

I wanted to say no, end the call, and toss my phone across the living room. I'd already answered enough questions to fill ten notebooks, but they still kept them coming. Despite my complete exhaustion with the process, I said yes. The quicker I got over this unpleasant part, the faster I got the funds needed to fix the window and go on with business as usual.

They were standard-issue questions. Apparently, she was in a department higher up than the guys I first met, and my forms needed to pass through her before a decision was made.

"That'll be all for now. Thank you," Tracy said, and the call ended.

All for now? Gah! More calls would be coming in then. If that was the price I needed to pay to get the window fixed, so be it. Setting aside my phone, I drew my notebook close.

It'd been weeks since I had this much free time. Sitting at home in my kitchen, clad only in lounge pants while Klaus lingered by, playing with his toys and brushing against my leg occasionally, was odd. I'd been pushing to open the restaurant, working until my bones ached, and now, I had nothing but time. Seeing as I couldn't work on the restaurant until the window was fixed, I skipped the items on my to-do list—repairing the walk-in refrigerator and installing a new stove—to the last item—creating a menu.

I'd hoped to dive into testing out meals in the new kitchen once it was all fixed up, but I couldn't sit idle. So I delved into it here. Already, my mood lifted as I crossed out meals and added others. Preparing food was my main love. Everything else came second. Without the best meals, the most nicely decorated restaurant would lack patrons to fill it up. And I wasn't about to let the food aspect of my restaurant slack in any way.

The menu would be divided into seven sections, and for a start, I wanted to have no more than five food choices per section. For now, I was tackling the appetizers.

I ran over the list of appetizers I fancied. Twelve already. Sighing, I crossed out two. My eyes skimmed the list, but they all stood out as attractive options. The best way to whittle through them was by a bit of tasting.

My knowledge from culinary school and working at restaurants for many years meant I could recite most recipes to the various dishes off the top of my head. The real fun for me came when I reinvented meals. Combining two foods that wouldn't usually be expected to go together, like fruit and fish, pumped my blood, and I was set to do just that.

I searched through the fridge for ingredients and dropped them all on the table. I washed, sliced and diced, steamed, and mixed, and soon enough, the kitchen was filled with an aroma that was part salmon and part mango.

Klaus came around and nudged my leg with his wet nose.

“Hey, boy. Hungry?”

His giant tongue lolled out, and he panted expectantly.

I laughed and tossed him a treat. Wagging his tail, he went off to savor it while I added lime to the still-steaming dish.

A phone call made me pause midway. The caller ID was unlisted, but if I had to guess, it'd be the insurance company. I picked up regardless, less annoyed than I was earlier.

It was someone else, not Tracy, and they came up with a different set of questions. Like where I was the night before yesterday and who was with me.

“You have the police report. It's all in there,” I replied, moving away from the kitchen to the living room. “Or better yet, why don't you ask them if they suspect I had anything to do with it?”

The man forged on, unfazed. “These are routine questions, Mr. Younger. We just need to be certain—”

“That I didn't smash my restaurant window to get compensation? What's your theory? That I'm out of funds setting up my restaurant, and I need some from you?”

He sputtered.

"Okay, let me help. I just bought a building and hope to start a business. It's yet to get off the ground. Why would I compromise my situation by facilitating a crime on the premises? If I wanted your money, which is really mine, wouldn't I have taken out some heavy-duty items to get a larger check?"

The line was silent for so long I wondered if he'd hung up. When he came back on, he had the decency to sound contrite.

"Apologies, Mr. Younger. The questions are not intended to offend you. We just need to get the full picture."

"My bad, thanks," I replied in a bland tone.

He cleared his throat. "Last, we'll need you to fill out a form. It'll be sent to your email. The faster you complete it, the quicker we'll be able to process your claim."

*Last*, thank heavens.

"Fine. Thank you."

I tossed the phone, glad to be done with that, and returned to the meal I'd made. It'd cooled, but the pleasant smell still permeated the air. I photographed it and noted the combinations I'd used before reaching for a bite.

I paused short of putting it in my mouth, remembering Allie when she'd tasted cocktails with me. She'd make the cutest furrow between her brows as she tried to place the taste of something, and when she liked it, her eyes lit up. She would be right at home here, standing around my kitchen sampling dishes with me. Maybe we could use this table...creatively too, and I could eat...whatever this was—I eyed the meal—off her luscious tits.

Groaning, I shoved off those thoughts and brought the fork to my mouth, but a knock rattled the front door, stopping me. I frowned, set the fork aside, and headed to the door. Will was most likely at work, and he usually called before coming over. And we'd spoken this morning when he called about the damaged window. If he was coming, he'd have mentioned it. No one else visited me.

I pulled open the door and wished I'd looked through the peephole first. My dad stood on my porch, his back to me. Slowly, he turned. His hair was a mix of gray and dark blond, and his face was lined with age. Most folks said I looked like him, but besides the color of our eyes, I thought Casey took after him—personality-wise, too.

“Aren’t you gonna invite me in?”

The smell of alcohol hit my nostrils, and I fought a grimace. Clenching my teeth, I stepped aside for my dad to enter. I closed the door behind us and watched him take in my home. His gaze was hard as it skimmed over my leather couches and cream-colored wallpaper.

While he took his time, I couldn't help but contrast how he looked now to the man he once was. When I was a teenager, I feared him almost as much as I hated him. We butted heads all the time, and folks called it disrespect, but I knew if I let my guard down, he'd have steamrolled me into a version of myself I wouldn't recognize. So I rebelled against everything he wanted.

Now, he was no longer that hulking adult who once terrified me. He was just a weathered, shrunken man whose better years were past him. And where before he could bellow a roof down, his voice was now rough and weak. It'd been a long time since I'd heard him raise his voice anyway, seeing I didn't need him for anything he could use to lord over me.

His gaze stopped at my kitchen and his eyes lingered there. The line of his shoulders covered in his faded brown coat straightened, his jawline hardening.

A part of me that still recognized this man as my father despite our turbulent history tensed up. My love for cooking was one thing he couldn't abide, and even now, after doing it for many years and supporting myself, he still disapproved.

I needed to get him out of here ASAP.

“Why are you here?” I asked, my tone sharper than I intended.

My dad’s gaze spun to meet mine. “It’s about Casey.”

Yesterday's discovery at the restaurant came back in a wave that smacked any nostalgic feeling I had left in my chest, pulling me back to anger. "What about him?" I gritted out.

My dad’s eyes turned down, his hands going into his pockets. He was ashamed.

"Well?" I asked, wondering vaguely if he knew anything about the damage to the restaurant. Not that I expected him to care, but why would he come all this way? We hardly ever saw each other, and nothing had happened to change that recently.

“Do you know where he is?”

My frown deepened. “Why the fuck would I know? We’re not buddies.”

His eyes blinked rapidly as if he was trying to make sense of something.

I inhaled and tried to be patient. “Why are you looking for him?” I was sure they weren’t buddies, either.

“Some money went missing from my safe back at home.”

“And Casey knows the combination to this safe?”

“I didn’t tell him, but I had it on my computer, and he’s the only one who has access to my computer.”

An uneasy quiet stretched between us. Anyone else and I’d have had consolatory words or alternative suggestions, but my dad and I weren’t close enough for any of that.

“So, have you seen him?” he finally asked.

I thought about the Saturday I came home from my hike with Will. “Last Saturday,” I said. “He came over to ask...for some money.”

My dad’s shoulders sagged, like that confirmed his suspicions.

I started to speak but stopped. I hadn’t been in Hannibal for years and didn’t know my dad and Casey’s dynamic. What if this had happened before? What if Casey was taking back money my dad owed him? Getting involved in their mess was the last thing I wanted to do with my time.

“So, since then, nothing?” His eyes looked hopeful.

I shook my head. A foreign feeling, not dissimilar to sympathy, pinched at my heart.

“Huh,” was all my dad said.

In the space of a few days, Casey had managed to harass me at my home, possibly steal our dad’s money, and probably wrecked my restaurant window. If I was closer to my dad, I could have confided in him, and we could find a way to solve our “Casey problem.” But I couldn’t even bring myself to mention the incident at the restaurant. Just because my dad was in a sore place now didn’t mean he’d changed or that he would start to approve of me and we could get along.

Casey’s words echoed in my head. *You’re just like us.* And I wanted to be anything but. I’d take care of Casey on my end, and my



dad could work through his shit the way he'd always done.

"Is that all?" I asked.

My dad's eyes met mine, blue and watery. He grunted with a small nod and headed my way. I pulled open the door, and he walked past me, the smell of beer trailing after him, and close behind that was a heavy cloud of disappointment.

I shut the door, fighting to keep the unpleasantness out. Times like these made me wonder why I had chosen to return to Hannibal. Despite steering clear of them, they always wiggled their way back into my life with baggage.

Sighing, I headed back to my kitchen, hoping I could lighten up my mood once again.

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## Chapter 12

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## *Allie*

Jeff's Bar buzzed with life and energy as everyone celebrated the end of the work week. I jiggled a little in my seat to the generic pop song from the live band and pulled my margarita to my lips. This moment, sitting in a bar next to Mia and Stacey, was heaven after the week I had endured.

Since Tuesday, the week had turned into a slug and dragged on and on, every day boring and basic, making me miss the previous week when I had the excitement of working around Cal in the restaurant. I went back to my old routine—work, bake, read, rinse and repeat. And it sucked.

I'd truly underestimated how one week of a changed routine would affect me and how one sexy evening with an incredibly handsome man would change the wiring of my brain so all I saw and thought of was him.

When Mia invited me out, and knowing Stacey was also willing to hang, I thanked the heavens. I threw on an outfit and raced down here because I couldn't imagine spending a weekend locked indoors, thinking of him.

He hadn't even called or texted since the day he told me not to come to work, and I had too much self-respect to reach out. I kept my head down, minded my real job, and missed him all the time—just for the excitement of doing something different, not the man himself. At least, that's what I told myself. I'd be crazy to do that, right?

In my head, I cycled through the giant roadblocks that stood in the way of anything happening between Cal and me: his womanizing history, Casey, my imminent departure...

"Hey, Allie... Allie!"

My eyes snapped up and met my best friend's. She'd done up her brows with a dark pencil and her eyes stood out with a winged liner. Now, one of those fine brows was raised.

"Are you seeing your future in that glass?" she asked.

"Yep." I drank from it. "Tastes bleak."

She bumped shoulders with me and I laughed. True, it wasn't so much bleak as it was uncertain. I only hoped next week would lift the Cal-cloud hanging over me. I needed to move on.

"I hope your week went better."

I found a smile somewhere in all my tumbling emotions. "Boring as hell, but I'll survive."

"Ugh, my week was boring, too," Stacey groaned.

We both turned and watched the dirty-blond sigh at the strobe lights above.

"Really? How so?"

"Well, unlike you two twinning over here." Stacey gestured at us.

I looked down and realized I'd picked out a dress in the same color as Mia's shirt. What do you know? I was so in my head I didn't even realize. I leaned over and nuzzled my friend's cheek.

"Right, make me jealous," Stacey drawled.

Mia and I laughed and split apart.

"My best friend is off in St. Louis living this amazing life with her dream job and a great man, and I'm confined to my house. Except when I go out with coworkers, or you two find it in your hearts to let me tag along."

"Oh, Stacey..." Mia leaned forward and rubbed the back of Stacey's arm.

"I'm not *sad* sad." Stacey quirked her lip. "I just miss her, but really, I'm super proud of her. Meghan has grown so much and has all these classy vibes going on. She's working in the city, but she's still sweet as a button, even coming back to sell her art occasionally..."

I propped my elbow on the table, hand underneath my chin, and imagined my life to be half as exciting as what Stacey described. That was my dream! Well, without a man. I fought with Cal's image trying to take up space in my head. No, no! I wasn't going to obsess over a man who'd sleep with me one night and blow me off the next day. I was considering no man at all. My life would be work and the excitement of city living.

My phone buzzed in my lap, and as Stacey and Mia were busy ordering another round of drinks, I swiped the screen and nearly fell off my stool.

Cal had sent a text.

I looked around the bar and saw no one that remotely resembled him. No one could. He was all blond, brawny, and... Stop thinking about him!

What could he want now?

I kept my phone close to my chest as I opened the message.

**Work on the restaurant resumes tomorrow. You may come in.**

**Cal.**

What? Work on the restaurant paused? Why? And why didn't he tell me? Why... Ugh. Maybe this entire time he was just a terrible texter and I had misinterpreted his meaning. I wasn't going to ruin another night tossing and turning, trying to interpret what he meant by those two sentences.

**What a way you have with words.**

I sent the message before I could stop myself, then drained my glass as I waited for a reply. Stacey nudged another to me and I gratefully drew in a few sips before my phone buzzed again.

**Allie?**

**Of course. Who did you think you texted?**

**Haha. I do have a way with words.**

*True. When you drop instructions with no explanation whatsoever, it always gets me all hot and bothered.* I typed and chuckled to myself. What if I sent that? A hand fell on my shoulder and I hid my phone on my lap.

Mia leaned in. "Stacey and I are going to dance. Wanna come?"

My hand tightened around the phone. "You guys go ahead."

"See you..." her words trailed off into laughter as Stacey pulled her off to the crowded area where people danced.

I smiled at them and brought my phone up to my face. Oh, shit! No, no, no. I sent the message? My heart rate accelerated. Tapping rapidly on the message yielded no delete feature, and in seconds, three dots blinked from Cal's end, indicating he was answering.

Oh, jeez. I drained half my drink and wished the earth would split apart and swallow me.

Yet, when my phone buzzed from within my death grip, curiosity won over embarrassment. I peeled my hands aside and read his

reply.

**Yeah? You've missed my instructions, huh?**

He was playing along, and I was getting wet. I clenched my thighs and typed out.

**Maybe, maybe not.**

**I'm leaning toward maybe.**

**Ha, arrogant.**

**You love it, but I'm also generous. I'll give you instructions for the night so you don't hate me.**

I swallowed thickly, anticipation pebbling my nipples where they brushed against my dress.

**Like I'd do what you say.**

**You would. If not, I'd be forced to punish you.**

My throat went dry and I finished the rest of my glass. Another message followed.

**So, are you ready to be a good girl and do what I tell you?**

Damn. Had someone cranked up the heat? I adjusted my legs and sensation stirred between my thighs. But I wasn't upset about that.

**Fine, what do you want me to do?**

**Go to sleep early, okay? We have lots to do tomorrow.**

An image of Cal cuddling me against his chest wrapped around my mind. I shook it off. We were just playing around.

**Ha, can't do that. I'm at a bar drinking with my girls.**

**What bar?**

**Jeff's.**

It took a full two minutes for a reply to come in.

**How are you getting home?**

*Want to tuck me in bed yourself?* I chuckled at the thought and then typed a follow-up.

**Not so sure. My friends are dancing the night away with all the hot guys.**

**Don't dance with any hot guys. I'm coming to get you.**

I laughed, then stopped.

**Wait, what?**

But my message went unanswered. He wasn't kidding. My still wet core tightened with the thought of seeing him. I quickly reached

for the bottle of water none of us had touched all night and gulped, then grabbed some chips and tossed them in my mouth. Anything for a clear head. I wasn't jumping in bed with him again. Or rather, on a table where he covered me in cocktails and—

My phone buzzed and I read the message.

**I'm here.**

Shit. Taking a last sip of water, I went to find Mia and Stacey, telling them I was taking off. They blew me kisses, excitedly resuming their dancing. I made my way out, then sighed as the cool night air filled my lungs, clearing my head some more.

Good. I would be immune to everything Cal from here on out. And where was he? My gaze skimmed the parking lot and fell on... Cal? He was clad in black, from boots to jacket, standing next to a motorcycle. As his helmet came off, his gold-brown hair tumbled over his shoulders, only allowing me a glimpse of his strong tattooed neck and handsome face.

I swallowed. I was not immune. I was so not immune!

Despite my head screaming at me, my body turned to jelly and I floated over to the man. "Hey."

The shadowed night gave his face an edge that set butterflies dancing in my belly. "Hey, yourself."

And his voice...ugh. Just one more time wouldn't hurt, right? I wasn't the only one entertaining ideas, that was for sure. His gaze slid over my body, face to toes and back up, lingering on my hair. And like a total flirt, I tossed a lock over my shoulder, and his eyes darkened.

"Are we good to go?"

"Just a second." He slipped the helmet on me and then fastened the buckle. The whole time, my heart hammered. Then he took a seat and revved up the engine. "Hop on."

I straddled the motorcycle, wrapped my arms around his middle, and then we were off.

The chilly night air raising goosebumps on my arms had nothing on the warmth slipping into my body from being so close to Cal. I placed my head on his back and inhaled. A shiver rushed through me, his masculine scent making me heady.

God, I wanted him. Just physically, nothing more. And he wouldn't mind. He was that kind of guy. But was I that kind of girl?

It felt way too soon as we stopped in front of my apartment building. I climbed off and Cal pushed off the bike as well.

"Let me." He went for the straps on the helmet, pulled it off, and hung it on the motorcycle, then his blue eyes returned to me. "I mussed your hair."

I would have said "no" as his hand came up, but I wanted him to touch me. My core clenched in anticipation and my panties dampened.

His fingers brushed through my hair and a small moan escaped me. Cal's eyes fell on my lips and I watched his throat bob as he swallowed. Then with a confidence I didn't know I had, I rose on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his. His response was immediate, hands circling my waist, pulling me up against his hard chest. His mouth slanted against mine, a broken groan coming from him.

"You taste so sweet, Allie." He pulled away, panting. "But we can't. This is a bad idea."

I pushed against him, finding his hard length, and rubbed my center along his cock.

"Fuck!" The veins in Cal's neck stood out and his eyes darkened.

"I know it's a bad idea, Cal." And I showed him what I thought of that bad idea by kissing him so deeply I lost my breath. "Come inside with me."

Convinced, Cal parked his motorcycle securely, and we went up to my apartment. The moment the door shut behind me, Cal's mouth came down on mine. Our harsh breaths mingled, and I moaned as I pressed against him again, feeling his warmth engulf me.

"Like following instructions, do you?" Cal kissed up my neck and a shiver rushed through me. He didn't wait for my reply and spun me to face the door. My cheek hit the warm wood and his hands bracketed my hips in a caressing touch. "Wore this pretty little barely-there dress for the hot guys?" His kisses fell hotly on my neck, and he sucked on my sensitive flesh. "Looking for someone to tell you to take it off?"

"I wasn't...oh..." My back arched as his fingers made contact with my center. "I wasn't!"



He chuckled and trailed kisses over my back as my zipper hissed on the way down. "Tell you what," he said against my ear. "You only take instructions from me, you understand?"

A smack on my butt, even through the fabric of my dress's skirt, had me bucking into his touch. "Mmm, yes!"

"Good girl." He kissed my nape tenderly. "Now, hold up your dress for me. I need to be inside you."

I captured my dress and bunched it around my hips, then I heard fumbling. A zipper drew down, the snap of a condom wrapper, Cal swearing. And then a hard length prodded my ass, and a second later, I was filled with his cock.

"Cal, oh... Cal," I cried out.

His hips smacked against my ass in a slow rhythm, his hands coming up to mold around my tits through my dress. He stroked my nipples until they were stiff peaks. The sound of our bodies slapping together noisily made me even wetter. My legs shook, and I turned my head.

Cal's eyes met mine, and he dove in, capturing my lips in a kiss. I moaned into his mouth, and he pulled my hips against him, his thrusts turning harder, going deeper.

"Cal..." I groaned, unsure what I was asking for.

In response, he worked his hand down to my clit, and it was just what I needed. He stroked slowly, teasing my sweet spot, making me shiver. My head fell back, and I cried out.

He kissed my neck, then slipped his hand beneath my dress and cupped my breast, his work-roughened palm feeling so good against my skin. He captured my nipple between two fingers and pulled.

My cry filled the room and bounced off the walls which seemed to spur Cal to go harder. He ran his hands all over me, caressing me with his expert fingers, and right now, I was racing to that sweet high.

"Do one more thing for me, Allie." Hard thrust. "Come for me."

My control snapped at his rough and demanding request, and my core clenched around him as I came. His growl vibrated on my neck, and his cock seemed to expand as he fucked me deeper, telling me how good it felt. He rode out our orgasms until I was too sensitive to touch, then he pulled out and sagged against me, breathing roughly.

"Where's your bedroom?"

I pointed a trembling hand, and immediately, I was off my feet and cradled in his arms. I burrowed against his chest and shut my eyes as sleep's warm fingers pulled me under.

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## Chapter 13

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## Cal

Unlike the white curtains I'd become used to seeing first thing every morning, blinds kept out the sunshine as I opened my eyes. I rolled over, and my gaze fell on Allie. Last night rushed back into my head in detail, and I found myself reaching for her, brushing my fingers across her smooth, creamy shoulder. She was warm and soft and made me want to wake her up so I could lose myself in her heat again. Or better yet, hold her close, so she slept more peacefully.

Her pretty brown eyes were shut, but her small heart-shaped lips and rosy cheeks were on full display, sweet and precious. Against my better judgment, I reached over and placed a kiss on her forehead. Her button nose scrunched up and she turned away, giving me a full view of her lush auburn hair and pert backside. I drew up the covers so she was well tucked in and ignored my stiffening cock. She was probably still exhausted.

She'd fallen asleep immediately when her head touched the pillow last night, but I'd had time to stay awake and think. With any other woman, I would have bid them goodnight and gone off, but I didn't want to leave her alone. I didn't want to be alone without her, either. So I took off my clothes and held her against my chest. It felt so right, just as right as it felt now, settling her properly in bed, so she slept more peacefully.

What am I doing?

I fell on my back and stared at the ceiling. There was no doubt that whatever this was between Allie and me, it would end badly. But somehow, I couldn't stop myself from wanting more of her. I knew I shouldn't. I should leave now while I could, but this felt different from all the other times I'd been with a woman. *She* was different. Special. And I was going to pursue this to the end, no matter how painful it might turn out.

I slipped out of her bed and headed to the living room. It was small and cozy, and the little knick-knacks on her shelf intrigued me. Did they all have stories behind them? And what were they? I glanced at the bedroom door I left ajar, and replaced the little

wooden horse on the shelf. I'd learn everything with time. Right now, my mind was on breakfast.

Allie's kitchen was as cozy as the rest of her home, and I could almost picture her in it, flitting around and baking her delicious pastries. I slipped into that daydream, baking alongside her.

Opening up the cabinets in search of food rid me of those thoughts. But my face fell with each empty cabinet I met. The only thing I found was coffee. The fridge was empty apart from a head of lettuce that looked like it'd been there for quite some time. I shut it and picked up the coffee.

"At least it's good coffee," I muttered, reading the brand name.

But Allie couldn't have just coffee when she woke up. She deserved a hearty breakfast. I knew I always needed one when I had been drinking the night before.

So I went back to the room and slipped on my shirt and jeans. Back in her kitchen, I found sticky notes and a pen, wrote that I was out to get breakfast, and stuck it to the refrigerator.

The day was cool and colorful, with a light breeze blowing gently, and I couldn't rein in the smile stretching my lips. And when I walked by a baby in a stroller, I had no idea what possessed me, but I leaned in and said "hi," making the baby coo happily.

"How are you today?" her mom said. "Say bye to your friend, Chrissy."

New friend? I wasn't so sure about that, but the smile and wave from baby Chrissy warmed me.

Will would probably laugh his head off if he saw me right now.

That set me straight, and I stepped into the grocery store on the corner, determined to get in and out and stop marveling at everything.

I picked out a basket and walked through the aisles, tossing in ingredients for breakfast, but then I remembered the empty state of Allie's cabinets. She'd require more than just breakfast, so I threw in some more food combos, not certain what she'd like.

Soon, I was done and heading back to her apartment. Some foreign sensation was twisting in my stomach as I pushed open the door; I imagined she would be awake by now. Would she be happy to see me? But the kitchen was empty, and my note was untouched.

I poked my head into the bedroom and found her still sound asleep. My lip quirked. She was so adorable.

After putting the groceries away, I started with breakfast. Usually, I loved to cook with music on, but I didn't want to disturb Allie. My preferences didn't matter right now, as long as she was sleeping peacefully. Plus, the unfamiliar kitchen and the strange quiet were a nice, unknown combination that made me eager to see how my meal would turn out. But I was sure it would be great, as always.

And thirty minutes later, it was, if I did say so myself. The middle of the frittata was solid, and the edges were a beautiful golden brown, just the way I wanted it.

I started the coffee, so it'd be nice and hot when Allie eventually woke up.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was soft and scratchy, twisting at my heart.

I turned to see her standing next to the refrigerator, her eyes heavy-lidded with the remnants of sleep, a curious line between her brows. "Making breakfast."

Her gaze bounced over me to where the pan lay on the countertop. Her eyes brightened, and she bounded into the kitchen in two steps, leaning over to draw in a breath. While she fawned over the meal, I got an eyeful of her porcelain thighs and the curve of her ass barely covered by her oversized T-shirt.

Even a whole morning of preparing a meal couldn't entirely stave off the desire now building behind my zipper. I turned away quickly to pour us some coffee.

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Black." I glanced over at her.

She was pressed up against the counter. "Hmm. I'm hoping you like yours black, too, because I've run out of... everything." Her brows furrowed. "Hey, wait a minute. These didn't come from my kitchen."

I smiled. "Sit."

She did as I asked, and when I handed her the creamed and sweetened mug of coffee, she swallowed it with a sigh. "Oh, tastes so good."

I spun to the counter and drew in controlled breaths. Focus on breakfast, Cal. I dished the frittata, slid her a plate, and then sat opposite her with mine.

The “thank you” had barely left Allie's mouth when she shoved in a forkful. She groaned out loud, delight flitting across her face; she looked like she was in the middle of an orgasm. I gave up trying to distract myself, and I grew harder in my jeans the longer I watched her eat.

I'd been around people who enjoyed my cooking and praised me for it, but nothing had ever pleased me more than seeing Allie eating so enthusiastically, forking food into her mouth with barely a pause.

Her eyes met mine, and she sat up, her cheeks turning pink. “I don't normally go this wild over breakfast.”

“I'll take that as a compliment.” I took a bite from my plate.

Allie smiled. “So, seriously, last I remembered, my kitchen was empty. How did you get all of this and make the best frittata ever?”

“The store on the corner.”

“Oh, that's so sweet. But you didn't have to.” She ate the last piece and moaned. “Wait, no, that should be a thank you with a spoonful of sugar on it because this is glorious!”

I chuckled. “I'm glad you liked it.”

Her gaze zoomed onto the countertop behind me.

Gosh, she was so freaking cute. “You can have more if you want.”

Allie hopped off her seat and danced her way to the pan, plating more and returning to her seat. “How are you not a mammoth of a man?”

“What?”

“If I could cook meals like this every day, I'd never stop eating.”

“Hmm, I could say the same thing about your pastries.”

“Nah, that's not true. I enjoy making them more than I do eating.”

“Maybe I'm that way, too.” I leaned forward, enraptured by her animated face.

Her lips pursed. “Really? So we're alike?”

The deeper meaning of that settled in my chest. As the silence grew, her eyes slid away from mine, as though she wasn't entirely

pleased with that discovery. "Of course we are. We have the same type of eyes, noses, mouths."

Allie's laughter was soft. "Alright, I get it."

The meal passed more quietly, and when our plates were cleaned, Allie spoke. "Thank you for breakfast." Our eyes met, and she smiled softly. "It was really lovely."

I swallowed the last of my coffee, fighting the temptation to reach out and stroke her cheek. "Sure."

As I placed the dishes in the sink, Allie bounded after me and manned herself with a towel. As I washed, she dried. The kitchen was so little that as she moved around to place the dishes where they should go, her soft body rubbed against mine and her jasmine scent filled my lungs.

Did people have "best mornings?" Because this one was becoming mine very fast, and I didn't want to see it end.

A gasp sounded behind me, and I turned to see Allie holding a box of chocolate cereal.

"You got this for me?"

I nodded. "In case you need a quick breakfast on a work day."

"Cal..." Her voice broke on my name, her smile wide. "You went all out. I need to go shopping today anyway, so I would have gotten some."

I shrugged.

"Well, thank you." She replaced the box on the top cabinet, giving me a flash of her behind. Her shirt fell back in place as she resumed clearing up. "I need to go to the farmer's market first, then the pharmacy...and what else?"

She went on thinking out loud, but my brain was stuck on the farmer's market. What better way to enjoy her company more? I had to be there anyway, so we could go together.

We finished up with the plates, and as the last one was put in its place, Allie faced me. "So, thanks a lot for everything."

"You say thank you too much," I replied.

"I can't make a frittata half as good as yours, so there's no way I'll be paying you back with that kind of breakfast."

"You can pay me back another way."

She lifted a brow, her smile flirty.



I started to say *come with me to the farmer's market*, but the words wouldn't leave my throat. That would be too much. Allie may not want to, and having her shut me out would hurt.

"What way? Come on, I'm curious," Allie prompted.

"Always have a good breakfast, okay?"

She frowned like she could tell I was lying, but I left the kitchen before she could respond. I found my jacket, slipped it on, and then put on my shoes.

Allie strolled over to the door where I stood, her eyes warm. "So, have a lovely day."

"I'll try," I said, and because I couldn't help myself and didn't want to, I wrapped an arm around her and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

She whimpered softly like a request for more, but I told myself I'd imagined that.

I waved goodbye and left.

The ride to the farmer's market may have taken me far from Allie, but she was still very much in my head. I realized how much when I walked past a flower stall and considered buying some and taking them back to her. Would she love it or think I was going overboard?

I shook my head and trudged along. I needed to stop these feelings I had for Allie. My mind shouldn't be conjuring her in every aspect of my life. Not only was she leaving soon, but there was also Casey. If he found out, well, that would be bad. Very bad.

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## Chapter 14

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## *Allie*

Searching for a job was draining but a necessary evil I had to endure if my plans of leaving Hannibal were ever going to come to fruition. So I buckled up, armed myself with all kinds of snacks, and went from ad to ad. With each one I clicked, the lower my heart sank. Either the pay was too little, or the job description looked sketchy. Changing tactics, I searched by city.

I started with California. Yay to beaches, celebrities, and top-notch wine. I could love it there. But the job posts on my screen didn't go past the first page.

What? Weren't big cities supposed to have more job opportunities?

I rephrased my search terms and waited, munching on Oreos in the meantime. Two ads added to all the others I'd seen before, and their proposed salaries were...dismal.

I ditched that and went to scour for apartments instead. If the salaries weren't so awesome, but the housing was cheap enough I could get by, then when I found better opportunities, I could move on and...nope. The apartments were super expensive. Looking at it was already causing dread to pool in my gut.

"Argh!" I groaned and collapsed on my back. Why couldn't this be easier? Find a great job, fly across the country, and start my dream life.

I rolled over and planted my face in my pillow. "Everything is so hard." I fake cried, then sniffed, but the scent floating into my lungs pushed aside my worries.

Cal.

He'd slept on this pillow and left his imprint. I inhaled another breath, not caring if it was weird and obsessive. No one could see me, so it didn't matter. I hugged the pillow, wishing it was his big, muscled body instead.

I smiled as I recalled the previous day. At first, I'd woken up worried he'd already left, but then I smelled the most delicious aroma and padded my way to the kitchen to see Cal standing there,

preparing breakfast. I was so shocked I watched him for a full minute, admiring his backside. Then when he turned to me, I all but melted.

It was so sweet of him to make breakfast and stock up my kitchen with a few essentials. Was it crazy I was ready to drop all my Saturday plans and invite him back into my bed? And on his way out, he'd planted the softest kiss on my cheek. I stood stock-still for a full minute after he left, debating whether I should say fuck it and call him back. Even now, a delicious thrum was making my center ache, and I was glad my phone was out of reach before I "checked on him."

This daydreaming about him was what I had feared. I couldn't let him take up space in my head. Yesterday, I combated it by grocery shopping, cleaning, and baking, but today, I had nothing else to do. So, to pass the time and not obsess over Cal, I opened my laptop and searched for jobs and apartments in my dream cities. But even that was so disappointing I returned to thoughts of Cal.

Sighing, I took one last sniff of the pillow and tossed it aside.

"You are leaving Hannibal, Allie, and no man will distract you." Especially not Cal Younger. Even if his hugs felt like a warm sweater on a winter morning, and he smelled so delicious he made my blood race. And he cooked meals that sent me straight to heaven, and he gave the most tender kisses. Not even then.

Sitting up, I drew my laptop close. If California wouldn't work out, another city had to. Anything to keep my goals at the forefront of my mind. I checked out Boston's situation. The apartments were just as expensive as California, but the job sections had multiple ads.

"Finally!" I batted away thoughts of Cal by going from job to job.

As I searched and weighed my options, my chest bubbled with hope. My dreams would come true, and I wouldn't be tied down to Hannibal forever.

"God, I'm going to be here forever." I sighed the next day at work.

"What?" my coworker said.

"Nothing." I drifted away from their conversation circle.

While they weren't all that bad, I was sick of hearing about who did what. Yesterday, I psyched myself up with thoughts of leaving Hannibal by looking for jobs and apartments in Boston. But my bank

account told me that, sadly, it wouldn't be possible for a while. That was probably why today felt like a drag more than all my other work days combined.

I collapsed into my chair and leaned back, closing my eyes. Even from a distance, I could still hear my coworkers' snickers as they shared stories of what other people were doing with their lives.

"Someone save me," I murmured.

"I'll save you." Mia? "With work!"

My eyes opened, and I took in my friend. "Mia!" It was probably excessive, but I hugged her, relief swimming through me.

"Whoa." She chuckled but hugged me back. "Bad day?"

I sat back in my chair, gesturing for her to take the one opposite. "You have no idea."

As ever, Mia sat primly, back straight and legs folded at the ankles. It was surprising as she slipped so easily between her respectable teacher role during the weekdays and wild partygoer on the weekends.

"Tell me about it," she said.

"Where do I start?" I pulled close the box she dropped on my desk, sifting through it. It contained letters from her students to their pen pals in the city.

"Start with why you left the party early."

"Um... It doesn't start there," I said quickly while organizing the envelopes.

"Yeah, right," Mia rolled her eyes. "Seriously, what happened?"

I should probably tell my best friend what was going on with Cal, but how would she take it? I didn't want to see the judgment in her eyes. "Seriously, I just wanted to be home early. About the letters..."

"Those can wait." Mia placed a hand on mine, stopping my work. "What is up with you? Even Stacey thought you were a little distracted."

Mia normally let me open up at my own pace, but when I gave her a reason to worry, she never dropped it. I needed to give her something.

"Ugh, okay," I sighed. "I may have gone online yesterday to do some research."

"Research on?" Her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t be mad.” I lifted both hands defensively.

“Allie! Did you look up jobs and apartments in cities again?”

I cast a glance around to make sure no one caught that. Thankfully, we were all alone. I looked back at my friend, and her disappointed frown made me feel worse. “I just wanted to see what I was up against.”

“But that always makes you sad. You’re already working toward it, you don’t need to beat yourself up about it again and again. Except...” The sympathy left her face, replaced by a frown. “Allie?”

I bit my lip. “Mm-hmm?”

“You know how you always use one thing to distract yourself from another.”

“What?”

“Don’t act surprised.” She pinned me with a stern look I’m sure she usually reserved for her naughty students. “Something more is going on, isn’t it? You’re using looking at jobs to distract you from something else, even if you know looking up jobs makes you sad, but you chose it because it’s a lesser evil of the two. So what’s really bothering you?”

Shit, she knew me too well. “Mia, don’t you think you’re spending too much time away from your students?”

“I don’t have a class until noon, so spill.”

“Uh...”

“Allie?” My supervisor showed up. “I need you to assist with some tasks. Are you busy?”

Code for: You’re never busy. Do as I say immediately.

“No, sir. I’ll be right there.” Code for: Thank you for saving me. “Mia, I should go.”

“Don’t give me that. I know you’re happy he rescued you.”

My lips curved before I could keep them neutral. “I’m not.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling, too. “Get out of here, but you totally owe me the full story.”

“Okay,” I said quickly and hurried after my supervisor. When that bridge came, I’d find an alternative route around it.

Once my shift ended, I changed out of my work uniform, and unlike before, I put on high-waisted jeans and a crop top, then threw on a jacket. Normally, I’d wear a beanie and be on my way, but

today, I couldn't resist letting down my hair, powdering my cheeks, and adding gloss to my lips.

I told myself I wasn't doing it to look good for Cal. I only wanted to feel good since I didn't have a great morning, but as I walked over to his restaurant, I wondered what he'd think when he saw me.

We left things on a pretty good note on Saturday, but we hadn't spoken till now. My belly coiled as I contemplated this. What if he... No! I wasn't giving into the "what if" thought train. I shouldn't crave positive reinforcement for this thing we were doing because it didn't matter, since it was only a fling. Boston was looking like a city that would be great to set my roots down in and blossom into the successful career woman I dreamed of becoming, so I couldn't get attached to a chef who was setting his roots down in Hannibal. It'd never work.

I swallowed a deep breath of the autumn air, hoping it'd dissipate whatever nervousness I had in my chest toward seeing Cal, but it didn't. My heart was still ramming against my ribcage as I turned onto Broadway, and it took all of my control not to glance into a car window and touch up my makeup.

I spotted Cal's truck from a distance, then squinted. Was that him leaning on it? I drew close, and my suspicions were confirmed as his tattooed torso and arms came into view. Didn't the man own a shirt? Not that I was complaining, but damn, way to make a girl hot despite the cool weather.

I pushed aside the growing need between my legs and approached him. Klaus was running laps around a car, chasing something while Cal spoke on the phone. A smile broke out on his face as his eyes met mine, and I found myself smiling back.

Immediately though, his smile was whisked away by whatever the person at the other end said, and he broke out in a quick series of words that made warmth trail down my back and my stomach flip. He was speaking... Spanish? Oh, no.

That growing need was now tenfold, and I knelt and called Klaus over. I needed to make sure my knees didn't buckle unexpectedly, given how worked up I was just by being in Cal's presence. I rubbed Klaus's fur and tried not to think of his owner, but soon Klaus ran off again to continue his chasing game.

I was left to listen to Cal and distract myself by kicking the grass with the toe of my sneakers. I sneaked a few glances his way, and he caught me a couple of times, but I was too entranced to look away, coupled with his bright smile, and I didn't want to look away, anyhow.

He surprised me. I had to hand it to him. He had badass tattoos, rode a motorcycle, and made such good meals that everything else tasted like dirt in comparison. And now he added to his appeal by speaking another sexy language.

He was bad for me. I knew it. And yet, I didn't mind it so much right now. He just kept getting hotter, and I was growing more willing to be burned by his fire.



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## Chapter 15

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## *Cal*

After a week of hard work, the restaurant was shaping up nicely. I stood with my back to the front door and panned my gaze across the large room that served as the main seating area. I imagined I was a guest stepping into the restaurant for the first time. How would I feel? I might've been biased, but all I felt was awe.

"I'm done cleaning out the storage space." Allie turned up at the kitchen's entrance, leaning on the doorway. "What else did you have in mind?"

All thoughts of guests and the restaurant flew out of my head. They were replaced by the sight of her curvy hips and smooth tilt of her neck. She had no idea of the shit I had in mind—it would require a bed and one long night. Most times, I gave her tasks that kept her out of sight so I could think, but she always finished promptly, turned up again, and stole my focus—something I wasn't entirely opposed to.

"I was thinking I'd move the ovens a bit, but..." I looked over her slender frame. The delivery guys who dropped off and installed the ovens were big and beefy, which was the opposite of her.

"You don't think I'm strong enough?" She raised her slender arms to show me her guns.

It took all my effort not to burst out laughing. Those arms were only good for holding onto me while we made love and nothing more. "Well..."

"Fine, I'll show you." She spun, her auburn locks flying, giving me a flash of her rounded ass before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Allie!" I walked into the kitchen to find her straining, her face red, trying to lift the oven.

"What are you doing?" I couldn't hold back my laughter this time. "Even I can't lift it alone."

"I moved it a bit." She eyed me, breathing like she'd run a marathon—or had been bouncing on my dick.

I ignored the wicked thoughts I'd been having way too much and went to see where she pointed.

“Well, I'll be damned,” I marveled at the tiny, tiny shift she made by the mark on the floor. “You're the strongest woman alive, aren't you?”

Allie beamed. “You know it.” She waved me over to the other edge. “Let's lift this, so I don't get all the glory.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed, joining her in moving the oven. We placed it against the wall and went for the second one. Once they were lined up the way I needed, Allie clapped her hands and came to stand beside me.

“Is it the way you want it?”

The slight brush of her smooth arm on mine went to my head, and yes, that was exactly what I wanted.

“Hmm?”

I glanced at her face. Why was she so freaking cute up close? “Sure.” I drew myself away from her side and tinkered with some shit that didn't need tinkering with; anything to get myself under control.

It'd been a week of trading glances and brushing against each other as we worked. Her eyes always lingered on mine, and I'd gotten used to seeing her pretty blush half the time we interacted. Yet, we kept it work centered, not bringing up the weekend we shared, as if we unanimously agreed that it was the last time. Despite this, my cock was at half-mast all the damn time. And if Allie as much as breathed in my direction, it became a struggle hiding just how much I wanted her.

Not only was her body pulling me in, but I also found myself caring about her as a person more and more. I got sucked into her work stories and remembered them as I fell asleep, smiling to myself like I was some pussy in a fairytale enchanted by the princess. Allie in a flowing flowery gown, and no doubt she'd play the part perfectly. My princess.

No, no! Those kinds of thoughts would only lead down a path to heartache.

I needed to relieve myself and get rid of the pent-up desire in my system. The only way to do that— have one last night with her. It made sense to me and my stiff cock. No doubt Allie thought so, too. I glanced behind me, and her eyes shifted quickly, like she'd been

watching me. Yep, I was right on that front. But I couldn't tell her that in so many words.

Instead, I turned, saying, "We're done for the night. What do you think about hitting the bar?"

Allie's brows lifted. "Together?"

Was that a hint of excitement in her tone? I couldn't be sure because my hammering heart was taking precedence. "Yeah." I shrugged noncommittally. "We've covered a lot today, and it's a nice way to unwind. Especially since the restaurant will be opening soon, it'll be like an early celebration."

"Oh," she said, her smile small.

Her silence stretched, and I added, "I'll call Will up, too." Last thing I wanted, but maybe it felt too much like a date between just the two of us. Hell, why was I thinking of a proper date now? Never going to happen.

"Sure, I'll go freshen up."

As she left for the restroom, I called Will. He was on shift and knee-deep in cop stuff, but he told me to have fun. I planned to do that and more.

I'd just finished cleaning up myself and slipped on a clean shirt when Allie emerged from the bathroom. Her beauty smacked me in the face, and I gulped. She was still dressed as before in her blue jeans and crop top, showing off her midriff, but her hair fell around her shoulders now in thick waves. I wanted to run my fingers through it, bury my nose, and inhale her scent. Sometime within the week, she had traded out her usual sweatpants and baggy tees for this type of outfit. I wasn't sure why, but I was damn lustful anytime I saw her, and I wasn't too upset about that.

"Can we go now?"

It took a second to come to my senses. "Sure."

I ensured all the lights were off and all the doors secured before joining Allie in the truck.

"Will's not coming. He's caught up at work," I said, in case his presence was the reason she agreed. "You good?"

I watched Allie's head bob. "Yep, I am."

It was a quiet drive to the bar, but once we stopped in the parking lot at Jeff's, irritation buzzed along my skin, and I wanted to shout.

Probably some stern words at the guys standing outside the bar. I'd never been possessive or jealous, but a feeling very close to those two emotions worked up my spine as I imagined some guy walking up to Allie and talking to her. Which was within the realm of possibility since this wasn't a date.

But Allie was already climbing out of the vehicle, turning her face up and taking a lungful of air, looking like a goddess with zero effort. I mentally facepalmed. I couldn't possess Allie. I could only appreciate every scrap she tossed my way, grateful to be worthy of it. And if she thought someone else was worthy? I scoffed. No one else was.

I climbed out of the truck and joined her as we made our way inside. Sure, guys watched her walk, eyes straying from their dates, but Allie's eyes were all for me. Like we were... No. She wasn't mine, not in that way. And tonight was about ending those pesky thoughts once and for all.

"Allie!" a voice called out, high above the music, and it took a bit of searching to find the face. And a few more seconds to place it.

"Stacey, how are you doing?" Allie shared a hug with Stacey.

As soon as she let go, Stacey turned to me. "Cal, I heard you were back."

We'd grown up in the same neighborhood and gone to school together. Hell, I could place half the faces in the bar. Even though we hadn't spoken in years, her welcoming smile was nice, so I returned it. "I'm sure. This is Hannibal."

Stacey threw back her head with a laugh that showed she'd had a few drinks already. "Yeah, right?" She looked between Allie and me. "You guys here together?"

"Not *together* together. Just here with each other because we ended work for the day and thought a drink would be nice, but we are not here together," Allie said. When Stacey looked confused, she continued, "Will was supposed to be here, but he's busy with work, so we were supposed to be a group. Not us alone."

Her face was growing redder by the second, so I stepped in. "Who are you here with, Stacey?"

"Just some work colleagues." She leaned and whispered. "I'm not opposed to fresh company."

I turned to Allie, leaving it up to her.

"Sure." She smiled.

While Stacey went to retrieve her purse, we slipped into an unoccupied booth. Allie kept a significant amount of space between us, and I figured the reason for her hesitation. She didn't want to be seen with me in a way that suggested we were more than friends. Before I could unpack that, Stacey returned with a burst of energy and sat opposite us.

A waitress showed up almost immediately. Jeff's had been around since I was young, and I couldn't recall there being wait staff.

"Happened about five years ago," Allie said.

I frowned, wondering how she'd read my mind, but Stacey was speaking.

"Allie, you've got to try this cocktail."

I felt Allie stiffen beside me, and I was one hundred percent sure where her mind went. Just to mess with her, I said, "Come on, Allie, try it."

Her gaze met mine, dipped to my lips, not shifting as she addressed the waiter. "I'll take a cocktail, then."

It was my turn to freeze up, but I managed to order without looking away from Allie's brown gaze, too.

"Okay..." Stacey drawled, pulling our attention back to her. "So Cal, tell me, what is it like being a god among humans?"

I raised a brow.

Stacey gestured. "You know, you've had such a successful career, and you're bringing a new restaurant to our town while mere mortals like us haven't done even half of that."

I laughed. "You're exaggerating."

"Probably, but I'm digging for deets on Chicago. What was your life like there?"

That I could get on board with. So we drank and talked about Chicago, and a few times during our conversation, others who recognized me came over to say hi. A realization hit pretty quickly that despite my meeting with some unsavory, disapproving folks, most people my age and a decade younger were cool with me. That gave me a boost. Or maybe that was the alcohol. Or the fact that Allie and I had somehow drifted closer. And her soft laugh was

ringing in my ear, her warm skin rubbing against mine. Or probably all of that.

But next I knew, our eyes met, as they'd been doing all evening. All the feelings I managed to push down this past week soared to the surface, and I kissed her. It was such a shock that we stared wide-eyed at each other; then she kissed me back, and I let go of my beer bottle to cup her face and fully taste her lips.

"You fucker!"

The rough sound jolted me out of the paradise that was Allie. I turned to confirm I'd heard right, and my eyes met my brother's. Casey held a beer bottle in a loose grip in his right hand and wore a stained shirt a size too small for his growing gut. Our eyes met, and his eyes grew dark. Allie stiffened beside me. She'd feared this all along, and now it was playing out.

I needed to calm him down before it got out of hand, so I rose. Allie got up, squeezing out of the booth, and headed off. "Allie!"

Air whooshed past me, and I instinctively leaned away. Casey stood with both hands balled and ready in front of his chest, anger growing in his eyes.

"Casey, you don't want to do this." My brother was the real threat, but I couldn't stop looking for Allie past the gathering crowd.

Casey was seething and went for another punch. His motions were slow, his feet unsteady, but he caught me in the jaw.

"I won't fight you, Casey. Just step out of my way."

He swung again and clipped me in the brow, but I captured his arm with my left hand. Allie was the only thing on my mind, and if I kept entertaining him, I might not get to her in time. I landed a punch on his face and cringed as he collapsed to the floor, flat on his back and motionless.

He'd survive, but I needed to find Allie right now.

I jumped over his body and tore through the crowd.

"She went out the front door," Stacey's voice supplied.

I rushed in that direction, hoping I wasn't too late.

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## Chapter 16

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## *Allie*

The chilly night wind blowing against my skin and raising goosebumps should have bothered me more, but the emotions rolling through me took center stage. I wrapped my arms around myself—whether to keep the cold out or my turbulent feelings in, I wasn't sure. All I knew for certain was I had to get as far away from Jeff's as possible.

Without a plan in mind, I'd left the loud crowded space and broke out into the dark night. It was all I could think of at the moment, and now, I was following through by finding my way home.

I should have brought along a damned sweater. Just as the thought floated through my head, I batted it away. I had no idea tonight would take such a wild turn.

From Cal asking me out, running into Stacey, sharing a drink, and the kiss... I could still feel him against my lips. Warm and soft and tasting of alcohol. The perfect combo to get lost in. All my senses had screamed at me to stop. To pull away. But I gave in, luxuriated in the feel of him against me, snaked my arms around his neck, ready to damn it all. Until Casey appeared.

A shiver shuddered through me, having nothing to do with the cold but everything to do with my greatest worry unfolding before my eyes. And I was powerless to do anything to stop it. Even as I recalled it now, I cringed so hard my shoulders hurt from the tension.

Casey had been drunk and staggering, but he'd seen us, alright. The memory of his harsh curse sent guilt wrapping an unforgiving fist around my stomach. I'd always known. It was some kind of unwritten rule, right? Don't flirt with your ex's brother. Don't sleep with him. And definitely don't kiss him on full display at the local small-town bar.

I'd failed on all counts.

I sighed, looked up at the black sky, and sucked in a breath, but the familiar comfort didn't wash over me. I was alone in my torment. All brought on by myself. I should have set clear boundaries with Cal and told him we could never see each other that way again. But my traitorous body betrayed me.

The crop top hugging my skin and barely keeping me warm was evidence of that. I'd told myself I wasn't trying to look good for Cal. Yet the first day I saw him again, I wore an outfit sexier than my usual sweatpants and T-shirt. I noticed his gaze lingering on my exposed bits of skin; I turned it into a game. Make Cal stare until he forgot himself. I became addicted to the thrill, knowing he was admiring me. So, in the days that followed, when I finished work at the post office, I hung back in the bathroom a little longer and took extra care with my light makeup.

Equally as bad, I let myself go on the no-contact front. We were almost done with the restaurant, anyway. I reasoned that as soon as it opened to the public, he'd be too busy, and I'd be history to him. So in the past week, I took the bits and pieces I got—stray touches, extended eye contact, sweet compliments—and savored every moment.

It all came to a head when he asked me to go to the bar with him. I couldn't have said no, even if all the reasons I should had been written on a banner, tied to an airplane, and flown over my head. I debated for a few seconds, but ultimately, the part of me that stoked the flame of this thing between Cal and me won out.

Now, I was suffering the consequences.

My shoulders slumped, and I pulled in a deep breath, then exhaled.

What was happening at the bar now? Was Cal okay? Did Casey walk away? I hoped he did.

I'd known he'd find out somehow, maybe through a bit of gossip. Nothing was a secret in Hannibal for very long. I didn't just expect him to find us in the act.

My face burned, and I was glad no one was here to read the embarrassment that was no doubt written in my eyes.

Casey's discovery went as bad as I expected, and in front of the entire bar, no less. Everyone had paused to look in our direction, no doubt soaking in every detail to relate to those who were absent.

If only I had just said no, this wouldn't be happening. I'd be at home in bed...wishing I'd said yes because despite how tonight turned out, I didn't regret the moments I shared with Cal.

You know what? Fuck Casey!

Annoyance trickled up my spine, and my feet fell in harder stomps on the pavement. What was he so mad about, anyway? We broke up years ago. Plus, he was the one who dumped me like I was yesterday's trash. Now he was throwing a fit like we were still together. The entitled, possessive jerk!

My internal vexation worked off the cold a bit and gave a burst of energy to my steps. I wanted to get back home, bury myself in the warmth of my bed, and forget guys like Casey existed.

Cal's face flashed in my head, and my steps faltered. Where there was Casey, on the other spectrum was Cal, looking every bit the bad guy with his tattoos and take-no-shit scowl. But in spite of all of that, he was kind and thoughtful and sweet, and I'd left him in the bar to deal with his drunk brother on his own.

My throat closed up, and I glanced behind me. I was too far from the bar, and even if I went back, what could I do? Cal was tough and could handle himself, but the last thing I wanted was for him to get hurt because of me.

I knew how things would probably go down if Casey found out, and I kept entertaining Cal's advances.

Biting my lip, I turned and continued on my way. I just had to trust that Cal was fine and he didn't hate me. Maybe when I got home, I could call him? My stomach tightened with the thought. I could almost imagine him telling me off.

I sighed. "Please, just let tonight end."

Headlights shone behind me, stretching my shadow across the pavement. I glanced back, blinked against the blinding light, and faced forward, quickening my steps.

"Allie!"

I paused and half-turned. Did I hear correctly?

The car with the blinding lights was parked along the curb now, and when the lights went off, my body went stiff. Cal's truck.

Cal jumped out of the driver's seat, his long legs eating up the space between us as soon as they hit the ground. I took an involuntary step back, already preparing for the verbal sparring that'd surely follow. He'd blame me, I'd try to defend myself, and then I'd go home feeling like shit and wishing I'd never gotten caught up in the man. The worst thing that could happen was if he expressed regret

for the time we spent with each other. It was only a fling, I reminded myself. Yet, my heart knew it had meant more than that to me, and I wanted it to stay that way. Not soiled by Casey's confrontation tonight.

But when his face broke into the warm glow of the street light, only worry existed in the depths of his eyes. Relief poured through my body, but then I spotted his reddened jaw and the cut on his brow.

My heart clutched. "What did he do?"

Cal pulled me into his arms, cocooning me, so every breath I drew was all him. My eyes fell shut as I gave into his hold, sagging against him. His breaths fell raggedly against my hair, and his hands moved, smoothing down my back, then up to my hair, as if he was worried about me. But he was the one hurt, not me. Even if his arms gave me the warmth and safety I needed, my worry for him won out. I pulled back and pressed a finger to his jaw. He winced, and a pained sound left my lips. Freaking Casey! I wished I had stayed back at the bar; I could have... protected Cal? Attacked Casey? Probably gotten myself hurt but I was so pissed I couldn't think straight.

Cal's fingers cupped my cheeks, bringing my eyes back to his and snuffing out my annoyance.

"You okay?" he spoke quietly.

My throat clogged up. He was the one in pain, yet he was asking how I was. I sucked in a breath and nodded quickly.

His smile softened the worried look in his eyes. "Want to come over and have something to eat?"

Warmth fluttered in my belly. Was he really asking that? But his patient eyes stayed on mine, waiting for an answer. Breathing slowly, I nodded again. Somehow, words escaped me tonight.

Cal's shoulders sagged, and he took my hand in his, leading me around the truck to the passenger seat. As if forgetting I could get in myself, he curved his arms around me, lifted, and deposited me in the seat, looking deeply into my eyes before shutting the door.

I was breathless, sensing a new dynamic emerging between us, and it warmed me to the core. Cal got in beside me and drove off, and I sank into my seat and kept my gaze out the window. Tonight

was messed up, but the worst feeling was fading away since I had Cal next to me.

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## Chapter 17

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## *Cal*

Allie sat opposite me in the kitchen, her face fixed on her bowl of soup, only occasionally lifting her head long enough to take a chunk of bread and go back to eating. She was avoiding my gaze. Even if I couldn't see her eyes, the set of her jaw told me she was upset about tonight.

I clenched my fist, mad everything had turned out the way it did. Casey, the absolute asshole! He'd scared the shit out of her. And I worried like hell when she left. I wasn't sure how I was going to find her and whether she'd be willing to talk to me. But she let me hold her and bring her home to feed her.

Despite how fucked-up tonight was, I was glad she was filling her belly. Her eyes lifted, meeting mine for the first time since we got here. She swallowed, which did nothing to hide her over-stuffed mouth.

Any other day, I'd have laughed. Allie devoured my meals, which pleased me, but there was no space for humor right now. What happened was a heavy cloud hanging over us. Allie's eyes went back to her food, and I kept pushing around the chicken in my soup. Even Klaus had read the room. Instead of coming around for scratches like he usually did, he sat in a corner, looking at us with his big puppy dog eyes.

I sighed, the sound too loud in the otherwise quiet kitchen. Allie's gaze met mine again, but like before, she looked away without saying a word. Shit, I wasn't even sure what to say.

I could tell her it would be alright, but that'd be lying. I wasn't sure how anything would go now. Casey trashed my windows because I refused to give him money. Now he had an even greater reason to be mad at me and do something more foolish.

I just fucking hoped he left the restaurant out of it. I wasn't ready to go through another grueling round of calls to wring money from the insurance company. Even if the last time produced enough to fix the windows and install security cameras. At least one consolation

was that the newly installed cameras would capture anything he might try to do.

I hoped like hell he didn't try anything. He got on my last nerve, but he was still my brother. I didn't want to see him in jail.

A clinking sound brought my head back into the moment. Allie was almost done with her soup and getting the last of it on her spoon.

Our eyes met, and she shrugged. "It's good soup."

A surprised chuckle escaped my lips. Finally, she'd loosened up enough to speak. Her words hung in the air as we cleared the table and took the dishes to the sink. I washed while Allie rinsed, and when we finished, I grabbed a towel and dried my wet hands. She stood to my left, leaning against the counter, arms crossed over her chest.

I kept my eyes on my hands, but all I saw was her in the periphery of my vision. What was she thinking?

"Cal." Her voice was quiet and small but somehow filled the space.

I lifted my gaze to her. The unsure look in her eyes gutted me. I didn't expect her to stay over. It was our fooling around that had caused issues in the first place, but she looked ready to leave and never come back. I gulped past the lump in my throat and waited for the inevitable.

Allie's head cocked to the side, her gaze roaming over my face intently as her lower lip slid between her teeth. I pulled my eyes away, not ready to stir up feelings that would go unsatisfied.

"Thanks for dinner."

I shrugged noncommittally, but my heart was running a mile a minute.

Allie approached me, her steps a tad hesitant but her face lined with determination. She covered my hands with hers and peeled away the towel, dropping it on the sink. Her palms were warm, soft, and soothing, and I held back a satisfied groan in my throat. Why did she affect me so much? And what the fuck was she doing? If she told me she'd like to go home after putting her tender hands on me, it'd be the worst kind of torture.



"It's my turn to take care of you," she said, lacing our fingers and leading me down the short hallway to the bathroom.

My mind was reeling as I followed her. She backed me up against the tub, placing both hands on my shoulders and pushing down gently. I sat, unable to fully comprehend what the fuck was happening, but as long as it kept Allie close to me, I'd go along with it.

She drew close, standing between my legs. Her eyes met mine before skating lower. To my lips? No, to my jaw, and her fingers followed. I tried to hide my wince, but she was so close she saw every movement.

"Do you have something to disinfect the wounds?"

"Top cabinet," I said. As a chef who constantly worked with knives, I kept a first aid kit close by, in case I ever needed it. I had no idea I'd be needing it for my face, and a beautiful woman would be the one fixing me up.

*It's my turn to take care of you,* she'd said.

It warmed something inside me, but before I could fully make sense of it, a flash of porcelain skin caught my eyes. Her top had ridden higher, showing her creamy, smooth stomach. A new hunger clawed up my throat—to taste and kiss that sliver of skin until it pinked, and she squirmed beneath me.

"Got it," she announced, dropping back down.

My gaze snapped away, and I thought of anything else. Getting a hard-on as she tried to fix my face would surely push her away.

She dropped the supplies on the counter, then went to the sink to wash her hands. A shocked gasp hit my ears, and I was on my feet.

"Allie?"

She spun, pointing to the wet spot on her chest. "The faucet sprayed me!"

I cringed. "I should have mentioned that. Sorry." I'd been so busy with work at the restaurant I had neglected home repairs. I knew how to maneuver the tap head to avoid being doused, but I'd been too distracted to warn her.

"I'm soaked!" She laughed with shock.

An unbidden image popped into my head that had to do with everything to do with her dripping wet but zero to do with water.

"Take it off. I'll get you a shirt."

"No, sit," Allie said. Her face flushed, and she spun away to complete her hand washing. "We can't let the wounds remain unattended."

Damn, now I couldn't stop picturing her without a shirt. Shit. I reclaimed my spot on the edge of the tub and waited.

Hands clean, she kept her back to me and took off the wet shirt. My gaze went to the mirror, and I inhaled to keep myself grounded. Hanging the shirt to dry, she turned to me, now clad in only her bra and jeans.

"Ready?" Her smile was as innocent as could be.

"Ready," I choked out.

As she started with the bruise on my chin, I wondered if she was put out by me. Maybe I'd simply imagined it. She was certainly very comfortable letting me watch the soft jiggle of her tits every time she moved.

Or maybe she's simply trying to help you, Cal.

Fuck, of course. I tried to keep my eyes on her face, but damn. I'd never struggled against anything as I did at this moment. Just one peek, and I'd satisfy my curiosity. That's all. My eyes moved down and Allie's lifted, catching my gaze.

Her brown eyes held amused suspicion. I licked my lips, hoping she didn't bring it up. Those eyes became hooded, and her breath turned heavier. Just a little. But it was enough for me to notice.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

My cock? "What?"

"Your face."

I touched the Band-Aid on my chin. "Oh." I didn't feel a thing because I was completely distracted. "No, it's fine."

Allie gave me a small smile and stood. "Now, your brow."

Her chest was even with my face in this new position, and I should have closed my eyes, but I didn't want to miss the creamy mounds nearly popping out of her bra. Her motions remained steady, but her chest rose and fell faster. As if having my eyes on her turned her on. I bet if I stroked the spot between her legs, I'd find her wet and ready.

"Ow!" I pulled my face from her touch.

"It's the disinfectant," she said, a small smile playing on her lips. "Just sit still."

"Easy for you to say," I murmured.

She pressed the spot again, my hands flew to her hips, and she laughed.

"You're such a baby."

"It hurts like hell."

"It'll be over soon, I promise," she said.

Thankfully, the cleaning part was over, and she stretched a Band-Aid across the spot.

"That should heal nicely; hopefully, it won't leave a scar." Her gaze met mine.

"Thanks," I smiled at her. "For taking care of me."

She smiled back, remaining where she stood. The fingers running over the bandage to smooth it in place now trailed up to my hair and rubbed my scalp softly.

My eyes drifted closed, and a sigh escaped me. "What are you doing?"

Allie's voice held amusement when she asked, "Like it?"

"Love it," I said, and just to show how much, I tugged her closer. Plump breasts pressed against my face, and Allie gasped but didn't move away. Was it my imagination, or did she lean closer?

Both hands were now massaging the stress from me, and I wanted to give her something in return, or take more, or both. Whatever it was, I turned my head, placed an open-mouthed kiss on her left breast, and then sucked on the flesh. Allie jumped, making a sexy sound that sent a wave of desire straight to my dick.

Spurred on, I rubbed down her slender hips and kneaded her pert ass as I kissed her chest. I traced my hands up her back to her bra clasp.

"Can I take it off?"

"Please," Allie whispered.

All hesitation left me, and I opened the clasp. She wiggled free of the bra, her beautiful tits bouncing in my face. The moment she leaned back in, I captured both in my hands and played with her nipples, pinching and tugging on them with my fingers. They pebbled in a second, and Allie pressed even closer, moaning with delight.

Understanding pierced through my lust-fogged brain, and I brought my mouth to her nipple, licking languidly. Fuck, yeah.

"Oh, Cal."

She was decadent. Better than the best meal I could ever whip up, and I wasn't stopping until I'd had enough. I switched between breasts, licking, nipping, and sucking. Her fingers were no longer rubbing on my scalp, just holding on as I pleased her.

She shifted constantly, and I grabbed her hip.

"Stay steady for me, Allie," I gritted out.

"I-I can't." She moved against my hold.

"Should I help?" I spoke before circling my tongue over the hard peak.

"O-okay," she said brokenly.

While I feasted on her tits, I reached between us and undid the button on her jeans, tugging the zipper down. When my fingers grazed the warm flesh between her thighs, Allie cried out, her head falling back. I dragged the material down her legs and stroked a finger over her panties. Soaking wet, just as I had predicted. A savage pride filled me, and I wanted to give her more until she crumpled against me.

I worked my finger under the fabric and dragged it through her folds. So pliant and responsive, she wiggled against me, trying to match my movements, rubbing herself all over my fingers to get pleasure.

My cock was rock-hard in my jeans, begging for attention, but Allie came first. She always would. I stopped long enough to slide down her panties, and Allie whined a complaint that had me growling and diving back in to pleasure her.

While I held her hip steady with my left hand and my right worked between her legs, my mouth alternated between both breasts, unable to get enough. Her pleased cries hit my senses, making me work harder to bring on her orgasm.

I slipped a digit, then two, into her dripping channel. Her head fell against my shoulder, and she gasped, grinding wildly on my fingers.

"That's it, baby girl." My voice was a choked rasp. "Ride my fingers; make yourself come."

At that moment, Allie clenched hard and moaned long and loud, then she spasmed around my fingers, her entire body shaking. She raked my shoulders with restless fingers, clinging to me. I grinned and absorbed her weight as she leaned heavily against me, her stuttered breaths hot on my neck.

"Cal," she moaned.

"I'm here." I pressed a palm to her back, holding her against me as the last tremors of her orgasm flowed through her. "How do you feel?" I asked when she let out a satisfied sigh.

"Well..." she started, turning in my lap, then her thigh grazed my hard length, and a choked sound left me. Her eyes widened and drifted down. She licked her lips, and it was clear what she wanted to do.

"Allie, you don't have to," I said.

"I want to." She slid off my lap and knelt between my legs before I could say more.

I gulped, unable to protest even if I wanted to. She was a vision before me. Her thighs were spread wide and wet with her release, and her breasts looked like ripe berries, reddened by my mouth. Her eyes were on mine, eager hands undoing my belt buckle and zipper, exposing my cock.

She sucked in a breath before diving in like I was a damned feast, with no warning. Her mouth wrapped around me, and breath gasped out of me. Her moan vibrated along my length, twisting my stomach with sensation. As if spurred on by my reaction, she took me deep in her throat.

My eyes rolled back in my head, blood surging through my veins. "Fuck, Allie."

Her mouth popped off my dick and she caught her breath, then eagerly dove in again. I ran my hands down her hair, disbelieving I was such a lucky bastard, and I took in the sight of her. She was beautiful with her lips stretched around my cock, brown eyes occasionally lifting to meet mine, gauging my reaction.

"You're doing a good job, baby girl." More than good; I had no words, just grunts and the occasional curse.

My inadequate praise still pleased Allie. More than pleased as she slipped her fingers between her thighs, pleasuring herself as she

sucked me off.

“Fuck!” I rasped, unable to stop myself from thrusting upward. She was going to make me spill my seed down her throat if she kept it up. And I had other ideas. I reached down and pulled her up.

Allie gasped but quickly melted against me as I kissed her. I stood and walked us to the sink. Tearing my lips from hers, I spun her around, so she faced the sink.

“Hands on the counter,” I instructed, feverish with need.

Allie obeyed immediately, mewling and lifting her hips toward me.

I looked down at her inviting ass and quickly shrugged off my jeans. They caught around my ankles, but I couldn't wait to take them off all the way. Leaning in, I kissed her shoulder as I captured my cock in my fist, pumping up and down a few times, then slid into her heat. We both exhaled, and our eyes caught in the mirror.

Our gazes held as I pushed inside her, bottoming out, and letting her feel the extent of my desire for her. She pulsed around my length, accepting every inch and grinding back up against me.

“Allie...” I grunted out. I wasn't going to last. She felt too fucking good.

I slipped a hand between her thighs and found her clit, stroking in a circular motion while I slammed into her from behind. “Can you come for me again?” I panted out because I was so damn close and wanted to feel her tightness squeezing me when I did.

Allie's eyes shut for a second, but she peeled them open and gazed into mine. “Yes.”

Growling, I redoubled my efforts, pounding into her so hard her tits jiggled while my fingers worked faster.

Her eyes broke off from mine, her head falling back against my shoulder. “Cal, I'm—Oh, Cal!”

She screamed as she came, and the blessed tightening had me releasing into her depths. I growled against her shoulder, my body convulsing as cum wrenched from my balls.

“What the—” The words died in my throat as the wave of satisfaction pulsed through me over and over.

Finally, I sighed, falling forward but catching the edges of the sink, so I didn't crush Allie.

“Let's clean up?” I managed to say.

Allie's eyes blinked heavily, her skin glowing with a sheen that only came from a good orgasm. "Yes."

So, we got into the shower and washed up before returning to the bedroom. While I toweled my hair dry, Allie drifted to my closet and re-emerged in one of my T-shirts. My heart squeezed.

"Hope you don't mind?" She dropped onto the bed face first.

I chuckled and slipped on my sleep bottoms. "Not at all."

I got in next to her, and she crawled into my arms immediately, her head against my shoulder, her side pressed to mine. Sliding in so perfectly, I wondered how she'd never been here before. She fit just right.

Pulling the cover over us, I held her close until her breathing turned heavy. I willed myself to join her, but my mind wouldn't rest. The past weeks with Allie were the best I'd had in a long time. And going by how she acted around me, I knew it wasn't one-sided.

I combed aside her hair to watch her peaceful face. I wanted her here with me. Always. Forever. Fuck, where did that thought come from? But I knew it had always been there. I kept pushing it away, hoping tonight would be the last, that I could get her out of my head. But I couldn't because I was falling for her. Even if I knew she was leaving, my damned heart was becoming invested.

I didn't doubt if I so much as hinted at it, I'd lose her before she even left Hannibal. She was pretty adamant about getting out of our small town, and I was staying here; she would think I wanted to hold her back. I wasn't going to do that.

Sighing, I stared at the ceiling, wishing sleep would steal my thoughts. My eyes drooped, but a final thought churned in my head. What if Casey was the reason Allie was determined to leave all along? What if she wanted nothing more to do with me because of him?

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## Chapter 18

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## *Allie*

Last night was stuck in my head on repeat. I kept replaying every single thing that went down. Most people might start the memory from the bar fight and likely obsess over the fact their ex now knew they had a thing for his brother, but not me.

My focus skipped over that crucial element and got stuck on the time afterward. Cal finding me, taking me to his house, and insisting he make dinner. No matter how conflicted I felt over everything that happened, I'd have been a fool to say no to his cooking. And good Lord, the chicken soup was so delicious I embarrassed myself by stuffing my face, but he only looked at me like I was the cutest thing he'd ever seen.

Nope, don't go there. I shook my head.

But my foolish heart dove straight for that thought and latched on. I didn't miss the way his eyes kept sliding to mine or how he reacted when I drew close to him. All of that was confirmed ten times over in the bathroom. He wanted me.

"Oh, God." I sighed and dropped onto the couch. He'd brought me home this morning since I said I had stuff to do, but I was getting nothing done. I was stuck on thinking of him.

He was starting to monopolize all my brain power, and I wasn't sure how to change that. I'd convinced myself it'd just be a simple fling, but damn, I couldn't think without Cal popping in my head every other minute, and a stupid smile grew on my face each time. Even now, I felt my lips tipping up as I remembered his reaction when I cleaned his wound.

"Such a softy." I laughed, caught myself, and brought a throw pillow to my face, groaning into it.

You cannot fall for Cal. You're leaving.

I was. It'd been my dream for the longest time, and Cal, on the other hand, was back here to stay. But—

Quickly, I shook my head. My dreams weren't about to change for a man.

*But it's Cal*, my silly thoughts interrupted.

Just a man. I clenched my teeth hard, shooing away the pesky thought. Even if—and it was a very big if—I decided to consider changing my plans for Cal, he hadn't even said anything to warrant it. I should be sated for at least a month from the way he fed me, took care of me, and gave me such a thorough loving. Or till the next time I thought of him. Which was now. And I was getting turned on again.

Groaning, I grabbed my phone. I needed some sense kicked into me. There was no better person to do it than my best friend.

"Mia," I said once she picked.

"Allie boo, how are ya?"

"Good, good." I exhaled, worried she'd be mad I didn't tell her sooner, but knowing I couldn't back out now. She probably already heard about what happened last night. Stacey was there, too. Maybe Stacey told her. But Mia would have called me immediately. Unless she was so mad, she didn't want to speak with me. But why would she answer the call if she wanted to avoid me?

"Allie, everything okay?"

I snapped back to the present. "Sure, yeah, of course." Sighing, I said, "Mia, I've got news for you."

"OMG, juicy?"

"Very juicy. Come over?"

"Right away!" Mia squealed.

I heard a thump, and I imagined her falling over herself to get dressed. So she didn't know. At least I could break it to her myself.

"Careful," I said, then ended the call.

In less than fifteen minutes, a gasping Mia was at my door. My brows knitted as I took in her ruffled hair and sweaty forehead.

"Did you run?"

Mia cut past me. "A girl's gotta do what she can for the juicy news." She dropped onto the couch and patted the spot beside her, her smile wide. "Now, spill."

Swallowing a breath, I sat, folding my legs and placing a pillow on my thighs. "Where do I start?"

"From the beginning, boo. And don't leave out any deets," she warned, a finger pointed at me.

I laughed.

"I'm not kidding. I know you've been hiding something." Mia eyed me, a flash of annoyance in her gaze, but quickly cleared it up with a sweet smile. "But all is forgiven just as soon as you tell me everything. Leaving out nothing."

So I did. I told her about running into Cal, wanting to supplement my income, so I started working for him.

"Oh my, Allie," she fanned herself. "How did you survive around all his hotness?"

My face turned red, and I ducked my head.

"You didn't!" Mia mimicked my sitting pose. "Tell me! Ah, I'm dying."

Despite how I felt toward everything, her excitement lightened the mood, reminding me of when we were teenagers and gushed over a boy. Only Cal was not a boy, and this didn't feel like a crush that would fade within a couple of weeks. We had spent time together, and he was digging deeper into my system, wanting to become something more, something permanent.

As I continued narrating how things had progressed between Cal and me, Mia's eyes kept growing wider until I was sure her eyes would pop out if I didn't finish.

"So that led up to last night."

Mia eyed me, a sly smile on her face. "Allie, you sexy goddess."

I buried my face in my hands, laughing. "I didn't do anything special."

"Yeah, except make Hannibal's baddest boy fall for you."

My heart skipped. "He hasn't fallen for me."

"Um, did I just hear you tell the story?"

"He is not into me like that," I repeated firmly.

Sensing I was getting upset, Mia tapped my thigh. "Don't mind me. Tell me about last night."

Sighing, I ran down what happened. "Since we were with Stacey, I was sure she'd tell you."

Mia shook her head. "Stacey's not like that."

I made a mental note to give her the biggest hug when next we saw each other. Continuing, I narrated how Cal and I kissed, then Casey showed up. "I freaked out, Mia. I just bailed. I was so sure Cal would hate me."

Mia's lips moved in a sympathetic smile. "Let me guess. He didn't?"

I rubbed my neck, her theory sounding more accurate by the minute. "No. I was walking home when he found me and took me over to his house and made us dinner."

Mia dramatically pressed a hand to her forehead and leaned back, swooning.

"Mia," I laughed, tapping her arm. "It wasn't like that. I was worried. We were worried."

"And now you're going to tell me he kissed your worry away," she returned, a big smile on her face.

I lowered my eyes, my cheeks heating up.

"More than kissed!" Mia was on her feet, flushed with excitement. She hopped back on the chair. "Tell me all about it, or I'm going to pass out."

I laughed. "Mia, I can't give you the details."

"Fine," she grumbled but lightened up immediately. "On a scale of one to ten, how hot was it?"

I took in her twinkling eyes, shaking my head, but then I considered. "Um, he broke the scale?"

My friend faked passing out, and I shook her awake, laughing. "You clown! Stop."

She giggled as she sat up, taking in my face. "You're blushing apple red. I'm glad he makes you feel good."

"Well, he does, but Mia, I'm leaving Hannibal soon." I sobered quickly as the words left my lips. "I don't want to let myself get carried away."

Mia leaned forward and took my hands in hers, her eyes warm on mine. "Truth be told, Allie—"

"This isn't going to be good."

Mia quirked a smile. "Just listen."

I pressed my lips shut and waited for her to find her words.

"Look, weeks ago, you were a zombie."

"What?"

"A very-determined-to-get-out-of-Hannibal zombie, but my point still stands. You were simply plodding along, moping, and hating

your life here, and no matter how I tried to cheer you up, you remained gray and dull."

"Okay, this just feels like a personal attack."

"Shush, this is a heart-to-heart moment."

I laughed but straightened. "Fine, go on."

"But then, for the past few weeks, I've noticed a spark of life in your eyes. And it's been a while since you've called me and ranted about all the reasons you hate being here."

"Really?"

Mia smiled warmly. "Yes, Allie."

I thought about it. Truthfully, the times I fantasized about leaving Hannibal were few and far between. I hadn't even checked job boards recently. "So?"

"So, you know exactly what I'm driving at."

"You're not going to tell me?"

"No, boo. You'll make your own decisions like the big girl you are."

Sighing, I sagged back onto the couch's arm. "I just wish it were easier."

Mia rubbed my thigh. "I trust you. You'll figure this out."

"I hope so." I was lost in my thoughts when Mia spoke again.

"There's something I'm curious about, though..."

"Mia, I'm not telling you the size of Cal's dick."

She gasped. "Allie, is that how you see me?" I eyed her, and she wiped the fake outrage off her face. "Okay, that'd be valuable information."

"Nope."

"Big?"

"Very."

"That's all I needed." We laughed. "But that isn't what was on my mind."

I waited, knowing Mia would get it out.

"Remember you once said your last boyfriend was boring in bed."

"Oh, God." I palmed my face.

"Come on." She tapped my arm. "Do a quick compare and contrast."

I laughed. "Okay, where Cal's a scale-breaker, my ex is a two."

"A two for effort?" Mia said.

"For effort," I agreed.

We both burst into laughter, and when we'd calmed, I wiped away a tear.

"Thank you, Mia, I really needed this."

"Looks like you need a lot more." She wrinkled her nose, looking around my messy living room.

"I've been busy!" I protested.

"Uh-huh." She eyeballed me.

"Ugh, I hope my relationship with Cal gets old fast."

"It won't. You're going to hear about it every single time we're together."

I didn't doubt she would torture me with teasing about Cal. "If I have to suffer through that, then do it while we clean up."

Surprisingly, Mia didn't bail but stayed and helped me tidy up. Even though we finished before lunch, she hung around till dinner.

"Just stay the night," I said mildly, knowing her weekends were precious to her.

"Of course, boo." She hugged me. "I'm not leaving you."

To show how much I appreciated her company, I took out my favorite snacks and made us tea. We built a blanket fort in the living room and huddled underneath with a lamp.

"Who's reading?" Mia pointed at the fairytale romance novel.

"You," I said.

As she started to read from the point in the book we both loved, my mind drifted to Cal, fitting him into the image of the book's prince. I idly wondered if everything would work out; if my life could be like the story's, finishing up with a nice little happily ever after. But this was real life, so I doubted it was possible.

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## Chapter 19

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## *Cal*

After thinking of Allie constantly on Saturday, I'd learned my lesson by Sunday. It was a miracle I didn't drive over to her place and beg her to talk to me. We'd woken up on Saturday morning, tangled in each other's arms. I'd kissed her, and she'd responded, but when I moved to stroke between her thighs, she froze and jumped from the bed.

"I have to go," she'd said, but her eyes kept dropping to my cock, her face going red. It was apparent she wanted to crawl back into bed with me. Hell, that would have made the morning perfect. Instead, she looked away and said something about having lots to do.

I stopped thinking with my dick and agreed. We both had lots to do. After working all week, the weekends were usually for taking care of personal shit. But the only thing I wanted to take care of at the moment was my girl and keeping her satisfied.

"I'll get dressed." She went into the bathroom and locked herself in for long minutes before coming out into the living room.

Already, I'd thrown on a shirt and jeans and sat waiting.

"You don't have to come. I can walk," she said.

"Like hell you will." She had no idea how she looked. She'd tried to hide it, but how she spent her night was pretty obvious. Her hair was in messy bun, her face glowing, and her clothes a little wrinkled. Even still, she was so beautiful. I couldn't let her walk around looking so well-fucked and gorgeous.

So I drove her home and watched her walk into her building before driving back, then spent my day thinking about her. It was crazy. I was a grown man who'd been with numerous women, but none had managed to mesmerize me as Allie did. The sex was amazing, but it was more than that. Her kind heart, her ambition, and her sense of humor all had me captivated. And her facial expressions, the way she looked when she was excited, mad, or unhappy, all of that stayed in my head. And the look I saw on her face when I left her indicated she was worried.



We'd both stayed silent on what had happened with Casey, but I was sure it wasn't settled for her, just as it wasn't for me. We would need to deal with the consequences, one way or another. I couldn't care much about Casey, though. What I cared about was what she was thinking and how she felt. And I couldn't know that unless she talked to me.

I'd been so tempted to go back and ask her to confide in me, but I needed her to be ready and willing, too. The conflict played out in my head until midnight, when I finally dropped into bed and slept.

So, on Sunday morning, I turned to the one thing that could keep my mind from fixating on Allie. I brought out the restaurant menu and resumed working on it.

However, trying recipes, and eliminating and adding options, reminded me of her. I was certain she'd love this aspect of planning, but I couldn't pull her in deeper by asking her over. We hadn't yet settled the past, and inviting situations that allowed me to be around her and ingrain my feelings for her even more was not wise.

Keeping my head down, I focused on my work. Luckily, I got sucked in, and time flew by. It was evening when I tasted the last meal and determined it was good enough to exist on my restaurant's menu.

Whooshing out a breath, I picked up the notebook and skimmed the messy page. In between all the notes and crossed out scribbles, I had a complete menu. Pride bloomed in my chest. It was happening. Just a few finishing touches, and I'd be set to open. Finally.

With a smile on my face, I stored the book away and cleared the kitchen. I reached into the cupboard, grabbed a loaf of bread, and laid it out on the table. When I was alone, despite knowing how to make any meal, from the best comfort food to the fanciest dish, my favorites remained breakfast foods. I made myself an egg sandwich and savored it at the kitchen table.

Afterward, I headed outside for the last thing on my to-do list. While Klaus ran and played in the yard, I washed my motorcycle until it gleamed in the setting sun.

It was fully dark when we got back in. After I showered, I was ready for bed. I went downstairs and started shutting off the lights

when the sound of a running engine pulled me to a stop.

Frowning, I grabbed my phone and opened the front door, looking out. A run-down Camry was parked halfway on my lawn with the tail end sticking out in the road.

I shut the door behind me and stepped forward, squinting my eyes to see who it was. Maybe a neighbor lost control of the wheel, but as I stepped forward, my brother's hard gaze glared back at me.

"For fuck's sake," I sighed, annoyed but not entirely surprised.

The car's tires screeched, circling in one spot and digging into the lawn as he tried to move forward. Giving up, he jumped out. He smacked his head on the door and staggered, groaning and clutching his head.

He was so damn drunk I could almost smell him from this distance. How had he even managed to drive? Hell, he couldn't even park his car properly. Worry fisted my gut. The body of his car was dented, and I wondered if anyone had been unlucky enough to get hit tonight. Forget our quarrel; this was madness. He shouldn't be on the road in this state. But the last thing I wanted was to be anywhere near him.

I thumbed my phone's screen, considering calling Will. It'd be shitty to hand my brother over to the cops, but he needed a safe place to get sober, or he'd get himself hurt.

"You!" His voice grated.

Jesus. I struggled not to roll my eyes. He was unsteady on his feet, but somehow found the strength to still be mad at me. "What, Casey? Get the hell out of here."

"You fucking stole her from me!"

I clenched my teeth, fighting the anger rising in my chest. He was a drunk bastard, and I refused to engage him.

"You fucking sleep with anyone that blinks in your direction, which led you to Allie, right? Did you always have the hots for her?"

I facepalmed. This was too ridiculous, even for Casey. But he went on, jabbing a finger my way, his voice raw and angry. It was almost ten, and my neighbors were probably trying to sleep. All of his yelling was bound to keep people up.

"You're a good-for-nothing little shit, Calvin. Dad told me."

My brows lifted.

“That got your attention, didn't it?”

I firmed my jaw, looking away. My dad was a sore spot, and Casey knew it. Right now, he was determined to rub it in.

“He told me he fucking regrets you. He wishes you were never born. You ruined his life. All our lives.”

That made zero sense. I knew he was lying, trying to get under my skin. Yet, no matter how I rationalized it, I couldn't help but picture the times my dad and I fought when I was much younger. He'd get so red in the face he looked ready to burst. Casey was the one who showed promise in football. I was the older son who wanted to cook. The disappointment.

“That's a lie,” I replied.

“You wish. You should have never come back to Hannibal. You're nothing but the guy everyone hates and wishes they'd never see again because you ruin lives, Cal. You ruin everything. As you did with me and Allie.” He went on like anything he said had merit. “And I'm going to ruin your fucking life.”

Those words pierced through my thoughts. That was an outright threat. My brows drew down, and I called Will's line. Once he answered, I placed the phone on speaker. “You should leave, Casey.”

“Fuck you, Cal.” He sneered. “You hide behind your pretty house with your fancy truck and think you're better than me. Not for very long because I will ruin everything you hold dear.”

My mind went to Allie and the anger running through me surged to the surface.

“Your little restaurant, your little house, I'll burn it all down.”

Casey's words could easily be given a pass as drunk ramblings, but the darkness in his eyes was very real, the hate very potent.

He marched forward. “You'll lose everything, and then you'll go back to Chicago in shame.”

“Stay back, Casey. Don't make me hurt you again.”

Casey cackled like that was amusing. “Fuck you, Cal. I'd beat your fucking face into the ground on any day.”

I scoffed, making him more enraged.

“Just stay away from Allie. She's mine!”

“You fucking nutcase,” I said incredulously. “You broke up with her back in high school for no fucking reason. It's not my fault your life is so empty you want to ruin other people's lives. Get off my fucking lawn and go fix your own shit.”

Casey turned a mottled shade of red, and he yelled, running toward me. I widened my stance, ready to kick his ass again, but then two cop cars spun into the driveway, their sirens wailing and lights flashing.

Cops jumped out.

“Don't move! Hands in the air!” Will's voice filled the night.

Casey jolted to a stop and raised both hands. His glare was venomous as he trained his eyes on me, and I had no illusions this would be our last confrontation.

As another cop read him his rights and cuffed him, leading him away, Will climbed up the steps to me, a frown on his face. “You okay, man?”

I glanced at Casey, who was being hustled into the back of the police car, before looking back at my friend. “Yeah, I guess.” My voice came out a little tight. I had no idea when I returned to Hannibal that calling the cops to arrest my brother would be in my future.

“You did the right thing,” Will said. “And very smart.” He nodded toward my phone.

I forced out a smile.

“You'll be okay?” he asked.

“Sure.”

I watched Will join the other cops and haul Casey away, consoling myself with Will's words. I had done the right thing.

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## Chapter 20

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## *Allie*

The knot in my stomach tightened with every tick of the clock on the wall. For once, I dreaded what came after work. And that was saying a lot since today had been packed with all the grunt work I despised. Yet, I would rather forever loop in this boring, mind-numbing drudgery than finish up and go to Cal's restaurant.

Bless Mia's heart for hanging with me on Saturday and keeping my anxious thoughts at bay. But when Sunday came around and she was gone, the worry popped back up and now was causing a cacophony in my brain that wouldn't allow me to concentrate. Twice, my coworkers had to drag my attention to my mistakes, and now they were giving me weird looks. Sure, most of them must have heard what happened on Saturday, but frankly, that was the last thing on my mind, so I paid them no attention. Not entirely because I didn't care, but I didn't have any energy left after considering what to do about Cal and me.

Close to noon, I picked up my phone, ran through my call log, and eyeballed his number. My finger hovered over the screen. Should I call him and say I can't make it? Something came up? Cal wouldn't mind, surely. It wasn't like he couldn't handle all the tasks on his own. Yet, he allowed me to keep coming. *Probably because he likes you.*

I squashed that thought quickly. I didn't want Cal to like me.

"I don't want it," I breathed.

Soon, I would be gone from Hannibal, and getting involved with him would complicate things. I slid my phone away. That was the whole point—leaving. Cal's reasons for his generosity toward me were his and his alone. I worked for the pay, and I was going to see it through. Especially as I was so close to meeting my savings goal, which was my ticket out of Hannibal.

"You can do this, Allie," I reminded myself, as I always have.

It was early afternoon when two familiar voices had me lifting my head.

"Hi, honey."

My mouth pulled into a smile. "Mom!" I rose to hug her, and she paused before collecting me in her arms warmly.

"Get in here," she said to my dad.

He wrapped his arms around us, and after five seconds, we broke apart. My mom smiled like I'd given her the best gift ever. Our eyes met, and she frowned.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sure." Like I'd tell my parents I was sleeping with Cal, and that resulted in complications. To take their hawkish attention off me, I asked, "Have a letter to send?"

"Oh, no," my mom said as she rounded the desk and sat.

Knowing caused me to smile. She sat to hide her nerves, twiddling her thumbs, and she only did that when she had something worrying to ask. I wondered what it was this time.

"We..." She cleared her throat.

"You want some water?" I asked. They were so careful around me. I'd given them every reason to be in the past, but right now, I was glad to see them and mildly entertained by their uncertain gazes.

"Charles, can you help, please?"

"What your mom is trying to say..."

"No, we. Don't put this all on me."

"I'm not putting it all on you. But it was your idea to—"

"Really?" My mom glared at my dad. "You said a barbecue would be great. I said yes; who would we invite over. Then you said Allie."

"Then you said she doesn't like barbecues and would probably turn us down. And I said alright. And you said let's try anyway."

My mom huffed, but didn't dispute my dad's claims.

I chuckled. "I'd love to."

Dad eyed me suspiciously. "You'd love to...say no thanks?"

"What? Dad, no. I'd love to say yes. I'd be happy to attend your barbecue." I smiled between both shocked faces.

"Who are you, and what have you done with our Allie?" my mom asked.

I threw back my head with a laugh. "I'm just glad to see you both and spend time with you," I added in a small voice.

“Come on, Fiona.” My dad took my mom’s hand. “Let’s leave before the other Allie comes back.”

"You're right." My mom stood as they hurried out.

“You guys!” I shouted after them, laughter barking out of me. “So damn goofy.”

They disappeared out the doorway, and I was still laughing when my mom's head popped back in.

“We love you, honey. See you at the barbecue! I'll send you all the details. And if you'd like for us to go have our hair done together, just say the word. I know this nice place—”

“Fiona, let’s get through the barbecue first,” my dad’s worried voice reached my ears.

My mom waved before they were gone for real.

I fell back against my seat, smiling. My parents were the most loving couple I knew, and I loved them too. But I'd always thought they'd just given up on more from life by staying in Hannibal. Today, though, the light laughter I'd enjoyed with them told me they were satisfied and happy. Despite their antics, my childhood was lovely. Instead of being closed off, I wanted to enjoy the last days I'd have with them. Starting with their barbecue.

My hands were clammy as I walked into Cal's restaurant that evening. The entire walk over, I cursed myself for not calling and canceling. Now my heart was racing, and my stomach felt like I had bees buzzing around inside.

"Hey." Cal's voice sent a rush through me before I turned and found him standing in the kitchen doorway.

He was shirtless, as always, making my pulse speed up. But the smile on his lips that went all the way to his eyes calmed me. He was happy to see me.

"Hey," I said, my voice coming out on an exhale, relieved. "How are things going today?"

“Come see.” He waved me over.

I crossed the space to the kitchen door, and my eyes popped. "New equipment?"

“Supposed to be delivered last week, but here they are.”

Going over to touch the shiny steel surfaces, I gushed, "They're really nice."



"Yep. We have to set them up."

"Sure thing," I said, lighter than I'd been when I walked in. "Do you need me to do it myself?" I raised both arms and flexed my tiny biceps. "Cause I can handle it."

Cal's loud laughter filled me with pleasure, causing my own. "You think you can?"

"I know it," I narrowed my eyes in a look I hoped was badass.

"Really?" Cal closed in on me, his eyes intent.

On what, I had no idea, but I stood my ground. "Uh-huh."

"I can lift both you and the appliance at the same time."

My eyes trailed to his muscular frame, and I knew it was very possible, but I'd started this, and I was seeing it through. "No, you can't," I said in a dismissive tone. "You'll probably—"

Cal closed in on me. One moment my feet were on the ground, and the next, I was thrown over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, screaming my head off.

"Cal, put me down!" I laughed.

"Yes, ma'am." He dropped me onto the equipment.

Our eyes met, and he had a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Cal, what are you doing?" I eyed him.

He grinned, then bent low, picking the appliance up with me on top.

"Cal!" I screeched, holding onto the edges for dear life.

His booming laughter filled my ears as I rocked from side to side until we came to a stop and the equipment touched the ground.

My laughter was a mix of relief, surprise, and fear, and I couldn't even begin to calm down.

Cal's arms wrapped around me and he dropped me to the floor. "Not very badass now, are you?" His voice sounded amused.

"No, I'm not. Never."

He chuckled.

Then a thought occurred to me. He *could* move the equipment on his own. He didn't need me. I'd suspected it, but now I knew for sure.

"Let's get this done, shall we?" His warm smile pushed that thought away.

"Sure."

As we moved the appliances around, organizing them, I realized the first was one of the lighter ones, and I was earning my pay fair and square. Still, it was a testament to how strong Cal was that he'd picked me and the equipment up at the same time. I found my gaze following his muscled back, his expansive chest, and taut abs. Just admiring how the human body worked, nothing more.

When we finished, we stood at the edge of the kitchen and looked across the U-shaped space. I'd never been in a restaurant kitchen to know what it should look like, so I asked Cal, "Good?"

"Excellent," he said, his voice soft.

I raised a hand for a high five. "You did it."

His blue gaze met mine, so intense it sucked the air from my lungs.

"Cal..." I whispered, swallowing, my body becoming tight. How could a single look affect me this way?

Before I could make a quip to lighten the mood, he closed in on me. I saw him coming, but I couldn't have moved if I'd tried. I wanted anything he wanted, and as his lips pressed on mine, I sighed into the kiss.

It was slow at first. His hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me up against him, and my hands flattened against his chest. He nipped and sucked at my lips tenderly like he'd been longing for this moment, and I moaned, feeling myself clench at nothing, willing him to take it further, but he kissed me slow and delicious.

To show him how much I wanted him, I swept my hand downward and palmed his hard length, drawing a growl from him. He thrust against my fingers, his kiss turning harder, his tongue curling through my mouth, his lips punishing.

I swept a finger over the tip of his cock through the fabric of his shorts and felt the precum that'd seeped through. His hips moved reflexively, pressing his shaft into my stomach. I whimpered, wanting him inside me.

Pulling my lips from his, I kissed down his torso, ending at the waistband of his shorts. I remembered how he liked it when I sucked him and wanted to make him that desperate once more. His eyes grew heavy as he watched me free his cock, stroke it, then wrap my lips around the head.

His groan filled the kitchen, and suddenly, I wanted nothing more than his pleasure, wanted to make him feel good. I bobbed my head, working my mouth over his dick, but it only lasted for a couple of minutes.

Cal picked me up and helped me tug my jeans and panties off. "Legs around me."

I followed his gruff command. This position allowed the base of his hard length to lie flush against my folds, and I moaned, rubbing against him. His breath came out harshly, and his body shook, but he found the strength to walk us to the wall and pressed me up against it.

"Slow down, Allie," Cal groaned. "Or I'm taking you bare."

I murmured a complaint he kissed away as he moved back and sheathed himself. Still kissing me, he plunged in, making me gasp. My back curved off the wall, and my eyes rolled back in my head. Cal's fingers dug into my hips as he pistoned in and out of me, grunting against my shoulder.

"Cal," I whimpered, feeling so good, feeling myself reaching for that sweet peak.

"What do you need, baby girl?"

"I'm so close."

Cal kissed me again, then his fingers found my clit, caressing it. Three circles, and I screamed, bucking into him. Cal's strong body pinned me against the wall as he came, his groans joining the whimpered cries I'd been reduced to. I felt him throb inside me, drawing out my orgasm until his body relaxed, as did mine.

He held me close, cupping a hand around my neck and kissing my lips softly. I kissed him back, staying in the moment and willing away any negative thoughts trying to rush back in.

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## Chapter 21

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## *Cal*

We stayed pressed to one another against the wall for a long minute until I felt it in the pit of my stomach. A stirring need; I was getting hard again.

Allie sighed, her eyes lifting to mine as if she felt it, too.

I gazed down at her parted lips, considering. Another round would make us stay here later than was prudent. So instead of sating the new wave of desire building between us, I edged away and put her down.

Her gaze stayed on mine, warm and trusting. In answer to that, I cupped her cheek and kissed her. She was so soft, so sweet, and my heart ached. I wanted to hold her against me all the damn time. Make love to her. Listen to her breathe next to me, or be her goofy self and make me laugh.

"Um..." Allie started, pulling back. "I think we should get dressed."

I look down at her half naked body and my own cock still on display. "Yes, of course."

She laughed lightly, chasing away my worry that she wasn't pleased with our activities. As she bent to pick up her clothes, I tapped her pert ass, feeling my dick twitch.

"Cal," she complained amid laughter and ran off, probably to the bathroom.

When she returned, she was all dressed, and I'd tucked myself back in my shorts and discarded the condom and its wrapper.

"So..." she said slowly.

"We clean?" A layer of dust had covered the kitchen after all the moving.

"Sure." She smiled adorably.

Allie swept while I mopped, and we covered a lot of ground quickly. When I started off working on the restaurant with only Will helping occasionally, I was so sure I could complete all the renovations that way. Yet, when Allie showed up to help, the work progressed far more quickly. Now it was almost at an end; I couldn't

picture running the restaurant without her close by. Her smile, her laugh, and her voice gave life to me, to this place.

The realization clutched my insides like a vise. I didn't want her to leave. Forget being selfish. She loved it here. We were a great team. We did great work. Once that thought solidified, there was no way I could push it away. More reasons why she should stay poured into my head. She was efficient and hardworking. She was a baker. She could become the head pastry chef.

Her treats were well-loved. Even I couldn't get enough, and I'd tasted the work of very seasoned bakers.

I only realized I'd been staring when she smiled and waved. I smiled back, but it fell short, and she frowned. Looking back at the ground, I moved quickly through the cleaning.

When we were finished, she strode over to me, brows furrowed. "Are you alright?"

I smiled again. "Sure. I was just wondering..." I stuck both hands in my pockets, trying to find the right words. *I want you here. Stay with me. Don't go.* "What do you think about working here?"

She rolled her eyes playfully, and a small smile curled her lips. "I already work here, Cal."

"No." I swallowed. "I mean, here, in the restaurant when it opens."

Her playful look faded a bit, but then she smiled. "I don't think you'd need so much heavy lifting then."

"Allie..." I took a step closer so she could see how serious I was. "I'm not kidding. Be the head pastry chef. You love baking. You're great at it."

Her eyes turned down to the linoleum floor, and I continued quickly, scared I was losing her.

"You'd have full creative control, and no one would boss you around, promise. Not even me."

She didn't smile at my joke or even look at me. My heart started racing, sure I'd ruined the harmony we'd enjoyed earlier tonight.

"What do you say, Allie?" My voice came out a hoarse whisper.

Her head lifted at that, misty eyes meeting mine. "Sorry, Cal. I— That's not what I want."

"You don't have to decide immediately. You can think about it."

She shook her head, taking a step back, her expression closed off.

Fuck! I knew if I let her go, she might leave and not come back. She thinks I'm holding her back.

*Aren't you?*

I gritted my teeth. Closing the space between us, I took her hand in mine. "Hey, look at me." Her eyes met mine, and I smiled. For her sake. "It'll be alright."

She nodded shakily, taking a deep breath.

"Maybe I could make you dinner, and we can talk about it some more?"

That nod turned sideways so fast her hair danced around her face. "No, Cal. I don't want to give you false hope."

Despite the vise in my stomach turning to a death grip, I pulled her into my arms, hating myself for distressing her. "I understand, okay?"

She nodded, wrapping her gentle arms around me.

We stayed that way for a bit, and when I pulled away, she looked significantly less freaked out.

I ran the pad of my thumb along her lips. Seconds later, my thumb moved to her soft cheek. "Will you at least let me make you dinner?"

Her eyebrows drew together as though she was considering. Sighing, she covered my hand with hers, stopping my motion. "I think it's best if I just go home."

My throat constricted, and my shoulders fell. I nodded. "As you wish."

We finished for the night in silence, and Allie kept avoiding my gaze. Hell, she wouldn't even walk past me—going in a different direction when I headed toward her. Like I could somehow bind her to Hannibal against her will.

I was exhausted by the awkwardness of it all. At last, I turned off the lights, locked the doors, and we headed out. She waited as I locked up the front door.

"Can I at least drive you home?" I didn't mean to sound sarcastic, but I wasn't exactly in the best mood.

Allie's gaze leveled with mine. "I can walk home by myself," she stated as though she was implying more—like, *I don't need you. Leave me alone.*

My shoulders sagged. "Fine, good night."

I was poised to climb into the truck when a familiar Camry careened into the parking lot. Instinctively, I turned to Allie, but she was still close to the door and thankfully, far away from the car.

Casey jumped out of his vehicle, stalking across the space. I left my truck and went over to where Allie was pressed up against the door, her eyes wide, staring at Casey.

"Go back in." I thrust the keys toward her. I sure as hell didn't think Casey was here to thank me for calling the cops on him, and Allie shouldn't be out here if it came to blows.

"He won't hurt me," she said, her voice small but brave.

Any other time, I'd have admired her courage, but right now, my fists were bunched, ready to take on my belligerent brother, and I didn't need her getting in harm's way. "You don't know that, Allie. Get inside!"

Her eyes met mine, defiance flashing in them.

Fuck. Since she was refusing to go in, I blocked her with my body, stepping forward to meet Casey.

"You brought her to your shitty restaurant?" Casey asked, trying to look around me. "Allie, are you impressed? That's why you're fucking him?"

"Get out of here, Casey!" I growled, anger pumping through my veins. If he took me on alone, then it would be no problem. Getting Allie involved, on the other hand, pissed me off so much I saw red.

"I'll only do that when you stop putting your dick in her pussy!"

Allie's fingers dug into my back, and I felt her stiffen.

"Don't make me hurt you." My voice grated, my temper barely in check.

"What're ya gonna do, huh?" My brother paced. "I'm not drunk, okay? My head's clear. I will fuck you up."

He rocked on the balls of his feet, his beer gut jiggling.

I shook away the rage threatening to take ahold of me. This fight was pointless. "Casey..."



“You scared, little bitch? Don’t want Allie to see you get beat up?” He tried to lean around me once more. “Allie, is this what you wanted? To see me crazy over you?”

Allie slid sideways, stepping out from behind my back and shooting daggers at him. “Casey, I want nothing to do with you. Just leave!” she yelled.

“You bitch! You've been fucking my brother.” His gaze turned darker. “Wanna fuck my whole family? Should I line up my dad and cousins, too?”

She winced like he’d hit her, which gutted me. Now I understood what she feared. His lies and accusations. His hate. She deserved none of it.

Casey carried on, making my blood boil over.

“Just because I love her and you couldn't, doesn't mean you get to keep being a dick!” I yelled, cutting him off. “Take your pathetic shit somewhere else, okay?”

When Casey and Allie paused, looking stunned, I frowned, my eyes darting between them both, my chest heaving. “What?”

“You-you love me?” Allie's eyes were huge, her lips trembling.

I blinked, replaying what I’d just said. Oh, fuck.

“He doesn't, Allie. He’s lying to you. He'll use you and leave you like all the other women he’s dumped.” Casey's voice was now a distant sound as Allie and I locked eyes in an intense stare that stole my breath as the seconds passed.

“Are you even listening to me?” Casey yelled, drawing our gazes back to him. When he had our attention, he grinned. “Watch your back, Cal. This isn't over.”

He turned and headed to his car. When the noise of the tires squealing faded away, and the night became quiet, I reached for Allie.

She stumbled out of my grasp, holding her arm against her chest as if the brush of my fingers burned her.

“Allie...” I said gently.

“You can't,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “You don't.”

My throat bobbed as I swallowed, seeing the denial in her eyes. “I do, Allie.”

“No, please don't say that.”

"I do."

"No," she insisted.

"But I love you, Allie!"

"Well, I don't love you!" she yelled back. Her hands flew to her mouth, her shallow breaths pushing through her fingers.

"That's not true," I said, shaking my head.

"I'm leaving, Cal!" A tear dropped to her cheek. "Nothing more can happen between us." She gestured wildly. "It would never work. I'm leaving Hannibal."

My heart clenched, and I pressed my fingers into my palms, trying to ground myself. I'd faced the worst shitstorms of my life the last few years. Hell, my brother kept tormenting me these past weeks, even tonight, but nothing hurt like this moment. Nothing hurt like handing your heart over to someone else just to have it crushed with a vehement *I don't love you*.

I squeezed my eyes shut before opening them. *Breathe*. "It's fine."

"What?" Allie asked breathily.

"Just go."

Allie blinked at me, more tears pouring from her eyes. I pushed away the part of me that wanted to console her. It was clear she wanted nothing to do with me.

"Get out." I nodded to the open road. "Leave."

"Cal..." she whispered brokenly.

"Leave now. I don't fucking care."

Her shoulders shook as more tears poured down her face. Unable to take it, I shook my head and headed to my truck, slamming the door so hard the car shook. My throat was clogged with emotions I couldn't name, and my eyes burned. But I revved the truck's engine and backed away, facing the road, promising myself never to let this happen again.

The last thing I heard before I tore into the night was Allie sobbing.

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## Chapter 22

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## *Allie*

Cal's vehicle disappeared into the night, and my heart caved in. I dropped onto the pavement, cold leaking into my skin from the concrete, but I gave it no thought as the ache in my chest ripped me apart.

*He loves me? What the hell?*

I gulped in a deep breath, struggling to calm my nerves. I didn't want him to love me, did I? And I'd rejected his love. Why, then, did it hurt so much?

My face contorted painfully as another fresh flood of tears drenched my cheeks. I pressed my hands to my eyes, shoulders heaving.

"Get off your ass, Allie," I said out loud.

I looked around the neighborhood. Businesses were closing up, everyone was going home, and I was crying over...what?

Struggling to my feet, I dusted myself off and stuck my hands in my pockets. I lingered on the sidewalk, looking one last time in the direction Cal had zoomed off. Fresh tears pricked my eyes, and I turned in the opposite direction, heading home.

I kept my head down, hands stuck in my pockets, counting the seconds until I could sleep this heavy feeling away. Yet, a part of me knew it wouldn't work. I'd toss and turn and be useless tomorrow.

My sneakers brought me to the building where Mia lived. I stopped on the sidewalk, looking up at the window of my friend's home. Taking a deep breath, I walked up the stairs.

Mia opened her door, a slight frown on her face. "Allie? What are you doing—" Her eyes ran over my features, widening. "Oh, dear. What happened?" She pulled me into a hug.

My breath shivered out of me as I gratefully accepted the warmth she offered.

"Come in." She took my hand and led me to her forest green velvety couch.

I plopped down and pulled my legs underneath me. A blinking to my right caught my attention. The TV was on and paused. "I'm sorry

I'm ruining movie night."

"Nonsense!" Mia declared. And just to prove how much she didn't care, she turned off the TV. She returned, then placed a plate of cookies and glasses of milk on the table.

A surprised laugh left me, but it came out all wobbly and thick with tears. My shoulders sagged, and I pressed my fingers to my face, wiping off stray tears.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Mia said quietly.

Sighing, I delved into what had happened that night, leaving out the part where Cal and I had sex. That was irrelevant in the bigger picture. *I'd told him I didn't love him, and he left.*

When I finished, Mia handed me a cookie and a glass.

"There, there, babe."

I laughed a little at the absurdity of it all. But one cookie and drink of milk later, I felt a bit better.

That's when Mia spoke, "Allie, help me understand what's going on."

I held my friend's gaze. "In what way?"

"What's up with you getting worked up about Casey? He was only a high school boyfriend, and a shitty one if we're being honest. And Cal's the opposite." She smiled softly. "Even now, your teary eyes light up when you speak of him."

"No, they don't," I said firmly, staring into my glass.

"Okay, boo. If that's what you choose to believe. So, what's this really about?"

I sighed, looking up at the ceiling. *How do I put this?* "I'm not hung up on Casey. He's a mess and can be an asshole, but he's hardly the biggest obstacle."

"In the way of you and Cal being together?" Mia inquired.

"We are not getting together, ever." The devilish gleam in her eyes made me roll mine. "Can you stop teasing?"

"I swear." Mia raised a palm. "So, what's the problem?"

"I'm leaving, Mia," I said quietly, my voice tight around the words. It'd been what I wanted for so long, what I worked toward, and now, it'd become the problem. "How are we going to make anything work if we were to have a relationship? Not that we ever would."

I expected Mia to smile at that last part, but her eyes turned down, not meeting mine. She downed a cookie in one swallow and gulped back her glass.

“Mia?”

Her eyes skated to mine, and the hurt in them squeezed my insides.

“Mia.” I scooted forward, all thoughts of treats forgotten, placing a hand on her arm. “What is it?”

Mia sighed. “I try to understand you, but sometimes—” Her eyes zeroed in on mine, showing me a side of Mia I hardly saw. “Sometimes I wonder if you truly realize what you mean to us.” Before I could speak, she went on. “You go on and on about leaving and telling me how terrible it is in Hannibal. But here, you have me, your parents, and others who love you and are willing to do anything for you.”

My heart shattered. “Mia—”

“Let me finish.” She squeezed my hand. “Look, I’m not asking you to change your mind out of obligation. I’m only asking that you consider what really matters to you. Heck, even if you say you hate this place, you’ve managed to positively impact so many people.”

I started to shake my head, but Mia pressed on.

“You baked a cake last summer for Mrs. Winston’s son, even if she couldn’t afford it. You make free treats for my class all the time. You visited your supervisor when he was in the hospital and no one else at work would. You—”

“Okay, I get it!” I pressed my hands to my ears. I didn’t need recognition for my good deeds; that’s not why I did them.

Mia smiled. “Okay, I’m done.”

“I’m sorry, Mia,” I said, “I had no idea I was hurting you by talking about leaving.”

She gave me a small smile. “It’s okay. As long as you’re doing what makes you happy; what you want. So, what do you really want, Allie?”

I frowned. “To get a job and work in the—”

“Not that stale anthem, Allie. Think about it. Picture your future; what does it look like?”

“Now?”

My friend nodded.

"I had no idea I had come to a therapist," I grumbled, but I sighed and closed my eyes. First, all I could sense was Mia beside me. It took a minute, but my awareness of her presence faded, and I saw myself laughing with my family, with Mia, then Cal. "I want to be happy," I murmured.

"And... what's making you happy?" she whispered.

"You. Mom and Dad." The last word squeezed out of me. "Cal."

"Mm-hmm."

I opened my eyes to see Mia's lifted brow. "What?"

"No great job in the city?"

I suppressed a shudder, my mood dampening immediately. "I hate my job."

"That was easy."

"What was?"

"Well, you said your family and friends make you happy, including Cal." My face flamed, but she carried on. "And you hate your job. Not your coworkers so much, but the work itself. Doesn't that tell you something?"

I considered her words for a minute, searching my feelings toward everything. Truly, the highlights of my life in Hannibal were the people I cared about, but my job drained my soul. I was always sad and miserable while there, and since it took up most of my day, it felt like I was that way all the time. And my best moments at work were when my parents showed up and—

"Oh, God. I just really freaking hate my job."

"Yep."

"And I thought leaving Hannibal and getting a new job would fix it." I turned to my friend, wide-eyed. "What if I hate my new job, too? And I'd have no one to vent to on the weekends in a large impersonal city." I chewed on my lip. "I've been such a fool."

Mia rubbed my shoulder. "It's alright, boo."

I looked at her with mock outrage. "You're supposed to say, 'you're not a fool.'"

"No, you were a fool." Mia nodded.

I chuckled. "Mia, thanks."

She smiled. "Sure thing. So, about Cal?"

“What about him?” I asked, a tad too defensive.

“What do you think of him? I mean, the man said he loved you.”

“I don't love him,” I murmured.

“That's what you say. But Allie, if you won't be honest with Cal or me, at least be honest with yourself.” Her eyes bored into mine. “Do you really not love him? Or are you simply afraid?”

I gulped.

“You don't have to answer that right now,” she continued.

I whooshed out a breath. “I thought you were going to make me visualize again. Are you sure you don't want to become a psychologist?”

“Know what?” Mia pursed her lips. “I've been considering it.”

“Ok, I'm your first patient. What's my first task on the road to self-discovery?”

Mia gave me an ominous look, saying matter-of-factly, “You finish these cookies, drain your glass, and rinse the dishes.”

Laughing, I did as she asked, and when I was done, I caught her yawning.

“Oh, I'm sorry for keeping you up,” I said.

“Pfft, it's nothing.” Mia waved a hand as she walked me to the door. “Will you be okay, though?”

I smiled, stopping at the threshold. “Of course.” I ruffled her hair. “Go to bed, sleepyhead.”

She batted my hand away playfully, then waved. “Nighty-night, boo-boo.”

I waved and was down the corridor when the door clicked shut. Talking to Mia gave me lots to think about, especially the part about Cal. It felt light while I had her to bounce ideas off, but now that I was alone, and the weight of tonight came back down on me. I didn't want to be alone.

My walk took me to my parents' house. My childhood home. I stood outside the door, hesitating. Unlike Mia, they didn't have to work early hours, but would they think I was disturbing them by coming around this late?

I started back down the steps when the door flew open, and my parents pressed out. I placed a hand on my heart to calm the jolt they gave me. “How did you—”



"Newly installed." My dad pointed at the security camera. "We saw you and waited for you to knock, but then you started walking away..."

My mom came forward and pulled me into her arms. "Don't leave, Allie. We're happy to have you."

My eyes filled with tears, but I sniffed them away and followed my parents in. As always, it was warm and cozy inside, and the earthy colors grounded me. We sat at the dining table, and Mom made tea.

"So," Dad said, hands clasped before him. "What's going on with you? What new things are happening at work?"

I cringed. "Dad, I—"

"Had any wacky deliveries?"

"Dad, I hate that job!" The kitchen went dead silent, but now that I had admitted it, I couldn't stop. I ranted about the job, about Cal and Casey, and when I stopped, I was breathing heavily. "Sorry," I whispered.

Mom shared a look with Dad before speaking. "We're glad you told us all this, Allie. You never really share anything about your life with us."

"And this is a lot you've been dealing with. How have you coped?" Dad asked.

I wrapped my palms around the mug of hot tea, absorbing the warmth. "I don't know."

"Well, look at it this way. You don't need to keep working at the post office if you hate it so much. Cal made you a job offer, and you love baking, so it's a win-win."

I chewed on my lower lip. "I never thought a career in baking was an option."

Dad's callused but gentle hand covered mine, making me look up into his wise brown eyes that were so much like my own. "Life's that way, Allie. Your plans may change along the way as circumstances do, but stubbornly sticking to them may only bring you sorrow."

Like now. I blew out a breath.

"And," Mom's voice chimed in, "Since Cal has connections in Chicago, he can open another restaurant for you guys there. You'd have the city life you've always dreamed of, and have little kids running around, and—"

“Fiona.”

Mom looked between Dad and me. “Too much?”

We both nodded. She smiled and tucked her face against Dad’s arm.

“So what are you going to do, kiddo?” Dad asked eventually.

That question rolled through my head as I curled up on my childhood bed to sleep. *What should I do?*

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## Chapter 23

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## Cal

Three days ago, I stood outside the restaurant and confessed my feelings to Allie. Feelings I couldn't put a name to until Casey forced my hand. Yet, I'd meant every word.

Eyeing the spot now and feeling bile climb up my throat, I tore my gaze away, opened the restaurant, and walked in.

A rush of pride filled me but it was diminished by all that had happened with Allie. Will had come over the previous day, and he helped me finish the seating, the kitchen's interior, and the bathroom.

"Pretty soon I'll be able to eat my fill here, am I right?" He'd elbowed my side.

I laughed, but it sounded hollow, even to my own ears.

"Is something wrong?" Will asked, worry furrowing his brows.

*She doesn't love me.*

Instead, I told him I was going over decor options for the place, and it was a lot to cover before the restaurant opened. Will offered to help in any way he could. I said thanks, and when he was gone, the emptiness inside my chest became a gaping hole.

I wasn't bothered about design ideas then, and I wasn't now. It was *her* who stayed on my mind, her words cutting into me over and over again like the first time.

*I don't love you.*

Even though denial cut through me whenever I thought about it, the passing days proved it. If she cared, maybe she'd have reached out, but it'd been complete silence from her end. I wanted to be brave, but I was certain if I heard her rejection again, I'd never recover.

Hell, right now, I was barely getting by.

Dropping into a chair, I pulled open my laptop. As it booted up, my mind wandered right back to the place that wrung my emotions dry. It'd be wise to let Allie go, forget our fling, and focus on the restaurant. Yet, just because it was the smart thing to do, didn't make it easy. She showed up everywhere, in everything, always in my head.

Hell, even as I worked on the positions I'd need to fill to get the restaurant up and running, I glanced over the list and saw the position of head pastry chef still empty. I should create an ad and schedule interviews like I did for the other positions, but I couldn't picture anyone else handling the restaurant's desserts. Allie was perfect for the job. Yet, she couldn't see it or refused to. *Because of me.*

I sighed, clicked on a folder, and went over the designs for the front sign. I dabbled with a design app and produced amateur designs, but a true designer would surely be the best for the job. No one came to mind, so I called Stacey.

"Hello," her bubbly voice sounded over the phone.

"Stacey, hi. I was wondering if you knew anyone who could—"

"Help you pick out a ring?"

My heart clutched, and I stayed silent, unable to speak.

"Ha! I'm just kidding. What do you need?"

She'd seen the way I was with Allie, so her joke wasn't a surprise. Only, none of that was happening, ever. Not after—

"Cal, did I say something wrong?"

"No," I said quickly, "Just a bit distracted."

"Oh, so what's up?"

Glad she sounded less worried, I asked about a creative designer. "I have a few ideas. I just need someone with the expertise to make it great."

"Front sign...front sign..." She repeated thoughtfully. "I think I know a guy who knows a guy."

"Stacey, it has to be the best guy there is."

"Sure, of course," she said. "I'll make some calls and get back to you. Just forward your ideas to me via email." She gave her address. "Cool, if I can reach him, I'll connect you both."

"Thanks, Stacey," I said, ending the call.

Done with that, I went to the next on the list—the food. I'd gone back to the farmer's market after my initial scouting and spoke to the vendors again. Reggie was onboard, and Lou would be valuable. The meat vendor, Danny, proved he could deliver the quantity and quality of meat the restaurant would need, so it was time to start ordering.

The first call I made was to Reggie. We went back and forth on timelines to ensure I got the vegetables at the earliest possible time, but within reason, so they didn't go bad. When we had everything coordinated, I informed him when I'd send the list, and he agreed.

Next was Lou. As always, she was nearly mothering in her questions, asking after my well-being as if I wasn't a grown man. It took several detours, but the conversation finally came back on track. She promised to deliver the fruit when I indicated I would need them and in the quantities I required. When that was over, I sighed with relief and moved on to Danny.

My finger poised above his number, ready to dial when a call came in. Dad's name flashed across the screen, making me frown. I debated letting it ring out and calling back later. We hardly spoke. What did he need me for now?

Just a second before it went off, I swiped to answer. "Dad, what do you want?" I shut my eyes, regretting my tone.

"Calvin, I want to see you tonight."

What the fuck? I sat up straighter, my fist clenching. "I'm busy. If there's something you need—"

"To see you, Cal. Haven't I made that clear? Come over by eight."

I was about to say more when the line went dead. I stared at the phone, disbelief making my eyes wide. I wasn't going to see him with that attitude, definitely not.

But as the day wore on and I juggled setting up the details of running a restaurant, thinking about Allie, and now my dad, I decided I needed to resolve at least one thing. And I wouldn't be able to get anything else done if I couldn't even get my mind focused.

Shutting my laptop, I slid it into my bag and headed out of the restaurant. Dad said eight? He'd just have to make time now.

I hopped into my truck and joined the early afternoon traffic, heading out to the country road where Dad lived. My mind churned as I wondered what would make him ask to see me. We were mainly on the same page regarding our relationship, which was non-existent. And the last time we saw each other was when Dad came over because Casey had stolen his money.

The thought caused a huff of painful laughter to spear through me. He was more concerned about his money than me. I wondered

if Casey had ripped him off again.

Heck, it could be anything, but I doubted it was anything good. My family was... How could I put it mildly? The worst. Nothing good came from their end, and no matter how I separated myself from them, they always pulled me back.

I sighed as I stopped outside his house, cataloging the renovations the place needed, from the roof to the foundation. Gritting my teeth, I got out of the truck, shutting the door behind me.

The steps creaked as I made my way up. Just another thing to fix, and my dad didn't care enough to try.

Exhaling my frustration, I knocked. The door opened a few seconds later. I met Dad's eyes first, then my gaze went from his scraggly hair to the robe around his body, tied loosely over his belly, and then to his bare feet.

"I told you to come by eight tonight," he grated out, his sunken eyes spitting fire.

I ignored his annoyance. Despite being glued to the bottle like Casey, he still had some embarrassment about it and tried not to make it obvious. He probably would have showered and been reasonably dressed if I had waited to come by at eight.

Now, though, I got to see him in true form. "Does it matter? Let's just get this over with."

Not allowing him to protest, I pushed through the doorway into the house. The smell of booze hung heavy in the air while newspapers and clothes littered the tables and chairs.

"I like what you've done with the place," I murmured, toeing aside a—rag? Shirt? Briefs?

"Don't mock me," Dad grated, shutting the door and cutting off the cool air. He took a seat on the edge of the littered couch and grabbed a half-empty bottle. "Sit."

"I'll stand."

He gulped, probably not caring anymore since I'd already seen him this way. I wanted to feel sympathy, but I couldn't find the energy.

"So, why did you call me?" I prompted, needing to get on with this so I could pursue more productive activities.

"Your brother."

I resisted the urge to groan. "What about him?"

"He spoke to me about everything that's been going on."

"Oh, yeah? Was that after he returned the money he stole from you?"

Dad's gaze cut to mine.

"So, no?"

"He needs help, Calvin," Dad said.

"Oh," I muttered, unconcerned.

"And you need to help him."

I scoffed. "Me? Fucking help him? Who came up with this? You two?"

"Cal, listen to me, young man," Dad's voice grew stronger than I'd heard it in a long time. Taking me back to when I was a teen and defenseless against his tirades. "You will do as I ask."

I snapped back to the present. I was no longer a boy he could push around. "You fucking treated me like shit growing up, and now you all need my help?"

Dad started to speak, but I cut him off, anger rolling off my back, forcing me to get it all out.

"When I left, it didn't wipe the slate clean of all you've done, Dad. And nothing you've done since I came back has redeemed you in the slightest."

"I am not asking for myself. I don't give a damn about that. Just fucking help Casey!" Dad was on his feet now, glaring at me like I was the one not thinking straight. "Don't call the cops on him like he's some criminal."

"He is a criminal. Are you fucking kidding me?" My voice boomed now, bouncing off the walls. "He stole your money! He vandalized my restaurant. Threatened me. Threatened—" *Allie*. My throat grew tight.

"He's in a bad state, and that's why he's acting this way. If you only gave him some money—"

"He'll only spend it on more booze," I said. Dad blinked, dropping his gaze. Glad that hit home, I pressed on. "And it's called a job. That's how adults earn money and take care of themselves. He injured his shoulder and couldn't play football anymore, but that was



years ago. There are so many jobs available, but he's choosing not to work so he can keep mooching off you, and you're letting him."

The space plunged into silence. The sound of my harsh breaths filled the air.

"Look, Dad," I said more calmly. "It's fine if you and Casey want to keep going on the way you are, but I'm done."

Dad's eyes met mine, and I held his gaze, so the weight of my words would sink in.

"I came back to Hannibal to rebuild my life, not have it ruined by both of you just because you're family. Family loyalty can go to hell if it means dealing with the likes of you and Casey."

His eyebrows went up, his old frame stiffening.

"I'm done. That's it. Tell Casey to stay away from me. If he ever comes near my house or the restaurant again, I'll fucking kick his drunken ass, then call the police to lock him up, okay?"

Dad stared at me blankly.

"Okay?" I thundered.

"Fine!" He gritted out. "Fine."

I blew out a breath and forced a smile. "Glad we're on the same page."

That settled, I spun and left the house, headed for my truck. I didn't look back as I drove away.

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## Chapter 24

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## Allie

I was a mess.

My parents and Mia were none the wiser. Their check-on-Allie calls, poorly disguised as inquiries about mundane stuff, failed to discover my misery. I kept my voice upbeat which satisfied them. Yet, after the calls ended, my strength was sapped. Work helped to keep my mind occupied, but when Saturday came around with nothing to distract me, the despair sank in, wrapping around my heart and pulling me under.

I stared at my dinner—baked chicken with rice and veggies. Sighing, I clutched my fork and brought it to my lips. I chewed listlessly as the veggies crunched between my teeth and echoed in the too-quiet kitchen.

My shoulders hunched as I went for another bite. I was determined to get myself fed; if I didn't, I'd return to the couch, staring blankly at the TV again. Just willing time to go by.

I brought the food to my mouth, but lost the will. Dumping it onto the plate, I buried my face in my hands, rubbing my forehead.

“What have you done, Allie?”

In the past five days, I had nothing but time to think, and all my thoughts led to one conclusion—I'm an idiot.

I hadn't been thrilled to trade my evenings off to work for Cal. I just really enjoyed his company. Working on the restaurant renovations somehow shifted away from bringing in a few extra bucks. I began to care about the transformation of the place, rooting for Cal and wanting to see him succeed. Because even if I claimed not to love him—which was the biggest lie I'd ever told in my life—I wanted to see him succeed and see his dream blossom.

My traitorous mind conjured up an image of Cal moving on without me. *The restaurant grows successful, and he finds a woman brave enough to love him as he deserves. Meanwhile, I get my wish, to work in the city but be miserable.*

A shudder ran down my spine, fear clutching my belly. Even if staying in Hannibal was against all I'd wanted and worked for in the

past months, true bravery meant being open to changing my mind, right? As Dad put it, I didn't have to stubbornly stick to my guns, especially because I'd found what I truly needed right here.

*Except, I ruined it.*

I sucked in a deep breath and looked around at my kitchen, then the living room. Everything seemed colorless and stale without him. Because I was an idiot who pushed him away.

My eyes pinched with the need to cry, but no tears came. I'd gone dry with days of reliving and regretting my mistake. The hurt that flashed across Cal's face the last time we spoke remained clear in my head. I'd done that; I hurt him.

Did he hate me now? Was he wishing he had never met me?

I had wanted to go to him for the last five days, but the fear of his rejection kept me away. What if he was over me already?

*You'll never know until you try, Allie.*

I paused at the thought. Maybe this was where bravery began. To own up to my mistakes and tell Cal I loved him.

"I love you," I tested the words on my lips, my voice small and shaky.

My kitchen didn't have a reply for me. I had to buck up and tell the man himself. And even if he rejected me, at least I couldn't think *what if*.

With that thought spurring me on, I threw a coat over my sweatpants and T-shirt. If I hesitated, I might lose my nerve. I raced out of my apartment. Where to first? The work on the restaurant was nearly done, so I suspected he wasn't pulling nightly reno sessions anymore. That meant he was at home.

My heart thudded, not only with the effort it took to practically run over to Cal's, but also with fear and worry.

*He'll reject you.*

*He won't.*

*You have to at least try!*

I halted to a stop on the sidewalk next to the front lawn, my heart skipping into my throat. Cal sat on the front step in sweatpants and a tee. In the waning evening light, I made out the stress lines on his face as he mindlessly tossed Klaus a ball and sipped from a mug.

I swallowed, realization dawning. He was as miserable as I was. Not debating any further, I started up the walkway. Cal's eyes snapped to mine, and they went wide—hurt and surprise flashing in them. Yet, he stood and collected me in his arms as soon as I reached him.

It was like coming home.

The tears I thought had dried up sprung back into my eyes and fell on his shoulders. I squeezed my eyes shut, my breath shaky, and felt his warm, comforting embrace; his broad back, his lean frame. The brush of his lips on my cheek.

"Cal..." I said, pulling away to look into conflicted blue eyes. I wished I could wipe that look away because I was the one who put it there, the one who rejected him and left him feeling confused.

"You can say anything to me, baby girl," Cal said hoarsely, running a finger along my chin.

"I'm so sorry," I blurted out, his tenderness after everything twisting my insides. "I'm sorry for not giving you the chance to love me openly." A tear trickled down my cheek, and I wiped it off, drawing a shuddering breath. Yet Cal remained patient, his gaze intent on me.

"All I ever wanted was to get out of here, find a job in the city and make a life elsewhere, imagining that'd make me happy. But I—" I cupped his face, staring into his softening eyes, feeling the pressure on my chest lifting. "I think I found that here. With you."

"Allie..." he whispered, eyes falling shut, the strong column of his throat bobbing like he was fighting against himself.

"Cal, I mean it. I've never felt more alive or fulfilled than when I worked with you in the restaurant. And I... Well, if the position for head pastry chef is still available, I'd love to take it."

Cal's eyes widened. I started to smile but was quickly stopped as Cal's lips took mine in a kiss that made me burn. His mouth was soft and hot and searching, his hands cradling me against his chest like I was the most precious treasure.

He pulled away, chest heaving, eyes dark. "Allie, of course, you can stay with me." His fingers played with my hair while his eyes ate me up. "That's all I ever wanted."

I giggled, relief flooding my veins.

"I'm so happy I'll get to boss you around." He tweaked my cheek. Desire pooled in my belly, but I managed an indignant expression. "I thought I'd have autonomy."

"Not from me, you won't." He leaned in, his hot breath whispering across my cheek. "How good are you at following instructions?"

"Very," I said breathless.

"Let's test that claim."

The next thing I knew, Cal swept me up into his arms, causing me to squeal. He brought us into the warmth of his home and didn't stop until we reached his bedroom.

Placing me down at the foot of the bed, he sat and planted his feet on either side of my body, looking up at me.

"Lose the coat."

I did so quickly, discarding it onto the floor. Then I remembered I was in less than sexy clothes, and I looked away, embarrassed. But Cal grabbed my chin, bringing my gaze to his. He looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time; as though I was wearing fancy lingerie.

He bracketed my hips with strong hands and placed a growling kiss on my belly button. My body shook with need as his kiss trailed down and stopped at the aching spot between my thighs. He nibbled on me through my soft pants, and pleasure shot through my veins, making my limbs weak. I whimpered his name.

When his face lifted, there was a damp spot between my legs, and his cock strained through his pants.

"Take off your clothes," Cal ordered.

I started with my shirt, eager to have his hands on my bare skin, but Cal shook his head.

"Slowly."

"Cal, I need you now," I whined.

"Follow instructions, Allie."

He wanted a show, did he? I quirked my lip and mentally calmed my desire. I was going to give him a show.

Leisurely, I pulled the shirt up, jiggling my breasts as I did. Cal's groan fueled my movements, and I tossed the shirt, then spread my hair over my shoulders.

"The bra," Cal grunted, pulling out his cock and fisting it. "Off."

Electrifying anticipation trickled down my spine as he pleased himself to my body, so I did as he asked, then went a step further to cup my breasts and play with my nipples.

Cal growled, his cock jerking in his fist and spurting precum on his fingers. "Pants. Now."

My need was building, too. I didn't need more foreplay, but I kept my motions steady, and I lowered my pants and stepped out of them.

Cal was now beating his cock so fast his fist blurred, a sheen forming on his forehead. My breath came out harshly as I gave him my back, leaned forward, and worked off my panties. I arched my back and spread my legs so Cal could see my damp folds. When I looked over my shoulder, I realized I had pushed him too far.

Without warning, he spun me around and lifted me off the ground, settling me on his lap with my legs straddling his hips. His firm motions belied the softness in his eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, then kissed me as his cock breached my entrance and sank deep.

I moaned, leaning my head on his shoulder as my channel pulsed around his length, adjusting to the fullness. Cal rubbed my back tenderly, kissing my neck and jaw, letting me get comfortable. Soon, desire pushed aside every other sensation, and I needed him deeper inside me as I reached the crest of pleasure, so I braced my hands on his shoulders and started to rock up and down.

Cal's guttural moans quickened my motions, his hands gripping my hips, spurring me on. Our eyes met and held as he started easing off the mattress, pounding up into me.

I gasped, a feverish feeling tightening my belly. "Cal... I'm going to—"

"Wanna come all over my cock, baby girl?" he growled. "Missed it that bad, huh? Missed me fucking you."

A thrill rushed through me, and I nodded. "I missed you."

"No more," he huffed, his movements turning jerky. "You will stay with me. All. The. Damn. Time." He punctuated each word with a thrust.

"Cal..."

His hips angled, his pelvis brushing my clit over and over. My eyes fell shut, and my fingers dug into his skin.

“I love you, Allie,” he palmed my face and kissed me hard. “So damn much.”

The orgasm speared through me and my head fell back as I screamed. I kept bouncing on Cal’s cock, trying to draw out the feeling, but the moment his hot mouth closed over my nipple, I was coming again. Cal groaned, his heat flooding my depths. He kept punching up, keeping us afloat on that wave of ecstasy until we drifted back down to earth.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, head buried against his neck, still heady, feeling his cock inside me. “I haven’t told you yet.”

“What?” Cal’s voice was quiet as he rubbed down my back, pulling shivers from me.

“That I love you.”

He chuckled. “So do it.”

I sat up, cupped his face, and held his blue gaze. “I love you, Cal Younger.”

His eyes warmed, and he brushed aside my hair, kissing my lips softly. “I love you, too, Allie Harmen.”

I giggled, happier than I’d been in the last few days. In forever. Being with him was all I ever needed. Cal’s cock pulsing inside me brought my mind back to the present.

“Now, tell me while I fuck you again.”

Smiling, I leaned close to his ear and repeated it while he pounded into me, and nothing had ever felt better.



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## Epilogue

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## *Cal*

The local paper had run a news story about the restaurant the previous week—Second Chance Restaurant. Dinner service open from Tuesdays to Saturdays, with Sundays and Mondays closed. Run by Cal Younger and his fiancé, Allie Harmen.

Allie and I had read it together at the breakfast table, and with every word, her face glowed, and my heart soared.

The paper called it “the hot new place to be in Hannibal.” And rightfully stated that our meals were homey, yet upscale and made from locally sourced produce, complete with fantastic cocktails and delicious desserts that Allie created.

The part that had us laughing was the ending: “The two people who run the restaurant are blissfully in love with each other, and the entire town knows it. They're each other's second chance, and they plan to make the most of their wonderful small-town life.”

Right now, I felt that love acutely in my chest as I looked up from the sauce I was stirring to where Allie stood, putting the finishing touches on the desserts.

Clad in a pristine white chef's coat, her auburn hair hidden underneath a baker's hat, she looked every bit the head pastry chef and performed her job with excellence. The staff working with us had grown used to our displays of affection—covering for us when we needed a private moment in our office and sometimes nudging us back into action when we took too long.

*Like now.*

“Thank you,” I replied smoothly to the cook.

He dipped his head and went on with his work.

Allie remained super-focused, while my gaze half stayed on my task, constantly returning to her. Her cheeks were flushed, her lower lip trapped between her teeth in concentration. A smile curved my lips. It still amazed me how we'd managed our initial hurdles and how every passing moment, the love I had for her grew.

We'd spoken about Casey, the scandal back in Chicago that brought me back home, and every other lingering doubt we had. In

the end, we worked through them and came out stronger.

“Chef, I’ll handle this.” The cook had returned.

An amused huff left my lips as I realized I remained distracted even after his initial nudge. He grinned as he took over the stirring. All the other staff would soon hear another story about how Cal couldn’t keep his eyes off Allie, but that didn’t matter.

When her eyes raised to find mine and a pretty blush deepened the color on her cheeks, her gaze dropped low. It was worth all the gossip because it was true. I couldn’t look away.

Done with her work, she placed a hand on her slightly rounded belly and rubbed tenderly. My heart turned to mush, and I swallowed thickly. Everything I ever hoped for was happening, and I had the woman I loved sharing it with me. Her eyes met mine again, and she grinned, shaking her head.

She drifted toward the restaurant front, and I followed. I’d probably need to refocus my attention once the dinner rush began, but it was still early, and I couldn’t help but keep my eyes on her every minute.

I exited through the wide kitchen doors after her and took in the buzzing restaurant. The glorious space still left me awed. It’d been transformed from the dust-covered, rundown building to a gold and cream-colored space with flowers, warm lights, beautiful paintings, a classy bar, and much more recently, a live musician. The song was slow and blissful, filtering through the restaurant and giving a warm ambiance.

My gaze panned the area to find Allie. It was still early and not yet busy. Charles and Fiona Harmen were among our patrons. Allie stopped by their table, head dipping as she welcomed them. Both parents smiled, their eyes tender as they watched their daughter. Their gazes slid over to me, and they smiled and waved.

I nodded back, glad to have them here. I’d never known familial support until I visited the Harmens and experienced the love they shared with each other. Even though my dad and brother refused to change their ways and stayed away, which I wasn’t mad about, I was grateful to have found love and acceptance with Allie’s family, who were quickly becoming mine.

They always offered their support, and during Sunday dinner last week, Allie brought up the offers we had received to expand the restaurant to Chicago and how we were considering it. Her parents were over the moon with excitement, asking what they could help with.

"I can help with the babies while you're busy. I don't mind," Fiona had said.

"Mom, we haven't even had one baby yet," Allie protested.

"But there'll be more, right?" Fiona turned to me, her eyes bright and excited.

Both Allie and her dad groaned, but I found the whole exchange hilarious.

When we weren't with the Harmens, Allie and I kept up with our friends, Will, Mia, Stacey, and a few more we'd connected with. Recalling how staunchly Allie had been against remaining in Hannibal, I watched her for clues, ensuring she was satisfied with her place here.

Every day that passed proved she was more than satisfied—she was thriving. And I was, too. With her by my side, everything was perfect, as it should be.

Allie's eyes collided with mine once more, then swept down my body. My need surged. She once told me my chef outfit, which she hadn't seen me in until we started operations, was her kryptonite. Right now, her lingering gaze and my hardening cock proved we needed a moment to ourselves.

I nodded discreetly toward the office, and her face brightened. In a few short moments, I'd have her pressed up against me, telling her how much she meant to me and how this was our forever.

She was my happily ever after.

THE END

Did you like *Bossy*? Then you'll LOVE [\*Billionaire Fake Date: A Grumpy Single Dad Romance\*](#).

\* \* \*

**Moaning on my boss's desk with my legs falling open isn't exactly what I had in mind when I took this high-paying contract.**

I felt like I had finally "*made it*" as an artist.

When I'm commissioned by the hottest, most desirable DILF bachelor in town, he challenges my self-control.

He's secretly using me to keep his match-making brother off his back – sharing photos to make it look like we're dating.

And when we accidentally brush up against each other in his office, it's goodbye professionalism.

Now I'm shamelessly begging for more on his fancy desk and I'm not sure where this is heading.

I still have to complete these projects and it's not like this relationship can actually go anywhere.

He's way older.

And rich.

AND he has an amazing daughter to think of.

There's no way someone like him would be interested in a starving artist like me. *Right?*

\* \* \*

**Start reading Billionaire Fake Date NOW!**

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## Billionaire Fake Date Sneak Peek

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### Chapter One

#### *Layla*

The first time I whispered out loud in middle school that I'd love to be an artist, all eyes turned to me, including my teacher's.

"Why not a doctor or a lawyer?" Mrs. Wilson asked.

She was a middle-aged woman with four kids and an absentee husband. She'd mentioned more than once in class how she could be doing anything other than teaching. I never wanted to be like the judgmental shrew.

"Because colors are pretty," I said, smiling.

Mrs. Wilson shook her head disapprovingly. "All artists are broke."

I never understood what she meant, but as the years passed and my dreams solidified into a career, it was an anthem, a motto, a slogan for artists. Starving artists. And like a prophecy, I was fulfilling it to the letter. Doing what I loved but broke as hell until Troy Barrera contacted me.

Now I was driving up a winding road flanked by towering trees on both sides. I was still in my '98 Honda that creaked like an arthritic knee every time we inched forward. My bank wouldn't bat an eyelash if I chose to close my account. But I still had a spark of excitement

blooming in my chest. For once, I'd landed a client who could pay me what I was worth.

Look at me now, Mrs. Wilson.

My car trundled ahead. I kept my hands tight on the steering wheel and leaned forward, navigating every turn my GPS directed. One more corner and...whoa. My car paused on the steep incline to the towering, white-walled home. My mouth went dry as I leaned forward and took in the house. House? More like a sprawling estate. Did I get the correct directions? I glanced at my phone. Yep, I was in the right place.

My heart climbed into my throat, and I swallowed to keep it down.

"You can do this, Layla," I muttered. I blew out a breath and hit the gas.

A heavy black gate stood before me. I pulled up as close as possible, but a sliding sound made me jump. The metal gate slid to the right and opened the path to Troy Barrera's home.

"Wowza," I whispered and proceeded to drive in. Behind me, the gate started closing, but I barely noticed. My attention was captured by the virtual palace before me.

It stood majestically between dancing palms on all sides. Flowers covered the entire garden curving around the gravel driveway, and pretty butterflies flitted throughout.

Un-freaking-believable. I stopped at the end of the driveway, turned off my car, and climbed out. Gravel crunched under my feet, and cool, salty air hit my face, ruffling the loose hairs on my neck. I inhaled deeply and took in my surroundings. The waves crashing onto the beach toward the west reached my ears. Faint but audible.

I returned to the task and grabbed my supply bag and stepladder from the vehicle. I started up the steps that led to the giant oak doors and paused to look back at my car. Its outdated body and peeling paint were an eyesore in the beautiful landscape. I glanced down at my body, and my eyes were drawn to the paint stains on my jumper. Yep, I was out of place, too. *Get a grip, Layla. You can do this!* Swallowing the nerves building in my stomach, I made my way to the door and tugged on the door knocker. Seconds passed before the door swung open.



"Hi!" A fresh-faced little girl beamed at me. Her frilly lilac dress danced around her, and a mane of dark brown hair fell over her shoulders.

"Hi." An uninvited smile tugged at my lips.

"I'm Layla, what's your name?"

"Evelyn," the girl replied, dancing on the spot.

"What are you doing here?"

I chuckled. "I'm here to paint."

"I love colors!"

"Me, too. What's your favorite?"

Evelyn started to reply when an older, more even-toned voice called her name. Evelyn's eyes widened, and her smile faltered. Uh-oh, was she not supposed to be here?

"There you are," the voice chided. "What are you—" A gray-haired woman stopped to stare at me, taking in my clothes, the bag slung over my shoulder and the ladder in my hand.

"Hello, you must be the painter."

"Her name is Layla, and she loves colors," Evelyn supplied with a big grin.

The woman gave Evelyn a look before turning to me. "Hi, Layla. I'm Mrs. Greyson, Evelyn's nanny. Please, come in."

I sucked in a relieved breath and followed them into the foyer. The smooth walls ran up to a vaulted ceiling from which hung a crystal chandelier.

"Mr. Barrera won't be available until later today, but I'm sure you know what he requires of you," Mrs. Greyson stated.

My eyes drew back to her. "Yes."

"Good. Follow me."

The older woman took me up the stairs, turned left, and started toward the back of the hallway. She pulled open a door, and we entered a spacious room, bare except for a sitting area with fluffy couches in all colors of the rainbow.

"So, this is the wall?" I walked slowly to the smooth white wall facing the sitting area.

"Yes," Mrs. Greyson said behind me. "Anything you need, I'll be in the living room."

“Oh, please, can I stay?” Evelyn ran up to my side, her small hands clasped in front of her. “I want to watch.”

“Evelyn, we need to let Layla do her work.”

“I can help!” Evelyn bounced up and down.

“Oh, please.”

“Layla, do you mind?”

I glanced back at the nanny; she had her hands folded before her.

“No, I don't mind at all.” I bent till I was eye-level with Evelyn. “You can stay with me, champ.”

“Woo!” She ran through the room and hopped onto a chair, jumping on it, both hands raised.

Mrs. Greyson started to speak but stopped, then smiled at the girl. She said quietly, “If she bothers you, just say so, and I'll take her off your hands.”

I laughed. “I'm sure we'll be fine. But thank you.”

Once Mrs. Greyson left, I waved Evelyn over. “Wanna see how I start?”

“By drawing with crayons?” Her eyes were giant saucers in her face.

I smiled. “Not in the beginning and not with crayons.”

I dropped to my knees and unzipped my supply bag on the ground.

The contents spilled out, and a “whoa” came from my new friend.

“First, we need to know exactly what we're going to paint, so we have to sketch with our special pencil.” I grabbed one of the grease pencils and held it out.

Evelyn poked the pencils. “Why are they special?”

“They're very light pencils. A regular pencil would be too dark and show in the picture when we're done. But these don't do that.”

“Awesome!” Evelyn beamed. “Are you starting now?”

“Yep.” I pulled my supply bag away from the wall and gave myself room to take it in. It was a large wall, finely painted in smooth white, so I didn't need to coat it with primer, which was a plus.

“When do we start?”

I spun around to Evelyn. She was seated on the floor next to my supply bag, tinkering with it and looking up at me with a frown on her

face.

“In a bit, champ. We just have to think carefully before we begin so we minimize any mistakes.”

“You sound like my nanny.” Evelyn giggled.

I wasn't sure that was a compliment, but I smiled anyway. She was too cute. Biting my lip, I walked the length of the wall, picturing the mural I'd sketched on paper after getting the specifications from Troy Barrera. A beach scene with pirates, mermaids, and friendly sea monsters. I thought it was an unusual request from a grown man until I learned it was for his daughter's playroom. His daughter, who was now laying out tubes of my paint.

I smiled and shook my head, then went back to the wall. It was always daunting, taking an idea from paper to canvas. But it was also so exhilarating that no matter how intimidated I was with a blank wall, I was still motivated to start and get to the fun part.

I wiped my hands on my thighs and flexed the pencil in my grasp. With a deep breath, I started at the wall's far side and ran a long line across to divide the sea from the beach.

“Can we start painting now?” Evelyn appeared beside me.

“Not even close.”

“Ugh,” she sighed. “I'll be right back.”

I glanced toward her as she raced out of the room. Mrs. Greyson really had her hands full with that one.

Picking up my stepladder, I unfolded and climbed onto it. I drew the clouds in the sky, the sun—which would shine golden yellow on the beach—and some birds. Can't have a beach without birds.

“Whoa! You're so high.” Evelyn entered the room.

I laughed. “I have to draw the birds in the sky.”

“Cool.”

“What have you got there, pal?” I took in the sketchpad and crayons in her hands.

“I'm going to make my own painting while you sketch,” she said.

“Dazzle me, then.”

Evelyn beamed. “I will. You'll see.”

She settled somewhere behind me, and I focused on putting the highlights in what would be the sky above the beach. After that, I lowered the stepladder to tackle the more complex part—sea

monsters, mermaids, and pirates. I sketched the pirates, their treasures with their boats, and the sea monsters; octopi, crabs, and stuff I made up. I was about to start on the mermaid when I turned to the girl behind me. She was laid out on the ground, hair draped over her face, bottom lip stuck between her teeth as she drew furiously. She'd make a cute little mermaid.

I went to kneel beside her. "Hey, Evelyn."

She looked up at me, and I committed her facial features to mind.

"How's it going?"

"Great. But you can't see it yet." She covered the sketchpad with both hands.

"No problem." I had already seen all I needed to.

I went back to the wall and drew Evelyn's likeness. She'd have wild brown hair, blue-grey eyes, a button nose, and a lilac fishtail. I finished it up with two more mermaids and knickknacks one would find on the beach.

Proud of my work, I stepped back and took it in. No one would be impressed with how it currently looked, but my mind could already fill in the colors, and it was gorgeous.

"Okay, come see."

I tracked back to Evelyn and sat cross-legged beside her. "Show me."

"Ta-da!" She lifted the sketchpad to my face.

"It's perfect." A smile framed my lips. The picture was in red and blue; I managed to make out a red one-eyed monster and a smaller blue one-toothed monster.

She smiled proudly. "Do yours here." She flipped the sketchpad open for me.

I shrugged and took out my pencil, sketching.

Suddenly, Evelyn sped out of the room. She'd disappeared through the doorway before I could ask what was happening. I was going to surprise her. I uncorked a tube of white paint and spread it over the page. Evelyn's voice drew close, so I quickly added a house and green trees.

"Daddy, look!"

*Daddy?* I spun to the door. Troy Barrera stood in the doorway. His eyes weren't fastened on the wall where his daughter was pointing

but at me. I uncurled my feet, heaved a sigh, and stood.

"Hey." *Hello, Daddy, indeed.* I stared into his lined, frowning face, my heart speeding up. "I'm Layla Douglas, the artist."

"I know." He stepped into the room, peeled his eyes away from me, and focused on the wall.

I let out a breath and took in the imposing man. All six feet two inches of him was clad in a blue button-down, sleeves rolled up to the elbows to expose corded arms—why were muscular arms such a turn on—and black dress pants with expensive-looking shoes. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, his gray eyes giving away nothing. Was he impressed? Disappointed? Regardless, the guy was some serious eye candy.

I took a step closer to where he stood. "I just sketched the scene today. Tomorrow I'll start painting."

His piercing gaze tracked to me. "Hmm."

Just 'Hmm?' Wow.

"Daddy, look what I did." Evelyn ran to pick up her sketchpad and showed him. He flipped the pad open to the painting I had made. I wrung my fingers. He clearly wasn't impressed by my mural sketch, and I doubted he'd be into the play painting I did for Evelyn.

"Did you do this, too?" he asked his daughter.

She frowned, then smiled. "No, that's Layla's. Wow, it's lovely. That's our house!"

Troy's brows wrinkled, and he turned to me. I swallowed, feeling awkward and not sure what to do while under his scrutiny.

"Well, I'll be off now." I quickly bent, gathered my supplies, and packed them up.

"You're leaving?" Evelyn asked, brows drawn.

"I'll be back tomorrow, champ," I promised.

She beamed. "We'll paint the wall tomorrow?"

"You bet." I tweaked her cheek.

When I looked up, Troy was staring at me intensely. Was that interest I saw in his gaze? I felt my nipples tighten and desire pooled between my thighs under his fiery scrutiny. No, I must be imagining things. I ducked my head and backed out of the room. Quickly, I raced down the stairs and out the front door. My hand trembling, I reached for the car door handle. What the...I brought my fingers up

to my face. A smudge of yellow paint smeared on my hand. Probably from when I was painting in Evelyn's sketchpad. Without hesitating, I hopped into my car, buried my face in my hands, and groaned.

No wonder Troy—*Mr. Barrera*—was staring at me. I had paint on my face. I must have looked stupid. I needed to remember that this man was my boss, and only my boss. I had to keep my mind off more *entertaining* thoughts involving Troy Barrera.

Hopefully, he won't be around tomorrow, and I won't have to face him again.

Exhaling deeply, I pulled out of the driveway, past the Jeep, escaping to my much humbler neighborhood in a different area of Cape Worth.

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