



# Brunch AT Bittersweet Café

A  
SUPPER CLUB  
NOVEL

CARLA LAUREANO

# Praise for Carla Laureano

## *The Saturday Night Supper Club*

“A terrific read from a talented author. Made me hungry more than once. I can’t wait to read what comes next.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Masterpiece*

“Bright, jovial, and peppered with romance and delectable cuisine, this is a sweet and lively love story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

“Romance aficionados and fans of stories about overcoming obstacles and the role of faith in everyday life will eagerly await the next entry in this sweet food-centered series.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Laureano’s latest novel, the first in her Supper Club series, is a delight for foodies! There’s a delectable amount of behind-the-scenes restaurant and cooking detail . . . that will literally have readers’ mouths watering for a taste.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4 ½ star Top Pick

“This romance nurtures the balance between following one’s dreams and embracing the moment.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“Writing charmingly about faith, love, friendship, and food, Laureano will leave readers hungry for the next installment in the Supper Club series.”

BOOKLIST

“You don’t have to be a foodie to enjoy *The Saturday Night Supper Club*, but if you are, you’re in for an extra treat. Carla Laureano has written a delicious romance you’ll want to devour in one sitting. Filled with sugar and spice, *The Saturday Night Supper Club* will leave you hungry for more from this talented author.”

IRENE HANNON, bestselling author and three-time RITA Award winner

“At turns devastating and delightful, this novel contrasts the heartbreak of instant infamy against the charm of a budding attraction. Highly recommended!”

SERENA CHASE, author of *Intermission* and the Eyes of E’veria series

“An absolute delight with compelling characters, a rich sense of place, and food that lingers on your palate long after the final page.”

KATHERINE REAY, author of *A Portrait of Emily Price* and *The Austen Escape*

“Smart, funny, romantic, hopeful—the perfect starter for Laureano’s scrumptious new series.”

CANDACE CALVERT, bestselling author of *Maybe It’s You* and *The Recipe*

“*The Saturday Night Supper Club* is a riveting read, crafted with sophisticated characters, delicious settings, and a satisfying romance that will leave readers breathless and anxious for the next book in the series.”

JEN TURANO, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Change of Fortune*

## *Five Days in Skye*

“Sweet and scathing, lush and intimate. . . . This story has guts and heart as well as the depth and heat necessary to satisfy any romance reader’s palate.”

USA TODAY

“From page one, *Five Days in Skye* captured my imagination and every minute of my pleasure-reading time. With enviable finesse, author Carla Laureano weaves romance, hope, healing, and faith into a spunky and sparkling tale that made me sorry to say good-bye to the characters and the alluring Isle of Skye. I look forward to reading more from this author.”

TAMARA LEIGH, author of *Splitting Harriet* and *The Unveiling*, book one in the Age of Faith series

“After reading *Five Days in Skye*, I wanted to pack my bags and catch the first flight to Scotland to discover Skye for myself. In her debut novel, Carla Laureano brought Skye alive with vivid detail, drew me into the main characters’ budding romance, and kept me turning the pages late into the night. I’m looking forward to more books from Carla!”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“*Five Days in Skye* swept me away to Scotland! Against the craggy beauty of the Isle of Skye, author Carla Laureano weaves a story . . . of love between an American businesswoman and a Scottish celebrity chef. Fans of the movie *The Holiday* are sure to enjoy this contemporary romance. Laureano’s voice is deft, seamless, and wonderfully accomplished. An exciting newcomer to the world of Christian fiction!”

BECKY WADE, author of *My Stubborn Heart* and *Undeniably Yours*

## *London Tides*

“In *London Tides*, Carla Laureano shows how fear and grief can hold us captive—unable to love ourselves and others. Yes, Laureano has written a beautiful reconciliation romance, but she also delves into deeper themes of identity and acceptance. The character of Grace Brennan, in spite of her unconventional life, speaks to all of us.”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“Achieving an aching depth and a resounding trueness within a heated yet baggage-ridden romance, author Carla Laureano has proven herself a storyteller who is not afraid to take her characters into the darkest regions of their own hearts. An excellent follow-up to *Five Days in Skye*, *London Tides* tugs and churns every emotion . . . right up until the lovely, hope-buoying end.”

SERENA CHASE, author of *Intermission* and the Eyes of E'veria series

“At times lighthearted; at times heart wrenching. Laureano has penned a delightfully romantic tale about the importance of finding home. If readers weren’t already smitten with the MacDonald brothers, they will be after *London Tides*!”

KATIE GANSHERT, award-winning author of *No One Ever Asked*

“Another captivating story! *London Tides* is as compelling and engaging as Laureano’s award-winning *Five Days in Skye*. It’s deliciously romantic and filled with tension, wonderful characters, and vivid scenery. A must-read this summer!”

KATHERINE REAY, author of *A Portrait of Emily Price* and *The Austen Escape*

“War photographer Grace Brennan is the kind of character I love to read about—she’s savvy, fearless, and damaged, yet is determined to carry on. Returning to London means making amends with Ian MacDonald, the fiancé she left behind, and author Carla Laureano knows how to make the most of their chemistry. But a chance at love for Grace also means facing the realities of PTSD, a subject Laureano handles with great sensitivity and care. Vividly written and deeply felt, *London Tides* will sweep readers away.”

HILLARY MANTON LODGE, author of *A Table by the Window*

## *Under Scottish Stars*

“In *Under Scottish Stars*, independent single mother Serena Stewart returns to the beautiful land of Skye, looking for stability for her two small children—not romance with Malcolm Blake, who manages the hotel that Serena owns with her two brothers. Their ‘this can’t be happening’ relationship is engaging, and Carla Laureano reveals both Serena’s and Malcolm’s vulnerabilities as they fall in love when they least expected it. *Under Scottish Stars* is a satisfying romance that reminds readers that love doesn’t always go according to our agendas—and that can be a very good thing.”

BETH K. VOGT, author of *Things I Never Told You*

“*Under Scottish Stars* is a fabulous read, filled with compelling characters, a delicious setting, and a romance that can only be described as . . . swoon-worthy. Carla Laureano’s third and final book in the MacDonald Family Trilogy exceeded all my expectations and truly shouldn’t be missed.”

JEN TURANO, *USA Today* bestselling author of *A Change of Fortune*

“Solid characters, brilliant dialogue, believable conflict, a setting you can taste—and, always, breath-stealing love scenes. No one writes a romantic hero like Laureano! *Under Scottish Stars* takes us back to Skye to explore poignant truths of single parenthood, family loyalty, the pursuit of dreams—and faith. A satisfying and stellar finish to the MacDonald Family Trilogy.”

CANDACE CALVERT, bestselling author of *Maybe It’s You* and *The Recipe*

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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
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*For my mom, Cathy.*

*You've supported me in every wild dream and change of direction.*

*I'll always be grateful for your love and encouragement.*



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# Chapter One

ONCE UPON A TIME, Melody Johansson had believed in happily ever afters.

To be truthful, she still believed in them, but with her thirtieth birthday in the rearview mirror, the fairy-tale ending had turned away from meeting a handsome prince to owning a little *patisserie* in Paris. Even if sometimes, as she toiled away in her own version of Cinderella's attic, both fantasies seemed equally far-fetched.

Melody brushed past the ovens in the bakery's kitchen, giving the loaves inside a cursory glance, then dragged a rolling rack of rectangular tubs from the back wall. Customers no doubt had romantic ideals of what it meant to be a baker, picturing quaintly dressed European peasants kneading loaves by hand and shoving them into ovens on long-handled peels, but the American commercial bakery had far more in common with an assembly line than a charming country *boulangerie*.

Still, there were worse places to spend the dark, still hours of the night than surrounded by loaves of bread, their deep-brown,

crackling exteriors fragrant with wheat and caramel and yeast. But Melody was closing on the end of a twelve-hour shift alone, and the only drifts she wanted to be enveloped in were the fluffy plumes of the down duvet on her antique bed. Not the hard, wet snow that coated the city like a sprinkling of demerara sugar on a freshly baked pastry. It looked beautiful, but the peaceful surface concealed treacherous sheets of ice, courtesy of Denver's mercurial warm-then-snowy March weather. Every time spring looked to be on the horizon, winter yanked it back for one last hurrah.

Melody muscled a forty-pound tub of dough to the benchtop and overturned it in one swift movement. She'd done this enough in her career to judge two-pound portions by eye, but she still put each piece on the scale after she cut it from the mass with her steel-bladed bench knife. Unconsciously, she matched the cadence of her movements to the music softly pouring from the speakers. Cut, weigh, set aside. Cut, weigh, set aside. Then came the more complex rhythm of shaping each loaf. A dusting of flour, push away, quarter turn. Each stroke of the scraper beneath the loaf rolled the dough inward on itself, creating the surface tension that transformed the loose, wet lump into a taut, perfectly formed round. Then the loaf went into the cloth-lined proofing basket to rise before she went on to the next one. Twenty times per tub, multiplied by the number of tubs on the rack. She was going to be here for a while.

Baking wasn't usually such solitary work. A second baker normally worked the weekend shifts to make up for the café's increased traffic on Saturday and Sunday, but he lived south of the city, just past the point where they had closed the interstate. It shouldn't have been a surprise—practically every storm closed Monument Pass. Had it been Melody, she would have driven up earlier on Friday morning to make sure she was able to make her shift on time. But then, she'd worked her entire adult life in restaurants and bakeries, where the first rule was: always show up.

That meant her usual eight-hour shift had morphed into twelve.

She muffled a yawn with the back of her arm. "Get it together, Melody. Only two more hours." Assuming the morning staff got here on time to put the proofed loaves into the oven.

Maybe it was time to cut this job loose. She'd been here for six months, which, with the exception of a single fine-dining gig, was the longest she'd been in one place in her life. She needed variety. She could churn out someone else's mediocre recipes for only so long before she felt like she'd sold out.

She'd been wanting to go back to Europe. She'd been away from Paris for eight years, and even then she'd been so busy as a baking apprentice that she'd never had the chance to explore France beyond the capital. A few months to travel sounded like heaven.

Melody sighed. That was as much a work of fiction as any book in her extensive library. Based on the current state of her savings account, she could barely fund a trip to the airport, let alone any points beyond.

She was heading back for a fourth tub when she heard a tapping from the front of the store. She frowned, cocking her head in that direction. Probably just the snow or the wind rattling the plate-glass windows. This strip mall was old, and every storm shook something new loose.

No, there it was again. She wiped her hands on her apron and slowly poked her head out of the kitchen toward the front entrance.

A man stood at the front door, hand raised to knock on the glass.

Melody hesitated. What on earth was anyone doing out in this storm at 4 a.m.? Even worse, what was she supposed to do? It didn't bother her to be here alone, but she kept everything securely locked until the morning staff arrived to welcome customers.



“Hello?” His muffled voice sounded hopeful. Didn’t sound like someone who was planning on murdering her. But what did a murderer sound like anyway?

She approached the window cautiously. “Can I help you?”

He exhaled, his breath crystallizing around him in a cloud. “My car got stuck down the street. Can I use your phone? Mine’s dead, and I forgot my charger in the hotel.” He pulled out a cell phone and pressed it against the wet window. Evidence, apparently.

Melody wavered. From what she could tell through the snow-crusted window, he was nicely dressed. Didn’t sound crazy. And sure enough, when she peered down the street, she could see a car cockeyed against the curb with its emergency flashers on.

“Listen, I don’t blame you for being cautious. I’m a pilot, see?” He opened his overcoat to show a navy-blue uniform and then pulled out a badge clip holding two unreadable cards. “These are my airport credentials. Homeland Security and my employer trust me with a thirteen-million-dollar plane. I promise, I just need a phone.”

A gust of wind hit him full force, the smattering of snow crackling against the window. He turned up his collar and hugged his arms to himself, waiting for her response.

Melody sighed and pulled a key ring from her belt loop. She couldn’t leave the poor guy outside to freeze, and she knew there wasn’t likely to be another place open for miles. She just prayed that her compassion wasn’t going to backfire on her. The lock clicked open, and she pulled the door inward.

He rushed in, rubbing his hands together. “Thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate this.”

“Sure. The phone’s over there by the register.” Melody pointed him in the direction of the counter.

He nodded, turned toward the phone, then hesitated and stuck out his hand. “I’m Justin Keller.”

As his cold fingers closed on her warm hand, she looked up and found herself frozen by brilliant blue eyes. "Melody Johansson."

He smiled, causing her heart to give a little hiccup, and released her before moving toward the phone. She watched as he dug a roadside assistance card from his wallet and dialed.

The stranger she'd rescued was handsome. Almost unfairly so. Hair that vacillated between blond and brown, cut short and a little spiky. Those arresting blue eyes. And a crooked leading-man smile that must routinely melt women into puddles at his feet. No, not leading man . . . fairy-tale prince. Why was it that pilots seemed to dominate the good-looking end of the gene pool? Was it a prerequisite for the job?

Justin was talking in a low voice—a sexy voice, she had to admit, just deep enough to balance the boyish charm—and she realized she should probably get back to work before he caught her staring. But he turned to her and cradled the handset against his shoulder. "They said it's going to take a while. Is it okay if I wait here?"

"Sure." She might have been reluctant to let him in, but her answer now was a little too enthusiastic. From the slight glimmer of a smile he threw back to her, he'd probably heard it too.

Well, a guy like that had to be aware of the effect he had on women. She had just never thought of herself as predictable.

He hung up the phone. "They say two hours, but they also said that there are people stranded all over Denver right now. I have no idea how long it will be. Are you sure it's okay? I don't want you to get in trouble for letting me in."

"It's no trouble." Especially since the opening manager was a single woman. She'd take one look at him and understand Melody's decision. "I've got to get back to work, though. Do you want some coffee?"

"I'd kill for some coffee."

"I'm not sure I like the choice of words, but I understand the

sentiment.” Melody smiled at the flash of embarrassment that crossed his face. “Have a seat and I’ll get you a cup. One of the perks of the night shift—unlimited caffeine.”

“Sounds like more of a requirement than a perk.”

“Sometimes.” She found a ceramic mug under the counter and then went to the vacuum carafe that held the coffee she’d made a few hours earlier. She pushed the plunger to dispense a cup and set it on the counter. “Cream and sugar are over there.”

“I take mine black.” He retrieved the mug and warmed his hand around it for a moment before he took a sip. “It’s good. Thank you.”

“Sure.” She’d said she needed to get back to work, but now she found herself hovering awkwardly behind the counter. It seemed weird to leave a stranger out here by himself—even weirder that she was reluctant to walk away.

He was looking around the bakery. “So, you’re the only one here?”

Now Melody took an involuntary step back, red flags waving wildly in the periphery of her mind.

He picked up on her tension and held up one hand. “Forget I said that. It sounded less creepy in my head. I just meant, are you the one responsible for all that bread? It seems like a lot of work for one person.” He gestured to the metal bins behind the counter, still awaiting their bounty for the day’s customers.

“Usually I have an assistant on the weekend, but yeah. It’s mostly me.”

“Impressive.” His nod made her think he meant it.

“Not really. This isn’t baking.”

“What is it then?”

Melody shrugged. “Assembling, maybe? But it’s a job, and working with bread all day beats sitting behind a desk in an office.”

He saluted her with a coffee cup. “I hear that. Exactly why I went into aviation.”

A little smile formed on her lips. She’d expected a guy that

good-looking to be arrogant, but his relaxed, comfortable attitude suggested the opposite. “I’m not supposed to let anyone back here, but if you want to keep me company . . .”

He straightened from his perch by the counter. “If I wouldn’t be bothering you. Normally I’d stream a video or put on a podcast, but . . .”

“Dead phone. Right.” She moved back to the kitchen, aware of him following behind. She nodded toward a stool by the door. “You can sit there if you like.”

He shrugged off his wet overcoat and hung it on the hook by the door, then perched on the stool. She couldn’t resist giving him a subtle once-over from the corner of her eye. Seemed like in addition to being unfairly good-looking, he had the physique to match—tall, lean, broad-shouldered. From the way his slim-cut white uniform shirt skimmed his torso, she would not at all be surprised if it were hiding six-pack abs.

She could tell already that this guy wasn’t the type to let himself go soft from too much sitting and bad airport food. He probably had a gym membership or a personal trainer or something to stay in that kind of shape.

She shook herself before she could become another pilot groupie. *Focus, Melody.*

Starting on the next tub of dough gave her something to think about other than the man sitting a mere five feet away from her. She started cutting and weighing the dough. “So what kind of planes do you fly? 747s or something like that?”

“No. Not anymore. Light business jets.”

“Like for executives?”

“Executives, politicians, athletes, celebrities. I work for a fractional, so it’s different people all the time. You know, they buy a share of a particular plane so they can travel whenever they want without having to pay for the whole thing and the cost of having a crew on standby.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“Sure.”

Melody cast a look his direction. “That didn’t sound very convincing.”

Justin chuckled and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Had you not asked me at the end of a seven-day, twenty-five-leg tour—followed by being stranded in the snow—I probably would have said yes, absolutely.”

“Okay, I guess I can give you that one. You said, ‘Not anymore.’ You used to be an airline pilot?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

“By my count, that’s only three.”

“Five.” He ticked off on his fingers. “What kind of planes? 747s? Executives? Do I enjoy it? And did I used to be an airline pilot?”

Melody rolled her eyes, but she laughed. “You must be fun at parties. Answer the question.”

“I flew for a regional 121 operator out of Texas for a while . . . one of the smaller companies that code-shares with the majors.”

“And you left because . . .”

He shook his head, like he realized he wasn’t going to get out of the conversation. “The pay wasn’t great and the schedule sucked. I flew twenty-four days out of the month, which meant I usually stayed in hotels twenty of those. Now I work eighteen days a month for more money, and even though there’s a lot of waiting around for passengers, I actually get to fly instead of babysit autopilot.”

“You seem pretty young to be a pilot.”

“You seem pretty young to be a baker.”

“How old should a baker be?”

“I don’t know. But they shouldn’t be young and stunning.”

Heat rose to Melody’s cheeks before she could control it. “Are you hitting on me?”

“If I were trying to hit on you, you wouldn’t have to ask.” He caught her gaze, his expression dead serious. Just when she feared she wouldn’t be able to breathe again, his mouth widened into a grin.

The flush eased when she realized he was just teasing her. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m honest.” He hopped off the stool. “Is it okay if I get more coffee?”

“Help yourself.” She let out a long exhale when he left the room. That guy was dangerous. He was gorgeous and he knew it. He had a sexy job and he knew it . . . even if he pretended to be blasé about it.

Pretty much the sort of guy she was always attracted to and lived to regret. In fact, the more attracted to a man she was, the worse off she knew she’d be at the end when the relationship imploded like a popped soufflé.

Judging from the little quivers she felt in his presence, a mere twenty minutes after their first meeting, this one was a heartbreaker.



## Chapter Two

JUSTIN LEFT THE KITCHEN in search of another cup of coffee. He needed way more caffeine—or maybe a muzzle, considering the way his thoughts seemed to be spilling from his mouth. He hadn't lied. The woman who had saved him from a cold morning in his car was young and stunning. Everything about her was lush, from her figure to her lips to the spill of blonde waves she kept partially tucked up beneath a slouchy beanie. When he'd knocked on the door, he'd been silently pleading for someone, anyone, to answer. He wasn't quite sure what he'd done to deserve *her* being the one to open it.

That kind of thinking was the last thing he needed. She was already skittish enough being alone in the bakery with a stranger. His only job was to be as nonthreatening as possible and check the interest that had hummed to life the instant she put her warm hand in his.

Instead, he wandered to the window to peer out at the car and cursed his own idiocy once more. He should have known better than to trust the warm sunshine that saw him off on his last



tour; he was a Colorado native, so he knew as well as anyone that March had an on-again, off-again relationship with spring. It had just been so long since his project vehicle had seen the outside of a garage that he'd left his much more sensible SUV behind and driven the vintage pony car to the airport.

Which was precisely why he was waiting for a tow instead of already home in his warm bed. The 1967 Mustang GT might be 271 horsepower of pure driving fun on dry roads, but it was virtually useless in conditions like these.

"You okay out there?" Melody's voice drifted from the back. "Are we out of coffee?"

He'd been out of sight for too long. He took his coffee and moved back into the kitchen, where Melody was taking golden-brown loaves from the oven, one by one, and setting them out on vertical racks to cool.

"Those smell great," he said. "Why do you say that's not really baking?"

Melody started, as if she'd forgotten he was there. Without looking at him, she batched the next set of loaves into the oven and shut the door. "The rye and the country *miche* are decent breads, even considering they come premixed. But the baguettes and *batards* aren't even close to what they should be. And of course, the clientele is used to grocery store bread, so that's what they expect bread to be like."

"What's wrong with grocery store bread?" Justin asked. "It tastes good and it fills you up."

Melody sent him a look that was halfway between resigned and bemused. "Bread shouldn't be some sort of bland, spongy starch that you use to push down your food. When it's done right, it's as complex as wine—the pleasantly sour flavor of well-fermented dough, the nutty quality of freshly ground wheat flour, the bitter caramel notes from the crust. Haven't you ever wondered why the Bible says Jesus is the bread of life? Bread was once worthy

of that metaphor. Somehow I don't think He would like to be compared to Wonder Bread."

Justin raised an eyebrow. The last thing he'd expected from the blonde bombshell was a biblical reference. He put his attention back on her words. "So why aren't you baking that sort of bread?"

Melody shrugged. "There are only a few really good traditional bakeries in Denver, and they don't tend to have much turnover. I had a pastry chef job with a lot of freedom, but that ended when the chef who hired me left."

"What happened?"

"Now who's asking a lot of questions?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to figure out how I can get my hands on some of that heavenly bread you're talking about." He couldn't help it. The sentence came out with a hint of flirtation. So much for distance.

She seemed to be struggling against a smile. "If you're really that anxious for good bread, I'll write down the names of a couple of bakeries for you."

"I get it. You don't like talking about the past."

She shot him a look, her brow furrowed. "You're really pushy; do you know that?"

He didn't mean to be, but two hours spent in silence with a beautiful and interesting woman was a wasted opportunity. "I'm just trying to pass the time. I could sit out front, but I hoped you wouldn't mind the company."

She didn't say anything, a clear answer. He could take a hint. He was about to excuse himself to the dining room when she said, "My friend was the chef, and through no fault of her own, she was pushed out of her restaurant. I left as a show of solidarity."

"Loyal. I like that."

"Impulsive, more like. Even Rachel told me I should have stayed."

"Wait. Rachel Bishop?"

“You know her?”

“I caught that feature *Altitude* did on her a few months back. She’s a big deal around here. Which means that you’re kind of a big deal. What are you doing at a place like this?”

“Like I said, pastry jobs are in short supply.”

Justin fell silent, watching her more closely this time. He didn’t know anything about baking, but there was something about the way she moved—contained, controlled, with no wasted motion—that marked her as a professional. Her hands seemed to know what to do even when she was focused on something else.

And then she stopped, her gaze locking with his. “Do you ever look at your life and wonder how you got here? I mean, I realize I made all the decisions that brought me to this point, but I haven’t been working on my craft my whole life just so I could bake a corporate chef’s mediocre recipes in a chain bakery. Do you know what I mean?”

The personal nature of the question took him off guard, and for a moment, he struggled for an answer.

She laughed self-consciously. “Never mind. This is why solo shifts are better. I tend to ramble at 4 a.m.”

“No, it’s okay.” He considered how to answer her question. “I guess I’ve always been pretty focused. I knew I wanted to be a pilot since I was a kid, and no one was going to do the work for me. It took a lot of time and money to get here.” He cocked his head and studied her curiously. “What would you do if you could snap your fingers and make it all different?”

Melody didn’t even hesitate. “Open my own place. French-inspired, most likely, with all those amazing pastries I fell in love with in Paris. Maybe light lunch fare. Hearty bread, the way it’s supposed to be done—heirloom wheat, baguettes baked *bien cuit*, that point just before burnt where the crust gets rich and caramelly.”

“Then why don’t you?” It was clearly her passion. She’d prob-

ably spent hundreds of shifts daydreaming about being her own boss. Maybe he didn't understand the love of bread or what *bien cuit* meant, but he understood that need for independence.

But Melody was shaking her head. "I don't have a hundred grand stuffed in my mattress, that's why. And it's a high-risk venture. Not easy to get a loan with no track record."

Her expression shifted toward melancholy, or maybe wistfulness, until she shook it off and plastered a smile on her face. "Tell me how you became a pilot."

"How did I become a pilot? Or when did I become a pilot? Or how did I come to do it as a job? All three of those are different questions."

Another smile twitched at her lips. "Pick one. Or better yet, answer all three. I've got about ten more of these tubs to do." She indicated the rack with a floury wave of her hand.

"The answers probably won't last you even one. My dad is an Airbus driver. He taught me how to fly in his 1966 Piper Cherokee. He sold it later when we built our own, which I know isn't strictly one of your questions—"

"You built a plane?" She paused in her shaping to focus on Justin. "From scratch? How do you even do that?"

"From a kit. We assembled the pieces in our garage and then put them together in our hangar."

Melody made a face. "No big deal. You have a hangar."

He grinned as he realized how it sounded. "Yes, we have a hangar. For the Cherokee, remember? Anyway, I racked up a lot of my PIC time in the homebuilt . . . well, that and as a flight instructor, but that's not strictly one of those three questions either. So, short version, I got my private pilot's license at sixteen. Accumulated enough flight time at my dad's expense in our plane and as a flight instructor while I was in college to get my commercial license at twenty. When I graduated, I got my ATP—that's the license you need to fly passengers for anything other than

skydiving or tours—and then I got a job as a first officer with a regional airline. Put in enough hours to qualify for a fractional job, and voilà. Here we are.”

“Wow.” Melody nodded thoughtfully. “Why a fractional? Why not one of the big airlines?”

“Seniority is a big deal, and had I gone to a major, I’d still be working my way up the first officer ranks. Maybe I’d make captain by fifty, if I was lucky and a bunch of pilots retired. Instead, I hired onto AvionElite as a captain. The advantage to being in the first wave of new hires after a fleet expansion. No waiting.”

She smiled. “I’m impressed.”

“You should be. It’s very impressive.” He shot her a grin, and as he’d hoped, she laughed.

“Somehow I don’t think you need another woman stroking your ego. I’m quite certain you get enough of that already.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Melody rolled her eyes. “Come on. You’re telling me you don’t have women falling all over you the minute you say you fly jets for a living?”

*Well, to be fair . . .*

She took his hesitation as confirmation. “I thought so. But in case you were wondering, I’m not the type.”

“Didn’t say you were.” She was making it pretty clear which side of the line she was on, and there was a line. Half the women he met thought dating a pilot meant spontaneous trips to Paris. The other half—the ones who instantly dismissed him—automatically assumed he had a woman in every city.

Neither was the truth, at least not completely. He had zero autonomy in where he flew, so Europe on the company dime was out. As far as women went, he’d learned a long time ago that casual flings had a way of turning out to be not so casual. He didn’t need the complications or the guilt. A few dates to pass the time, no strings attached? Sure. But the minute anyone tried

to attach expectations, he was out. If he'd learned anything from his parents' failed marriage, it was that this job didn't lend itself to long-term commitment.

Which was exactly why he needed to stop thinking of the best way to get Melody's phone number. Anyone who confessed her deepest dreams after thirty minutes of acquaintance surely didn't do casual.

No reason he couldn't tease her a bit, though. "I have a confession to make. I've wanted to ask you something since I got here."

She instantly went on guard. "Okay?"

"Do you think I could have one of those mini quiches over there?"

She let her breath out in a relieved laugh. "Help yourself."

"You won't get in trouble?"

"No, I'll just ring it to my account."

"Thanks. I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday." He found a plate and grabbed a savory pastry from the cooling rack. After that he limited his questions to her process of forming the endless loaves of bread until the hands on the big institutional clock edged toward six. From the front of the café he heard rattling as someone unlocked the front door.

"There's my relief. Finally." Melody pushed her last proofing baskets onto the rack and began scraping bits of dough off the wood tabletop with her steel cutter thing. She gave the whole surface a wipe-down with a wet rag and then yanked her apron off over her head. Only when she took her down parka from the hook beside his overcoat did she seem to remember his presence. "Do you want me to just drop you at home on my way? I assume you live around here."

"LoHi," he said. "But I don't want to put you out. You already saved me a very cold night in a very old car."

"It's no problem."

Her expression said she meant it. He knew he should probably

just go wait for the tow truck, but who knew how long it would be before it came along. At this point, he'd been awake for twenty-six hours and felt nearly dead on his feet. Too dead to resist the impulse to spend a little more time with Melody.

"Okay," he said finally. "Thanks."

Melody nodded and marched out to the front, where a short-haired woman was flipping on lights and unlocking cash registers.

"Louisa, I'm going to take off. When Patrick gets in, have him put in the baguettes and the quiches. Everything's ready to go."

"Thanks, Mel," the woman said absentmindedly, throwing a glance over her shoulder. She did a double take when she saw Justin there . . . triple if you considered the way she looked him up and down with interest.

Melody sighed. "This is my friend Justin. He got stuck in the neighborhood and needed a ride home. We're going to take off, all right?"

Louisa's expression changed, and she nodded. "Thanks again for covering last night. We all owe you one."

"No problem." Melody strode back into the kitchen, and Justin followed her to the back door, where she grabbed her purse and keys before breaking out into the frigid, but no longer snowing, morning. "I'm over there. That Jeep."

She gestured to a battered blue Wrangler that had seen better days, mounded with snow. He revised his impression of her once more as she retrieved a snow brush and began clearing the white coating from the windows. Then she hauled herself up into the cab and leaned across to unlock the passenger side.

As he climbed in, she pulled the knit beanie from her head and took out a pair of clips. Blonde hair spilled over her shoulders, just as long and thick as he imagined it would be. She ran her fingers through it before pulling the cap over her head again.

Just kill him now.

She shifted into reverse and twisted to see out the rear window

panel, bracing her hand against his seat as she did and reigniting that earlier spark of interest. Wow. Since when did he find driving to be sexy?

She was a good driver, though, and he always admired a woman who could handle a stick, especially in bad weather. The Jeep's big tires didn't flinch as they plowed through the snow. Neither did she, for that matter.

"You take this thing off road?"

Melody shot him a glance. "Occasionally. Why?"

"Just wondering. I'm rethinking my initial opinion of you."

"Which is?"

"Artistic and capable. Now I'm going to add 'a thwarted sense of adventure.'"

She chuckled. "That's not too far from the truth, actually."

Now he was wondering what other sorts of adventurous things she was into. She didn't strike him as a mountain climber. Skydiver? White-water rafter? World traveler? And why did it matter to him anyway?

They drove slowly through the downtown streets, the roads eerily silent in the dark. On a stormy Saturday morning, no one would venture out until after ten, when the sun would come out and begin to melt the snow and ice that coated the city. He was suddenly glad he'd taken her up on her offer.

"I don't suppose I could borrow your phone?"

She didn't hesitate, just rummaged one-handed in her purse and handed it to him without looking.

"Thanks." He pulled out his roadside assistance card, dialed the number, and canceled his request for help.

"Why did you do that?"

"Doesn't make much sense to have a tow truck come when I'm already home. I'll go back and pick it up when the roads clear."

"I guess it doesn't do you any good until the plows are out anyway. How are you going to get around?"



"I have an SUV. I just got duped by the weather report before I left, figured I should run the Mustang so the gas doesn't get stale. I don't take it out much in winter for this very reason." He shrugged. "You didn't think I was dumb enough to purposely drive it in a snowstorm, did you?"

"I don't know you well enough to make that judgment." But her tone and her slight smile said that was exactly what she'd been thinking. "Project car?"

"Precisely. I'd intended on selling it when I was done, but I couldn't bring myself to let it go."

"Sentimental, then. Don't worry; I won't tell."

Justin buried his smile and only then realized he was paying more attention to her than their progress through the snowy streets. He was supposed to be giving her directions. "Turn here. And then right at the second light."

Melody followed his directions silently, but when he told her to pull up at the curb in front of an old brick building, her head whipped toward him in surprise. "This is it? When you said LoHi, I thought—"

"One of those huge new developments? No. I'm still paying off my loans. Sorry to disappoint, though." He got that a lot. One more disillusionment from the glamorous lifestyle people thought he led.

A slow smile spread across her face. "Who said I was disappointed?"

His breath caught for a moment at her expression. Call it sleep deprivation or just a loss of his senses, he found himself leaning closer to her. She didn't move away, just sat there, her eyes wide, those luscious lips parted in surprise. At the last minute, he pulled himself together and grasped the door handle. "Thanks for the ride, Melody Johansson. I owe you one."

He hopped out of the Jeep before she could reply and stepped back onto the snowy curb. She gave him a little wave through

the window, then pulled back out onto the street, ice crunching beneath her tires. Justin watched her go for a minute, then turned and trudged toward the entrance of his building. He'd said he owed her one, but it was unlikely he would ever see her again to make good on the promise.

It was probably better that way.



## Chapter Three

MELODY PULLED AWAY from the curb, blowing out her breath and shoving down unreasonable disappointment. She'd known the guy for all of four hours. Knew nothing about him but his name, his occupation, and the fact he liked to fix up old cars in his spare time. And yet she was wishing that she'd offered her number. Or asked for his. She was a modern woman, after all. There was no reason to hide her interest in him.

Scratch that. She had plenty of good reasons. Five to be exact.

Brandon. Sebastian. Luc. Leo. Micah.

Especially Micah.

All guys she'd been powerfully attracted to at first sight. All guys who had been intelligent, charming, accomplished. By all outward indicators, decent as well.

But little by little, whether it took one month or one year, she'd realized that outward appearances were deceiving and been left with nothing but a broken heart and a sense of shame over her own naiveté.

No more. She had plenty of things to worry about, first among

them how to get off this dead-end path she was on. If there was one good thing about Justin's appearance tonight, it was that she'd been forced to articulate what bothered her about her life. How far from her own dreams she'd drifted. Justin had made it seem simple to make a plan and follow it. So why couldn't it be?

She found street parking outside her tiny white-brick apartment complex in Sun Valley, an area that was worlds away and not just a handful of miles from the tony Capitol Hill neighborhood in which she worked. That was another thing that would be depressing, if she allowed herself to think about it for too long. Her best friends had made something of their lives by the thirty-year mark: Rachel was an award-winning chef who owned a nice condo conversion in Cheesman Park, while Ana was a big-time publicist with a beautiful high-rise condo in Lower Downtown. It wasn't that Melody was irresponsible or profligate with her money—quite the opposite. It was just that her line of work didn't tend to pay especially well, and she didn't hang around most places long enough to get a promotion and a raise. These days she was pretty happy to afford rent, food, and health insurance. Which meant living in a not-quite-nice building in a not-quite-nice neighborhood.

She bypassed the snow-covered shopping cart that had been abandoned at the curb and trudged toward the building's front entrance. Her key stuck in the cold lock, and she had to wiggle it to get it to turn—naturally the owners wouldn't have sprung for keycard locks, not in a building of this age. She climbed the stairs through the dingy hallway to an apartment on the second floor, its door peeling and warped, where she went through the same key-jiggling routine she'd done with the front door.

The interior, fortunately, was nowhere near as depressing as the common areas. Melody had resigned herself to not getting back her security deposit and covered the plaster walls in a soothing shade of gray to contrast with the white molding. Much of the

art-deco plasterwork remained, damaged and patched inexpertly, giving the apartment an air of graceful decay, like the lovely old building in which she'd lived in Paris for a short while. There wasn't much that could be done with the 1950s kitchen, but she'd decorated the rest of the living area in whimsical printed fabrics and vintage furnishings she'd thrifted or refinished. It was a beautiful cocoon, one that blotted out the loud neighbors and wailing sirens that surrounded her.

She dropped her keys on a tiny demilune table near the doorway and hung her coat on the antique doorknobs that acted as hooks. A big glass of water, a quick shower, and then she could collapse into bed beneath her pin-tucked cotton duvet cover. And if she happened to be thinking about a certain handsome pilot despite her best efforts to the contrary, there was no one here to tell on her.

\* \* \*

An obnoxious trill penetrated Melody's dreams, peeling back the layers of unconsciousness until she could pry one eye open to squint at her cell phone. The big white numbers on the screen said 2:05. She swiped a finger across the screen, but instead of silencing the alarm, she only managed to swipe the phone off her nightstand with a cringe-inducing thud.

She fumbled back the covers with clumsy limbs and crawled under the bed, where she finally got the blasted thing to shut off. That was the drawback of shift work. She might get six or seven hours of sleep a day, but it wasn't good sleep, and she often woke in a state of confusion. She pushed the phone onto the table where it belonged, climbed into bed again, and dragged the duvet over her head.

No. It was Saturday. That meant that she couldn't go back to sleep. She had a dessert to make for the Saturday Night Supper Club.

Technically, it wasn't an official meeting; those only happened on the first and third Saturdays of the month when Rachel hosted the invitee-only dinner party at her house. For the actual supper clubs, the guests were nominated by previous attendees and selected by Rachel and her boyfriend, Alex. They pretended like the selection was random, but in reality, Rachel and Alex spent a great deal of time putting together the right mix of guests to ensure that conversation would flow and everyone would get along. Guests were expected only to contribute the cost of their meal, which could range from ten dollars to fifty depending on the extravagance of the menu, but it was a small price to pay. In the eight months since it had begun, it had quickly become the hottest and most sought-after dining invitation in the Denver metro area.

Most of that had to do with Rachel's incredible cooking, but Melody could say without arrogance that her desserts were always one of the night's highlights.

Because tonight was a girls' night—only she, Rachel, and Ana were attending—she could get away with something simple, but of course she wouldn't. She had a reputation to uphold, after all. Melody rubbed her eyes until they burned, levered herself out of bed with another yawn, and stumbled to the kitchen.

Her programmable coffeemaker was almost finished, the last drips making concentric ripples across the surface of the dark brew. She grabbed a mug from the cabinet, poured herself a cup, and added milk and sugar. She'd go through this entire pot by the time she left for Rachel's, but right now she took the opportunity to sip the first cup and let it transform her groggy state into something resembling alertness.

She was practically a Folgers commercial.

In the meantime, she could decide what to make. She selected one of her favorite cookbooks from the rack on the kitchen wall and took it to the dining room table, flipping through the pages for inspiration. She rarely baked from them—she had her

own recipes for most things—but there was something about the beautifully photographed, glossy images that sparked her imagination.

She brushed a finger across a photo of a strawberry pie. The glistening strawberries and swirls of cream topping began an instant craving for summer, but fresh strawberries were months away from their peak. She could still do a napoleon, though.

With either inspiration or caffeine flowing through her veins—hard to tell which—Melody began pulling ingredients out of the cabinet. She didn't store them in the quaint little jars one would expect from the vintage style of her apartment, but rather big commercial Cambros, plastic buckets that could hold twenty pounds of flour and sugar at a time. When it came to serious baking, cute didn't quite cut it.

A proper laminated dough would take hours, folding the layers of dough and butter multiple times, interspersed with frequent rests in the refrigerator. She had neither the time nor the energy to pull off something so exacting for a casual meal. Rough puff would have to do.

This method worked on the same principle as traditional *pâte feuilletée*, cutting cold butter into the flour, rolling the dough out until it was streaked with butter, then folding it several times envelope style. As the water in the butter evaporated, it caused air pockets that rose the pastry while the fat kept it tender. The shortcut meant it wouldn't have as many layers, but it was close enough that some of the chefs she'd worked with didn't even bother with the real thing.

When the dough was folded, she wrapped it in plastic, popped it in the refrigerator to chill, and began to work on the filling. There wasn't enough time for a proper pastry cream—it had to be boiled together on the stove like a custard and then chilled before using—so she'd do a whipped cream filling with strawberry jam.

Melody lost herself in the work, her grogginess melting away



as she put together a quick jam, whipped heavy cream, and baked the pastry between two sheet pans to keep it flat. When the components were finished and cooled, she cut the sheet of pastry into even rectangles and layered each with whipped cream and jam. She scooped the rest of the whipped cream into a pastry bag with a star tip and piped perfect little plumes on the upper layer. At the last minute, she pulled out a bar of bittersweet chocolate and sliced curls onto the top with a vegetable peeler. Beautiful. The girls would love it. As would her followers.

She pulled out her cell phone and brought up her Instagram account, her heart giving a little leap when she saw that she'd gained a few dozen more followers while she slept. She'd started the profile out of boredom after she left Paisley and began the first of several bad bakery jobs, needing an outlet for her creativity. In eight months, Books in the Bakery had reached over ten thousand followers—pretty impressive considering she'd done nothing but post a photo every day or two.

She glanced around for inspiration, settling on the pickled wood surface of her dining table, then pulled several colors of vintage linen napkins from a basket on top of her cabinets. The mint added a nice counterpoint to the red of the strawberry jam, two pops of color in an otherwise-monochromatic layout. She toyed with the arrangement of the napkin, then transferred the napoleon to a plate with a paper doily. No, no doily . . . just the scalloped-edge platter. A coffee cup, a tiny silver creamer, and one of her antique dessert forks later, the composition was ready for its most important element: the book.

She wandered over to the milk-painted bookshelf that acted as a TV stand and knelt before its overfilled shelves. The napoleon was an old-fashioned pastry, named after the Italian city rather than the French emperor as so many assumed, so it definitely had to be classic European literature. Melody ran her fingers across

the spines of the cloth-bound volumes as if she could absorb their essences by touch. Tolstoy, Hugo, Eliot . . . Dumas.

She smiled and tipped a scarlet-bound volume of *The Count of Monte Cristo* off the shelf. Perfect. A French book about a pretend Italian count paired with an Italian dessert with pretend French roots? Her more literate followers would get a kick out of the parallels. Not to mention the fact that Napoleon himself figured prominently in the plot.

Grinning to herself, Melody crossed back to the table, placed the book carefully in the composition, and dragged over a chair to stand on. She needed height rather than depth of field for the flatlay, so her cell phone camera was more than sufficient. Half a dozen photos later, she had selected the best one, enhanced it in her photo editing app, and uploaded it to both Instagram and her Tumblr.

Almost immediately the likes started coming in.

She left her phone on the table while she went to change her clothes and twist her hair up into a messy bun, but she couldn't resist checking when she came back to pack up the dessert for transport to Rachel's house. Up to thirty. Not bad, but certainly not the record for fastest-growing post. She analyzed the photo for some clue about what wasn't resonating with her audience, but it didn't seem any different from her most popular posts. Maybe next time she'd add some greenery. Things with roses and fresh leaves always were a big hit.

She was still recomposing the photo in her head when she pulled up in front of Rachel's house and picked her way up the icy walkway to her friend's front door, balancing the dessert box carefully in front of her.

The door opened to reveal a beautiful dark-haired woman, casually dressed in a flannel button-down shirt and jeans. "Mel. You're early!"

"There's a first time for everything." Melody gave Rachel a

one-armed hug and handed over the container so she could shrug off her down parka. She followed her friend into the kitchen, where Ana sat at the long, rustic kitchen table. As usual, the Filipina was impeccably put together in a stylish sweater and jeans, her makeup flawless.

Ana held up a bottle. "Wine?"

"Please." Melody lifted her face and breathed deeply. "Something smells amazing. What are we having?"

"*Moules marinières*," Rachel said. "It seemed a shame to let mussel season close without making it at least once."

"*Oh la la*," Melody said. "Paris must have been in the air today, because I made a napoleon."

Ana handed over a half-filled wineglass and gave Melody a quick hug. "You're killing me, Mel. I'm still recovering from last week's Death by Chocolate Mousse."

"Don't tell me you only have dessert once a week." Melody looked over Ana's trim figure, toned and sculpted in the gym, and shook her head. "Never mind. I already know the answer to that."

"Please. You and Rachel got the good genes. I have to work at it."

"Whatever." Melody rolled her eyes and plopped herself across the table from Ana, watching Rachel lift the lid on the pot. A plume of shallot and white wine-perfumed steam wafted their direction. "I see she's missing the restaurant tonight."

"You think?" Ana flashed a smile. "She was just waxing eloquent about white truffles."

"Not for this dish," Rachel interjected. "Just white truffles in general."

Melody laughed. "Hon, you've got it bad."

"That obvious?" Rachel checked the temperature of the oil in her Dutch oven and began to transfer once-fried potato strips into the oil for their final crisp. "Don't get me wrong. I've loved going to college, and I'm enjoying teaching at the culinary school far more than I ever thought I would. I have this one student who

reminds me of why I cook. She's forty years old and came to the conclusion that she'd rather die than spend one more day in an office. Normally, cooks who start any older than their twenties never make it. They realize that the life is harder than the one they left behind. But she's like a sponge. She absorbs everything I can throw at her and demands more."

"So you want a restaurant so you can hire her?"

"That's not a bad idea, actually." Rachel sent a smile over her shoulder. "You know me. This was always just a break. I just haven't found the right situation yet."

"I know what you mean," Melody said.

Ana grimaced. "Bakery job not going so well?"

"You know how it is. Low pay, long hours. Making the same boring things every day without any relief. If I've got to make one more ham and cheese quiche, I'm going to lose it."

Ana swirled her wine around in her glass, a sure sign she was thinking about how to broach a tricky subject. "You know, if you hadn't moved around so much, you could be the executive pastry chef somewhere by now."

Melody had no response to that, because it was 100 percent true. Had she stuck with the pastry chef job she'd held before she went to work for Rachel, she probably would be in charge of the entire section now. Of course, the reason she'd quit had nothing to do with the details of the job or her performance and everything to do with her bad taste in men.

"At least we can both agree that my current situation is dead-end. I'm just a cog on the wheel. You don't need a baking pedigree to do this gig."

Rachel watched her fries carefully, then began to fish them from the Dutch oven with a spider skimmer. "So what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I would love nothing better than to pack up all my earthly possessions and move back to Paris, but my

bank account disagrees. So maybe I should just start looking for another job.”

Ana regarded her with a half-exasperated, half-doting look. Neither of Melody’s friends quite knew what to do with her restlessness. She’d never been able to explain it, even to herself. It wasn’t boredom exactly. It was just that for every opportunity she chose, she was all too aware of the ones she rejected. It was only a matter of time before she wondered what else was around the corner. And yet she had realized today that none of those choices were moving her *toward* anything, just away from something else.

“I saw your latest Books in the Bakery post. You’ve got a ton of followers, Mel! Why aren’t you doing something with that?”

“Do what? Ten thousand followers does not a business make. It’s not even enough to get a publisher interested in a cookbook.”

“What about a mail-order bakery?” Rachel started to transfer their dinner to serving dishes. “Surely some of those ten thousand people would love to get their hands on your work. With your design sensibility and Ana’s PR skills, I’m pretty sure you could get up and running almost immediately. You know I’m willing to help however I can.”

“You don’t have any time, between teaching and going to college and that gorgeous boyfriend of yours.” The words came out petulantly, but Melody winked so Rachel would know she was kidding. “I don’t want Alex hating me for taking up all your free time.”

“Alex knows how important you guys are to me. Which is why he’s hanging out with Bryan tonight so we could have some girl time.” Still, there was a little glimmer in Rachel’s eye that made Melody think she’d rather be with her boyfriend. And who could blame her? Not only was he handsome, he was successful, kind, and he adored Rachel. You only had to see how he looked at her to know that he was head-over-heels in love. It was enough to send a single woman into twin spirals of hope and despair.

And resurrect fairy-tale fantasies faster than you could say “glass slipper.”

She didn’t begrudge Rachel the fairy tale, though. It was her turn, her shot. Rachel had lived for work almost her entire life, eschewing men completely in favor of climbing the ranks of the culinary world. Ironically, Alex had been the one who caused it to come crashing down, after an article he wrote in the *New Yorker* set off a chain reaction that ended in her losing her share of the restaurant she’d built with her partners. If you asked Rachel, she’d say it was the best thing that had ever happened to her, and not just because of the guy.

*Maybe I need a guy to come around and ruin my career.* Justin’s image immediately popped into her head, and she shoved it back down.

Rachel began bringing soup plates to the table then, heaped with open mussels in a shallot-and-parsley-studded buttered broth. A basket of freshly cooked, thick-cut French fries went in the middle, along with a plate of baguette rounds for soaking up the last bits of the fragrant liquid.

Melody closed her eyes to savor the first taste of perfectly steamed mussel. Her friend really was an amazing chef. Simple dishes like this one showed off both the quality of the ingredients and the skill of the cook—no heavy sauces or elaborate preparations behind which to hide.

Ana gave a blissed-out sigh. “You need your own place again, Rachel. Not that I’m not grateful to be the recipient of your boredom, but it seems selfish to want to keep your cooking to myself.”

Rachel repressed her smile, obviously pleased. Cooking was the way she loved her friends; praising the food was the way they loved her back.

They ate in virtual silence, too consumed with pleasure to be bothered to speak, until Melody jerked her head up and looked to Ana. “Oh! I forgot! You had a date last night!”

Rachel turned accusingly to Ana. "I can't believe you didn't lead with that."

"That's because it was a disaster." Ana dipped a round of bread into the broth and took a bite, chewing long and carefully. Clearly she wasn't going to elaborate.

"So we can check the setup off the list as a viable dating option," Melody said.

"Either that or I need to be set up by coworkers who have better taste."

Rachel cringed. "He was that bad?"

"He was good-looking, but all he wanted to talk about was how much money he made and how much his car cost. Plus he kept saying that he wanted to take me to his house in Vail. All in the first thirty minutes." Ana shuddered. "It creeped me out, like he thought I could be bought."

"I'm sorry," Melody said, wrinkling her nose. "Surely Rachel didn't get the last decent guy in the entire city."

"I'm beginning to think so. So you're not having any luck either, I take it?"

"When would I have time? Though, actually . . . you won't believe what happened at work this morning."

Melody hadn't planned on telling them, but the story was too good to keep to herself. She started with how Justin had shown up in the snow outside the bakery, and by the time she got to the part where she drove him home, her friends were grinning like fools.

"So you got his number, right?" Ana said. "Or gave him yours."

Melody shook her head. "No. It wasn't like that."

"It wasn't like that," Ana muttered. "She meets a hot, intelligent, employed guy who doesn't put the moves on her, and she has no interest."

"I didn't say I had no interest. Of *course* I had interest. A lot of interest. And therein lies the problem."

"Not every guy is like Micah," Rachel said. "And you've seen firsthand that sometimes the right guy comes along when you least expect it."

"For you, maybe. When I let my hormones decide, I make terrible choices."

"You're not wrong," Ana said. "But how do you plan to meet someone if you rule out anyone you're attracted to?"

"I figured he'd sit down next to me at church or something and I'd hear a voice from heaven."

"When's the last time you went to church?" Rachel asked.

"You know very well. About as far back as you, before you became a lady of leisure and got all this free weekend time."

Rachel snorted, and Melody cracked a smile in return. Only a cook would consider part-time college and part-time teaching as less than a full-time job. "Seriously, though . . ."

Melody waved a hand. "No, trust me. This guy pushed all my buttons at first sight. And we all know that's bad news. Besides, even if I were interested, I have no way of contacting him."

Ana shrugged. "You know where he lives." "I'm not going to stalk him!"

"I have no such qualms," Ana said. "I want to see the button-pusher myself. Give me your cell phone."

Reluctantly, Melody passed her the phone. Ana immediately punched the Facebook icon. "What did you say his name was?"

"Justin Keller. Wait, you're really looking him up?"

"Of course I am." Ana's fingers flew over the phone's tiny keyboard and a page of results loaded. She swiped up, murmuring to himself, "Not him . . . not him either . . ."

Then she stopped and shoved the phone in Melody's direction. "Is that him?"

Melody squinted at the photo and her breath hitched. It was her Justin all right, looking as appealing in a snapshot as he had in person. Well, he wasn't *her* Justin . . . "That's him."



Ana whistled and passed the phone to Rachel, whose eyebrows went up. "You weren't kidding."

"I never kid about ultra-hot guys. Now give it back to me."

"You should send him a friend request," Ana said.

"Absolutely not."

"Too late. I already did."

Melody snatched back her phone. "What do I do now?"

"You wait. He'll accept your friend request and then you post something cute and flirty on his wall. Ask him if he ever got his car out of the snow."

"Add a winky face," Rachel suggested.

"Do *not* add a winky face," Ana said.

Rachel's brow furrowed. "Why? Does that mean something bad?"

"Honey, I know I've been telling you to brush up on your social media skills, but maybe you should stay off of it."

"Can we get back to my problem here?" Melody asked. "I'm going to cancel it."

"If you do that," Rachel said reasonably, "he'll know you were looking him up and you pressed it by accident. Which really is stalking. Better that he just thinks you're proactive."

"I can't believe you just did that to me!"

Ana grinned. "You're welcome."

Fine. The damage was already done, so she might as well take advantage of it. Melody pressed the photos section, and several that were set to public popped up on the screen. She tapped one of Justin with a little girl, maybe two or three years old. "He has a kid?"

Rachel hopped out of her seat to look over Melody's shoulder. "Wait, what?"

"No, no. It's his niece, I think. He was tagged by Jessica Keller Costa. Must be his sister." She looked closer and read the caption. "Abby with her favorite uncle at church today."

“Jackpot,” Ana said. “Christian and a good uncle.”

“We don’t know that,” Rachel said. “Maybe his sister dragged him to her daughter’s dedication or something. And she really shouldn’t be posting pictures of her kids set to public.”

Ana made a face. “Party pooper.”

Rachel stood and began clearing the table of their dishes, practically licked clean. She piled them in the sink for later, then turned to the pastry box holding Melody’s dessert. “Do you want to come cut this?”

“Gladly.” Melody jumped out of her seat, taking her phone with her this time, and rushed to Rachel’s side. She portioned the napoleon into slices and transferred them to small plates that Rachel provided, then helped her friend bring them to the table while the coffee brewed. Before they could return to the topic of Justin, she asked, “So who do we have invited for supper club next weekend?”

“The three of us, of course, if you can still make it. Alex invited his neighbor and the neighbor’s girlfriend. That makes six. I thought each of us could invite someone new, just to mix it up a little.”

Melody caught Ana’s grin from the corner of her eye and held up a finger. “Don’t say it.”

“What?” Ana asked innocently. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Good. Because short of Facebook, I don’t intend on having any contact with Justin Keller.”

And yet, on her way home from dinner, his repeated intrusion on her thoughts called her a liar. It was all she could do not to check her phone at the stoplight and see if he’d accepted her friend request. That was why looking him up had been a bad idea. Back when she thought she had no way to reach him short of showing up at his apartment, it had been easy to dismiss him as the central character of an interesting story. Now that there was the possibility of contact—real contact—she found herself

making excuses, thinking up reasons why he wasn't as bad an idea as she'd initially convinced herself.

*When did you go and get all conservative?* she wondered as she marched up the icy sidewalk to her building's front door. *Once, you would have been the first to track him down.*

But she knew the answer to that, too. If there was one thing Micah had taught her, it was that once her heart got involved, her head took a backseat. Had she not been so stupid in love with him, she would have seen what was staring her in the face, and she wouldn't have had to walk in on her boyfriend with another woman.

In the storage room of his own restaurant.

Even worse than the eyeful she'd gotten had been his excuse: *"We were never exclusive, Melody. I thought you knew that."*

She shook off the memories with an irritated shake of her head and climbed the stairs to her apartment. She had some taste in men, all right. Chefs and pilots. Two occupations known for their groupies, and for appealing to men who were all too willing to take advantage of the fact.

Melody let herself into her apartment, her mind made up. She would cancel the friend request. Who cared if Justin thought she'd been Facebook stalking him? If she never saw him again, it hardly mattered. She pulled her phone out, her thumb selecting the app as she automatically shrugged out of her coat.

*"There you are."*

Melody let out a shriek and spun toward the settee near the window, her phone forgotten. Her heart pounded so hard it made her sway on her feet with every beat. When she recognized the intruder, she sagged against the wall. *"Why would you do something like that to me? You just about scared me to death!"*

The tall, elegant woman who unfolded herself from the seat looked enough like Melody that they could be sisters—or at least that's what she liked telling everyone. Same long wavy hair, same

brown eyes. The difference of course was that this woman was whittled and toned from personal training and Pilates, her voice modulated to a sultry Southern twang that Melody knew was as fake as certain body parts. Janna Leigh had been born and raised in Denver, not the Deep South like she implied when talking about her love for Tennessee.

"I don't know how else I would have announced myself," Janna said petulantly, crossing the room in impossibly high-heeled boots. "I didn't mean to scare you, love. Why don't you come give your mama a kiss?"

Melody stared at her mother for a long stretch—it could have been ten seconds or ten minutes for the questions that flew through her mind. Finally, she drew in a deep breath and let it out with a prayer for patience. She kissed Janna's proffered cheek and then stepped back from the cloud of perfume. "What are you doing here, Mom? And how did you get in?"

"You gave me a key, remember? Last time I was here."

A key that she was supposed to have returned when she left. Melody hadn't made a fuss, because her mother's dismay over her living arrangements had made it clear she wouldn't be coming back short of hell freezing over. Melody barely kept herself from inquiring about the temperature of hades.

"That answers the last part but not the first. I know you didn't come all the way from Nashville just to visit me."

Part of her waited for her mother to deny it, but instead Janna reached out one cool, slender hand to grasp Melody's and drew her over to the sofa. "Sit down, sugar."

Melody's heartbeat quickened again, this time from dread.

"There's no easy way to say this. Grandma Bev is dead."

"What?" Melody stared at her mother, unable to comprehend what she was saying. "That's not possible! I just talked to her a couple of weeks ago."

"Apparently, she had been having some heart issues that she

didn't want anyone to know about. She had a stroke. They think it was a blood clot. She called 911, but she died on the way to the hospital."

Melody felt like the ceiling had caved in on top of her. No, it would have been easier to breathe with a ton of bricks on her chest than through this news. "I can't believe it."

"I know you were still close to her. That's why I wanted to tell you in person."

Melody fell back against the cushions, tears welling in her eyes and spilling down her cheeks. *Close* was an understatement. Her grandmother Beverly had raised her, homeschooled her, done all the things that her mother was too busy to do because of her country music career. She was the one who had wiped Melody's tears and kissed her scrapes and taught her all the things a young girl should know and quite a few things she shouldn't. But that was her grandmother. She'd been an unusual mix of traditional and modern: a university literature professor, twice married, who nonetheless attended a conservative church and gave up her career to raise her only granddaughter. She had been the one to encourage Melody's love of art and baking, even while she insisted on a thorough classical education.

"I know this is a huge shock. I only hope you're this broken up when I die."

Melody turned incredulously to her mother. "For the love, Mom. Could you give it a rest? This is the one time in our lives when even you can agree it's not about you."

"Why, I never—"

"No, you never do." Melody pushed herself to her feet, hugging her arms to her chest protectively. "When is the funeral?"

"Tomorrow. I thought we could drive up together for the service."

Once more, she was stunned nearly speechless. "Tomorrow? How long have you known about this?"

“Since Thursday morning, but—”

“Thursday? And you’re just now telling me?” Melody stared in disbelief. “How could you keep something like this from me?”

Janna stood, her unnaturally sculpted body stiff. “Don’t act like that. She was *my* mother, you know.”

“And yet somehow your career was always too important to come visit her.”

Janna jerked like she’d been slapped, but she smoothed it over with the ease of long practice. “I’ll come by and get you at nine. It’s a bit of a drive to Longmont.” She brushed past Melody toward the door and paused with her hand on the knob. “I know you don’t want to believe this, but I loved her. I love both of you.”

Melody stared as the door shut behind her mother, guilt creeping in to mingle with the grief. Maybe she hadn’t been fair. Of course Janna loved Beverly, and of course she would be upset. But she also wouldn’t put it past her mother to turn this tragedy into some sort of publicity op, a chance to play the grieving daughter before cameras, where she would weep prettily beneath a netting-veiled hat and dab her eyes with a lace handkerchief. No doubt her albums would get a boost from playing on the public’s sympathies. It was an uncharitable thought if ever there was one, but Melody had been a prop in those publicity stunts too often to not be cynical.

She walked numbly to her bedroom, crawled beneath the duvet fully clothed, and sobbed until it was time to go to work.

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