

A close-up photograph of a woman's face and hands. She is holding a bright red ceramic mug with both hands. The background is dark and out of focus. The text of the book title is overlaid on the image.

THE SOLID GROUNDS COFFEE COMPANY

A
SUPPER CLUB
NOVEL

CARLA LAUREANO

Prologue

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, Suesca was haunted.

From everything Bryan Shaw had seen, he believed it. But for him, it wasn't the spirits of the dead that hovered over this small Colombian town. It was the memory of the living. A memory that he'd ignored, run from, and blotted out for three years without any significant success.

He zipped up his one-man tent and stood there, letting the cool, dark night surround him before he made his way toward the campfire where a cluster of other climbers gathered. Suesca was the epicenter of rock climbing in Colombia, its 8,400-foot elevation giving it the benefit of comfortable temperatures year-round, its proximity to Bogotá giving it the benefit of ease of access. The entire town was built around climbers: gear shops, hostels, campgrounds. Like most, Bryan had opted to rent a tent from the outfitter and camp here, just a stone's throw from the rock.

"Hey, mate, want a beer?" Jack, the big blond Australian Bryan had met earlier in the day, pressed a bottle into his hand as he approached and slapped him on the back. "I was

just telling this mob about how you on-sighted Natalio Ruiz this morning.”

Bryan made a noncommittal sound that could be taken as assent or appreciation and settled into a spare folding chair by the fire. Just because he’d never climbed that particular route didn’t mean he’d never been on that pitch—he’d been climbing in Colombia on and off for most of his career. Nor did he say that for a climber of his caliber, a simple 5.9 wasn’t much of a challenge. But Jack was a convivial sort who liked to tell stories, even if they weren’t his own. Fine with Bryan. He didn’t much feel like talking tonight.

Maybe Suesca had been a mistake after all. He could have gone on to Florián or La Mojarra without returning to the site of his old memories. Maybe he’d figured that by coming back he could reclaim them, expunge them. He’d been wrong.

Bryan took a swig of his beer and stared into the dark. He and Vivian had met here for the first time five years ago when Bryan was filming a climbing video. She’d been a production assistant, a climber herself, and even though Bryan was supposed to have his mind on the rock, half the time it had been on her. Which explained why he’d fallen on his first attempt. Embarrassing, but altogether understandable considering the nature of the distraction. Black-haired, lithe, and athletic, she was pretty much a climbing supermodel, and she naturally drew the eye of any man within a hundred yards.

A shadowed woman skirted the fire, and for a moment, he could have sworn it was her. Now he was seeing things, and he didn’t even have alcohol to blame for it. He took another drink, closed his eyes, and tipped his head back to the sky.

“Hello, Bryan.”

His eyes snapped open and he looked at the bottle in his hand as if it could confirm that he hadn’t lost time, wasn’t in the middle of some drunken vision. When his voice came out,

it sounded hoarse and scratchy. "Vivian. What are you doing here?"

She dragged a folding chair over and plopped down beside him. "What anyone else is doing here, I imagine. Just got in tonight. How about you?"

"Last night, late." He looked her over as if to convince himself that she wasn't an apparition. But no, he knew her features as well as he knew his own. Hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, longer than it had been last time he'd seen her. Chiseled cheekbones. Sleek climbing pants and sport-fabric shell showing off every curve and muscle on her small frame. His stomach tightened and his heart clenched in response. "You're telling me we just happened to be in Colombia at the same time? That's some coincidence."

"It's no coincidence. I was in Peru, and when I saw your Instagram, I thought, *Why not?*" She flashed him a smile that managed to be halfway between knowing and regretful.

"In that case, I'm going to bed. Early morning tomorrow, and I want to be rested." He rose and saluted her with his mostly empty bottle.

He'd only taken a few steps when her voice trailed after him. "Since when are you so concerned with getting your beauty sleep?"

He paused for a second, then continued to his tent several hundred yards away and ripped the zipper open. He resisted the urge to shatter the bottle, setting it down carefully inside instead. Turned on the battery-operated lantern and zipped himself in, then stripped down to his athletic shorts. All the while he clenched his jaw so tightly his teeth ached.

Bryan was just reaching for the lantern's switch when the flap of his tent opened with a slow, deliberate zip. He straightened, muscles tensed, hoping it was just some drunk climber who forgot which rented tent was his own.

He couldn't be so lucky.

Vivian ducked through the opening and settled on her knees, zipping up after herself. "I don't like the way we left things."

"Just now? Or three years ago?"

"Both." She studied him carefully. "You look good."

He looked away before he could be pulled in by her pleading expression. "I'm not doing this, Viv. If you remember, you were the one who decided how we left things. I asked you to marry me, you said no, and I never saw you again. It sounded pretty definitive to me."

She crept closer. "Bryan, I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I just . . ."

"You just didn't want to marry me. I'm over it." He made his face and his tone stony, as if the affectation would reach his heart.

Vivian bit her bottom lip. "Well, I guess I'm not."

Great, she was going to cry. He'd never been able to bear seeing her upset. That had been the whole problem. He would have given up everything for her, and she would give up nothing for him.

"I'm sorry. This was a mistake. I just thought—" Her voice strangled for a split second. "I thought if I could see you again, I could stop wondering if I made the right decision."

Despite the fact he hated himself for it, her imploring tone began to soften the hard shell he'd erected around the part of his heart she still owned. He reached out and smoothed a tear off her cheek with the roughened pad of his thumb. "Viv, we can't go back. What's done is—"

"Done, I know. But it doesn't stop me from missing you. It doesn't stop me from wishing I'd done things differently."

Her eyes, shining wet in the glare of the lantern, met his, and all the anger he'd held against her crumbled. For a while, he'd thought an endless string of women would help numb

the pain, but they couldn't erase her memory when he'd never stopped loving her, never stopped wanting her.

Bryan didn't think when he slid a hand behind her neck and brought her closer. Acted on instinct when he lowered his lips to hers. And when her arms wrapped around him and she kissed him in return, the last three years melted away. It felt like all the wrongs in his life had been righted.

* * *

Bryan woke to a pale-blue glow through the tent canvas, the distant chirping of birds alerting him to the cusp of morning. He rolled to his side and touched only an empty space where Vivian should be, the chill on the nylon telling him she'd been gone for a while.

Quietly, he pulled on his clothes and shoes and unzipped his tent flap, a rush of relief coming immediately when he saw Vivian crouched in front of a small campfire. The smell of coffee drifted from the aluminum percolator set on the rocks. He crept up behind her and pressed a kiss to her neck. "Good morning, beautiful."

Instead of twisting around to kiss him as he expected, she straightened and slipped out of his embrace. "Coffee?"

"Sure." He retrieved his lightweight camp mug and held it out as she poured the thick black cowboy coffee into it. "Sleep well?"

Once more, she avoided his eyes. For the first time, a pang of fear struck him. "Viv? What's wrong?"

"Last night shouldn't have happened."

Bryan frowned and settled into the dirt beside her. "Viv, baby, I know it wasn't planned, but now that you're back . . ."

She swallowed hard and looked him straight in the eye. "I'm getting married."

He swayed in a sudden rush of dizziness. "Excuse me?"

"In May. I came here for closure. To get you out of my head once and for all. I didn't mean—"

"You're getting married?" His stomach clenched, not a single word after those three registering in his brain. She was getting married. To someone else. Not to him.

"Bryan—"

He jumped to his feet, but it didn't feel like his brain had any control over his body. "How could you? I thought—"

"Bryan, I'm sorry. You know I'm sorry." She buried her face in her hands. "If Luke finds out . . ."

"Wait, not Luke Van Bakker . . . What does he have to do with this?"

Vivian raised tear-filled eyes to his. "I thought you knew."

Bryan wiped a hand over his face, sudden understanding dawning. Luke Van Bakker, president and CEO of Pakka Mountaineering. A man he'd known for ten years, one he'd like to think was a friend. Engaged to his ex, and neither of them had told him.

Even worse, Pakka was his biggest sponsor, the one that allowed him to travel all over the world climbing instead of holding a real job.

"How could you come to me when you were engaged to him? I thought . . . I thought you were coming back to me. Wasn't that what this was all about? How much you wanted to be able to do things over?" He scrubbed his hands through his hair. "You must not think very much of me if you think I'd be okay with this."

Viv jumped to her feet. "Do you think I meant for this to happen? You can't tell him."

"Tell him?" Bryan barked out a harsh laugh. "The last thing I want is for Luke Van Bakker to know I just slept with his fiancée!"

She jerked her head around as his voice rose, and sure

enough, another climber poked a sleepy head out of a tent. He lowered his voice. "You and I are screwed. If there's anything Luke prizes, it's loyalty." It suddenly occurred to him that had Luke prized loyalty so much, he wouldn't have taken up with Bryan's ex in the first place. "How long have you been seeing him? Was that why you wouldn't marry me?"

"No! No, Bryan, you have to believe me." She reached for his hand, but he stepped out of reach. "Luke and I have only been together for a year. We reconnected at an event. Figured it had been long enough, you know? I assumed you were long over me, that you wouldn't care."

"Which is why no one told me."

"I swear to you, it wasn't like that . . ." Viv broke off, her lips pressing together stiffly, and Bryan turned to see Jack approaching them at a jog.

"Morning, you two." He beamed at them, a big blond puppy. "Wanted to know if you need a ride back to Bogotá this morning."

Right now, bugging out of Suesca didn't sound like a bad idea. "Sure," Bryan said at the same time Viv said, "No thanks. I'm climbing La Bruja today."

Bryan stared at her. "Not by yourself, you aren't."

She lifted an eyebrow and planted her hands on her hips. "And since when have you had *any* say over what I climbed?"

"As your former instructor, I do have some say. And unless you've suddenly advanced in your climbing ability, La Bruja is way over your grade."

Jack finally figured out he was stepping in the middle of something bigger than a climbing dispute and started to back away. "Okay, mates. We're leaving at eight if you change your mind."

Vivian never took her eyes from Bryan. "Go if you want. I'll find someone else to belay for me."

Bryan snorted. "You're out of your mind."

“You doubt my climbing ability?”

“No, I doubt your beta. I’ve watched these guys. None of them have even come close to sending that route. They wouldn’t know a crimp from a hole in the ground.” It was, he could admit, a little unfair; there were decent sport climbers among them, but La Bruja was the most difficult trad route in Suesca, and Bryan was betting any information they’d given her was colored by their need to impress her, not firsthand experience.

“Then come with me.” Her eyes held a challenge.

“What game are you playing at?”

“No game. I came here from Peru and I’m not leaving until I climb.”

“So do Azul.”

“I’m not interested in Azul. You in or what?”

He knew that look. Knew that stubborn glint in her brown eyes. It was one of the things he’d loved most about her, one of the things that made her an excellent climber. She was going to do this with or without him. And however angry and hurt he might be right now, she was better off climbing with him as a partner than without.

Bryan shook his head. “Fine. You win. But I lead.”

“I lead.” Her eyes silently dared him to argue. “And to be clear, I got my beta from Alejandro, the guide at the shop. It’s solid.”

“Fine.” He held up his hands. She was a good climber. As long as she placed active pro in the right spots, she’d be okay. And he’d be there on belay to catch her when she inevitably fell—as he’d always been.

They silently ate their breakfast of protein bars, trail mix, and coffee, the strain palpable. The whole time Bryan shoved down his feeling of betrayal and what felt like the awakening of his long-dormant conscience. He’d done many things in his life, but sleeping with another man’s fiancée was in an entirely

different class. If he felt this betrayed, how would Luke feel? And how long would it take for him to find some loophole to cancel Bryan's sponsorship contract if he found out?

He needed to finish out this day, keep Vivian safe on the crag, and get out of Colombia. The more space he put between him and Suesca, the easier it would be to pretend this whole sordid thing had never happened.

* * *

The sun was just beginning to shine down when they approached the route, loaded with their gear and a full thirty minutes ahead of the other climbers, who were just starting to poke their heads out of their tents. Bryan was used to hot climates where an early start was an advantage; here, the temperature stayed chilly well into the morning.

Vivian didn't meet his eye as she pulled on climbing shoes and set her gear. Bryan checked the length of lead rope for any frays or weaknesses before he handed it over for Viv to tie it onto her harness with a figure-eight knot, then double-checked her knot. It was a routine, not a doubt about her competence—two sets of eyes were always better than one. More skilled climbers had decked out because of a simple mistake.

"All right, so let me see your rack." He nodded toward the collection of cams, nuts, and slings hanging from her belt, ignoring the flash of amusement that crossed her face at the comment. "You'll need more active pro for this one."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "This coming from Mr. Passive Is Best?"

And here they were, retreading old arguments over whether active or passive protection was best, when in reality it was whatever best suited the rock and the route. Had he not been so irritated at her at the moment, he would have found it

funny. “There’re some cracks that won’t take a hex or a nut, and you’re not going to want to worry about conserving cams. Trust me on this one.”

For once, she didn’t argue and rummaged in her gear, then clipped a few more cams onto her harness. Old-timers who’d started climbing before spring-loaded camming devices existed looked at them as cheating; Bryan figured if it was a choice between a cam or a fall, he’d pick the cam every time.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.” She checked her rope again, chalked her hands from the pouch on her belt, and approached the rock with a look of determination.

“On belay?”

“Belay on,” he replied.

“Climbing.”

“Climb on.” He stayed in position near the wall, feeding rope through the belay device and his hands to give her enough slack to get up to her first anchor point. He’d always loved to watch her on the rock, partly because of her gorgeous body displayed in climbing tights and a skin-tight T-shirt. The thought of that now set a sick feeling in his stomach; she wasn’t his to ogle, no matter what he might have thought the night before.

Mind on her climbing, he reminded himself. Vivian made short work of the first fifteen feet, her technique steady and confident. He began to relax as soon as she took the first cam from her harness, placed it precisely in the crack where he would have, and clipped herself in. Now he had a belay point, so he took up the slack while she looked for her next hold.

She was climbing respectably, placing more pro than strictly necessary, which told him she’d taken his warning seriously. Except she hadn’t yet reached for another cam after the first, choosing to place hexes and nuts where she could fit them. “Set

a cam before the overhang!" he yelled, but either she was too focused on her next move to hear him or she was ignoring him outright. Stubborn woman.

She was at least seventy feet up when she realized she'd gotten herself into an untenable position. He checked the slack on the rope and waited for her to work out a solution. There—thanks to her flexibility, her handhold became a foothold and she could lever herself upward with the power of her legs. She was going to send it on her first try. Unbelievable.

Then Bryan saw the mistake, but it was too late to help her correct: her leg had crossed between the rock and the rope, the anchor below holding it taut against her thigh. Her left hand held steady near her foot, right side pushing upward to the next handhold, and then . . .

Vivian screamed as her supporting leg slipped off the rock.

Bryan automatically prepared himself for a soft catch, but there were bigger problems. The rope flipped her upside down so she was plummeting headfirst down the side of the rock. Every hair on his body lifted in dread. He jumped just as she hit the end of the slack and braced his feet against the wall, a move that should have helped soften the catch and dampen her swing back into the wall.

The nut she'd placed earlier popped out of the rock and zippered the next two out with it.

"No, no, no." Bryan barely managed to get back on his feet and yanked the rope through the brake as fast as he could, silently praying that one of the anchors would catch before she hit the deck. Then finally, the slack ran out and the rope caught on the cam and held.

Vivian careened into the side of the rock with a sickening crunch, where she hung, her limp body dangling thirty feet off the ground, unmoving. Drops of blood fell in slow motion and spattered the dirt at Bryan's feet.

“Please,” he mumbled, running the rope through the brake to lower her slowly to the ground. “Please be alive. Please be alive.” She never wore a helmet—Bryan rarely did either—but now he wished with every ounce of him that he’d insisted on it before she’d attempted La Bruja.

Finally, she was on the ground. He unclipped and ran to her side, carefully laying her out flat on the dirt. Blood matted her dark hair and something about her lower body looked wrong, crumpled, but her chest still rose and fell. He put his fingertips to her neck and found her pulse, surprisingly quick considering she was unconscious.

“Help!” he screamed. “*Ayuda!*”

It could have been moments or hours later, but a crowd began to form around them. Alejandro, the guide from the shop near the base camp, pushed his way through and checked her pulse and breathing as Bryan had, then pulled out his cell phone. He dialed the emergency number and then explained the situation to the dispatcher in calm, rapid Spanish. “She’ll be okay,” he said to Bryan, but it was an empty reassurance. No one knew whether she would be okay or not. They hadn’t seen how she’d whipped into the wall, too out of control to break her own fall.

“Just hang in there,” he whispered to her, wanting to do something but knowing that moving her would be the worst thing he could possibly do. He brushed her hair off her face and clasped her hand until he heard the siren from an ambulance approaching. Relief rushed through him. He hadn’t been sure if Suesca had ambulance service; he’d never needed it.

Two paramedics stepped out of the ambulance and carried an unwheeled stretcher to Vivian’s side.

“*¿Que pasó?*” the first man asked, looking automatically to Alejandro.

Bryan quickly explained what had occurred. Had it been any other situation, he would have been amused by the paramedics’

surprise that the gringo spoke their language. The men examined Vivian with little more detail than Bryan and Alejandro had, then the two of them carefully transferred her to the stretcher.

"I'm going with her," Bryan said. They nodded and he climbed into the back of the ambulance with her.

They were minutes away from the camp when Vivian began to stir and cried out in pain. Her eyes opened slowly, but they didn't seem to focus.

"Viv, I'm here." He bent over her and gently squeezed her hand to try to orient her.

"Bryan?"

"Yes, love."

"Everything hurts." Tears leaked out of her eyes and slid down her face, breaking his heart more surely than her earlier tears had.

"I know. You had an accident. We'll be at the hospital soon and they'll give you something for the pain."

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. They arrived at the hospital, which was a surprisingly modern-looking white-and-blue two-story building in the small town of Suesca. Bryan said he was her husband so they would give him updates. The doctor in the emergency department examined her, pronounced her hip dislocated, several of her ribs fractured, and her skull cracked, and promptly decided to transfer her to Bogotá.

That trip took over an hour, and Bryan held her hand in the back of yet another ambulance as they traveled to a larger hospital in the capital city. She remained sedated—a mercy when he considered how many broken bones she had.

And the whole time he prayed, *Please don't let me lose her.*

He was aware of the irony. He'd already lost her three years ago, and once again this morning when she'd announced her engagement to Luke.

They finally arrived at a hospital in Bogotá, a concrete institutional structure that reminded him of a prison. The paramedics took her into the emergency department, where Bryan was immediately pushed out of the room, despite his repeated insistence that he was her husband. Instead, he paced the faded waiting room, pulled out his phone, and dialed the number he'd been dreading calling since the moment she fell.

"Luke, it's Bryan. Vivian's hurt. We're in Colombia."

* * *

Bryan sat in the bar of his Bogotá hotel, nursing a glass of whiskey and feeling like he'd been run over by a train. This was high rent for his usual means of travel—even if the exchange rate came out to about sixty-seven bucks a night—but he didn't have it in him to dirtbag it as he usually did. Despite his simple needs, he was still the son of a successful Denver real estate developer, and right now he wanted something that felt like home.

Vivian would be okay, or at least as okay as she could get with broken bones and a fractured skull. By now, she would be flying home on the air ambulance plane that Luke had arranged to take her to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles near where they lived together. Where they had been living together, apparently, for the past year—something that Luke had been lying about or at least avoiding the last several times they'd talked. Bryan had relayed the doctor's thoughts on her prognosis in straightforward terms, not softening them or putting hope on them. Bed rest. Physical therapy. She'd walk again. Climbing would be out of the question for quite a while.

Explaining why he and Vivian were in Bogotá together was another story. Bryan tried to pass it off as a friendly climb for old times' sake, but Luke clearly didn't believe it. Maybe it was

something in Bryan's voice or maybe Luke just knew Vivian too well, but he'd gone silent for a long moment while he considered. Then he'd said calmly, "I appreciate you helping me get her home. But after that, I don't think we have anything more to talk about."

He'd apparently meant it literally, because the notice of termination had hit Bryan's inbox less than an hour later, almost as if it had already been drafted and was simply waiting to be sent.

Notice of termination. A fancy way of saying he'd been fired, his sponsorship ended, his means of support gone.

Of course, Luke wouldn't be so obvious as to name the real reason he was firing him; instead, he couched it in words like *exclusivity* and *conflict of interest*, despite the fact he'd been fully aware of the other, minor sponsorships when he signed Bryan. Not that it mattered when the end result was the same. Without Pakka's support, he wasn't a professional climber; he was just a deadbeat, traveling the world with his backpack and his gear rack in order to avoid having a real job. He'd become what his father had always suspected he was.

Bryan let out a sharp laugh and drained the rest of his glass, then gestured for the bartender to pour him another one. What would his father think of this whole situation? Mitchell Shaw was a good Christian man; Bryan's mother, Kathy, was practically a saint. They'd given up lecturing him about his conquests long ago, but sleeping with an almost-married woman and losing his source of income was beyond what even they could overlook. Consequences of his own actions, they'd say. And now he was going to have to deal with them. When you screwed up this badly, there was no such thing as a second chance.

"You look like a man who's had a bad day."

Bryan turned his head toward the American who had sat down beside him. Nondescript in brown dress pants and a white shirt, like a Midwestern businessman. Slightly thinning

hair on top, sympathetic expression. Bryan was half tempted to give a sarcastic retort, but the man seemed sincere enough, so he just gave a single nod.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” The bartender poured Bryan’s drink and he took a slow sip, savoring the burn of the whiskey as it went down. Anyone who said that it was smooth was lying, or maybe he’d just turned wholly into a beer man somewhere along the line. In any case, it blurred the hard edges, and right now that was all he cared about.

The man asked for soda without ice in mangled Spanish, and Bryan quickly translated for him. He looked at Bryan in surprise. “If I had your fluency, my day would be going a lot better.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Central and South America,” he said. “You pick it up.”

“I don’t, apparently. I’ve made several trips to Colombia over the last couple of years, and it doesn’t want to stick. Old dog, new tricks, I guess.”

Bryan smiled vaguely, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a job?”

Bryan turned his head just enough to look the man in the eye, suddenly suspicious. “A job?”

“I was supposed to be headed south today, but my translator bailed on me. You know anything about coffee?”

“I know how I like to drink it.”

“Do you know how to talk about it in Spanish?”

“Enough, I guess. Why?”

The man pulled a business card from his pocket and slid it across the polished bar. “This is my company, Café Libertad. We’re coffee importers, but more than that, we’re . . . I guess you could call us missionaries.”

Bryan slid it back. “Not interested.”

“Are you sure? It’s an interesting story, ours. You see, for the longest time, the only option for farmers was coca, working for the cartels. But it brings violence into communities, wedges the farmers right between the government and the rebels, puts them at the mercy of the ‘war on drugs.’ So we come along and help them shift from growing coca to growing coffee instead. For the first time in decades, thanks to the demand for fair trade organic coffee in the States, the same acreage can produce a greater dollar yield than drugs.”

“Sounds like you’re doing good work,” Bryan said, but he couldn’t force interest where there wasn’t any. He didn’t have it in him today.

“It is. I’m supposed to be visiting several new farms, seeing about bringing them into the co-op. But again, without someone to translate, this was pretty much a wasted trip. You wouldn’t know anything about wasted trips, would you?”

Bryan tossed back the rest of his drink and set the glass firmly on the counter. “I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m the last person you should be asking to join some Christian charity.” He gave the man a wan smile, then eased himself off the stool.

“Are you sure? Because from where I’m sitting, you look like a man in need of a second chance.”

Bryan paused several steps away and turned. “What did you say?”

“I said maybe this is a second chance. I only need you for a week, and I pay well. What have you got to lose?”

What did he have to lose? He had nothing to go back to but the disappointed looks of friends and family. At very least, this delay to the inevitable would pad his bank account. And maybe he’d figure out a new direction by the time he boarded the flight home.

“Okay,” he said finally. “I’m in. When do we start?”

Chapter One

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

In all her years as a publicist, Analyn Sanchez had never met a mess she couldn't clean up.

Until now.

She gripped her cell phone so hard her fingers began to turn white as she struggled to keep her voice level. "I don't understand how this could have happened. I have a signed contract right in front of me. June nineteenth, Bishop-Kanin wedding."

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Sanchez. I understand how upsetting this is, and I take full responsibility for it. But the situation remains, we are double-booked for the nineteenth. I've already spoken to the other party to see if they'd be willing to change. They're not, and because their contract was signed first, I have no choice but to give them the space."

Ana pressed the fingertips of her free hand into her eyelids. "What are we supposed to do, then? The invitations have already gone out."

"Again, I'm very sorry. Of course we will refund the deposit

and any additional monies paid, and I'll be happy to send you a list of other venues that might have openings—"

Ana stopped listening after the second "very sorry." One job. She'd had one job and she'd blown it. Melody was handling all of the decor and working with Rachel on the menu; all Ana had had to do was negotiate and book the venue. And now, with the wedding less than three months away, her best friend had nowhere to marry the love of her life.

She almost didn't register the woman's voice still coming from the speaker; she'd ceased to exist the minute she wasn't willing to help. Ana clicked off her phone and, in nearly the same motion, dialed the other member of their little trio, Melody Johansson.

The phone rang several times before Melody picked up. "Hey, Ana. What's up? Is something wrong?"

The low hum of voices and clatter of pans in the background made Ana glance at her clock—5:20. Melody and Rachel would be shutting down the kitchen of Bittersweet Café right now, getting ready to close their doors to retail traffic at six o'clock. "Is Rachel there?"

A couple of sharp bangs, and the noise level dropped sharply. "Not anymore. I stepped outside. But you're starting to freak me out."

"The venue is double-booked and they gave it to the other party."

A long silence met the announcement. Then Melody said slowly, "That's . . . unfortunate."

"It's more than unfortunate, Melody. The wedding is only twelve weeks away and they've got nowhere to get married!" Heads turned in Ana's direction, and she quickly lowered her voice. She wasn't supposed to be handling personal matters in the office, let alone those of a friend, but it wasn't like she had a choice. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to look for another venue, of course. This is Denver, not New York. It's not like we booked the Plaza three years ahead."

Melody had been clearly watching rom-coms again; Ana knew for a fact she'd never been to New York, let alone the Plaza Hotel. "Yes, but this is *Denver*. Meaning there's less than three months of the year we can count on good weather, so everyone gets married between June and August. Things were starting to book up nine months ago."

"That's what I don't understand. We've been talking to them the whole time. We have menus chosen. How did no one notice this?"

"I don't know. Something about a junior sales rep booking the other group and not merging her calendar."

"How about a different day?"

"We can't. Alex has family coming in from Moscow. There's no way we can ask them to reschedule."

"Well, we're going to figure this out. Hey, what about Alex's place? He has that gorgeous roof deck, and it is where their love story began in a way. It could be really meaningful."

Ana shook her head automatically. "No can do. They've invited a hundred and fifty people, and even if we could manage to stuff that many guests up there, I think the fire marshal and the building department would have something to say about it. I'm sure it's not rated for that weight or those numbers."

Several feet away, Ana's boss, Lionel, poked his head out and gestured to her from his framed glass doorway. "Ana, when you're done, can I see you in my office?"

Ana nodded and held up one finger. "Sorry, Mel, I've gotta go. Let's talk later? And don't say a word to Rachel until we have some solution to present. I don't want her worrying about this."

“Okay, I’ll—”

Ana’s finger was already on the End Call button before the words came from the speaker, and by then it was too late. She had hung up on her friend midsentence. She cringed, but there was no time to call back and apologize. Besides, Melody wouldn’t be offended—she knew how crazy Ana’s job was.

She inhaled deeply, counting to herself as she sucked oxygen into her lungs, then exhaled for twice as long. A meditation exercise meant to calm her nerves and slow her heart rate. It didn’t help.

She rose from her desk, smoothed down her pencil skirt, and strode across the room to her boss’s office. “You needed to see me, Lionel?”

“Yes, I did, Ana. Please close the door.”

She turned around and pulled the glass door shut behind her, only then noticing that they were not alone. Morgan sat in the armchair in the corner, clutching a handful of Kleenex. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to need to you take over Christopher Mason from Morgan.”

Ana blinked at her boss for a long moment, then looked at Morgan. “Why? You fought tooth and nail for that account.”

Lionel cleared his throat. “It seems that Mason has been harassing Morgan and she is uncomfortable with continuing.”

Ana narrowed her eyes at the first whiff of dishonesty. Morgan never had a problem with clients. As women dealing with badly behaved men, they were always fending off unwanted advances and unwarranted assumptions. Morgan was the first person to set them straight, often in painful ways if they tried anything funny. The tissue-clutching, teary-eyed victim sitting in the chair across from Ana had to be a complete fabrication.

“This is a great opportunity for you, Ana.”

"I've already got a full roster of wealthy, wannabe frat boys. Why would I want to add another one?"

"Because this one's father is about to be appointed to a cabinet position, and said father happens to be a longtime friend of my family. So I would take it as a personal favor if you would get him in line and keep him out of trouble for the next month until the nomination is announced."

Ana took a deep breath and considered. It sounded like Lionel was giving her a choice, but she knew from experience that once you started turning down clients at Massey-Coleman, it was a short slide to finding yourself on the way out the door. They were hired to be can-do types, and that meant accepting even the most annoying and difficult clients. There was a reason why publicists in the crisis management division got paid so much—they earned each and every penny.

"Fine," Ana said with a sharp nod. "Morgan, I need all your files on him. I'll give him a call and figure out where we are. Lionel, are you notifying him of the change, or am I?"

"Somehow I think he would take the change better coming from you." The glint in Lionel's eye was her first indication she might have made a mistake by acquiescing so easily. "Morgan, that will be all. Please get Ana all your files before you leave today."

They both nodded curtly at their boss, and Ana preceded Morgan from the office. As soon as they were halfway across the room to her desk, Ana rounded on her. "What was that all about? And don't tell me for one minute you've suddenly lost your ability to shut a client down before he can even attempt a pass at you."

Morgan straightened, no sign of the tearful demeanor in sight. "He's called me in the middle of the night every night this week. My husband has threatened to either kill him or divorce me if I don't dump him."

“So you thought you’d make him my problem?”

Morgan grimaced. “Sorry about that. I was actually lobbying for him to go to Ryan. I figured he wouldn’t be as demanding with a male publicist.”

“But somehow Lionel got the idea that I was the perfect person to handle him.”

“Well, they don’t call you the Atomic Nun for nothing.”

“No one calls me that except you.” But the joking nickname loosened the knot in Ana’s stomach and she managed a smile. “Fine. But you owe me big time.”

“I promise. Anything you need . . . that doesn’t involve Christopher Mason.” Morgan sat down at her computer, clicked a few keys, and attached a file folder to an email message with Ana’s address on it. “On its way.”

Ana gave her a nod and strode back to her desk, concentrating on her breathing again. Morgan’s email was waiting at the top of her inbox, so she wasted no time in downloading the file and beginning her perusal. From the notes, it was hard to tell that Christopher Mason was a difficult client—it was just the usual guidance for anyone related to a politician. Keep them out of the press, keep their personal activities—whatever they might be—quiet, unless it was a specifically orchestrated photo op. The media was rabid when it came to the families of politicians running on a morality ticket. The minute someone came out in favor of family values or the like, reporters combed through the dirty laundry hoping to find an illegitimate baby or a gay son they could parade around as a sign of the politician’s hypocrisy. But from her reading, she didn’t see much more than the propensity to drink and speak a little too freely at fund-raisers for his father’s campaign. Maybe Morgan was telling the truth and she was just doing this because her husband didn’t like her getting late-night calls.

Only one way to find out. Ana found his number, picked up her phone, and dialed. Mason answered on the first ring.

"Mr. Mason, my name is Analyn Sanchez. I'm Morgan Carroll's colleague at the Massey-Coleman Group."

His response was cordial, professional even. "Hi, Analyn. It's nice to meet you. What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"We've had a bit of internal restructuring here, and I'll be working on your account now. I was hoping we could get together, just to meet, get to know each other a bit."

"How about tonight?"

Ana paused and glanced at her watch. She had dinner plans with Rachel and Melody. "I'm afraid I'm not available tonight."

"That's too bad. I've got reservations at Equity Bar and Grill and my dinner date had to cancel on me. Tell me if I'm mistaken, but I seem to remember Lionel Massey assuring my father that my publicist would be at my disposal whenever necessary."

Ana let out her breath carefully. If Lionel had really conveyed that message, it went a long way to explaining why Morgan had demanded that he be assigned to someone else. Some clients seemed to think they needed to get their money's worth.

And if Mason ran back to Daddy, who then called Lionel, Ana would have plenty of free time to spend on dinner with her friends.

"Very well. I can reschedule. What time is your reservation?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Great. I'll see you then." Ana forced a smile so the feigned warmth would transfer to her voice and then hung up. She quickly sent a group text to her friends.

Sorry to bail, but I can't make dinner tonight. Last minute meeting with new (problem) client.

Moments later, Rachel replied, Come by my house when you're done. Melody brought home eclairs from the bakery. We'll save you some.

Melody's response instantly followed: *Speak for yourself. Ana, if you're not there by nine, I'm eating them ALL.*

Ana texted back: *Fair enough.* For the last eight years, she, Melody, and Rachel had been practically inseparable. Her two friends worked in the food service industry, Rachel as a chef and Melody as a baker, but they had opened their own place together less than a year ago. Somehow, even owning a business that required them to report to work at 4 a.m., they seemed to have more free time than she did. In fact, it had been three weeks since she'd seen either of them in more than a drive-by at Bittersweet Café.

But that was the job. Long hours, late nights, and problem clients. When she'd taken the position in the crisis publicity division, she'd thought she was making the smart move; after all, most of her regular clients were in the middle of mini crises on a regular basis. Turned out it was less a matter of crises and more a matter of highly sensitive situations—she spent more time mitigating the negatives than accentuating the positives. It wasn't that she lied. Everything she publicized on her clients' behalf was 100 percent true. It was just that every fact was interpreted through the listener's bias; it was her job to make sure the bias leaned in her clients' favor. Like every criminal deserved a competent lawyer, she firmly believed that every public figure could use a brilliant publicist.

And just like every defense lawyer, she wished for once that she'd get a client who was innocent.

"That's why they pay you the big bucks, Ana," she murmured to herself. As if to punctuate that statement, she rose onto the five-inch heels of her favorite Louboutins, hoisted her Prada handbag over her shoulder, and prepared to make her way down to the parking garage where her leased company car—a shiny Mercedes-Benz SUV—waited for her. All the

symbols of her success. All items that, once upon a time, she'd thought she needed in order to prove herself.

And not for the first time, she wondered if it was a hollow victory.

* * *

Ana didn't have time to go home and change before her dinner meeting at the high-end steak house, so at the last minute, she made a stop in the ladies' room to freshen up her makeup from the case she kept in her tote. A few bobby pins secured her thick black hair into a sophisticated French twist. Fortunately, the office dress code was business—the unspoken understanding among the women that it also meant both sophisticated and stylish—so her black peplum suit and bow-necked silk blouse would fit right into the ritzy surroundings.

She made it the handful of blocks from her office building in just a few minutes and handed her vehicle over to the valet at eight on the dot. Then she marched inside to the hostess desk. "Christopher Mason's party?"

"Right this way." The hostess smiled at Ana and led her through the sprawling dining room to where a man sat at a table with two women.

Two very young women.

"Mr. Mason?" Ana asked, inwardly hoping he would answer in the negative, even though she'd already seen his photo and knew he was the one she was meeting.

"You must be Analyn." He rose with a blinding smile and shook her hand, then gestured to the empty chair on his right. "I would like you to meet my friends Catelyn and Rebecca."

Ana looked over the "friends" surreptitiously. They were barely twenty, slathered in cosmetics, and squeezed into cheap polyester cocktail dresses that showed off both leg and cleavage. Everything about them screamed *escort*.

A waitress came to their table then to take their drink orders.

"Double Manhattan on the rocks," Mason said immediately, flashing that smile for the waitress again.

"Sparkling water for me," Ana said. When the waitress looked at the girls, she said, "Them too."

Only a quick second glance in the girls' direction betrayed the waitress's curiosity, but she smiled and nodded and hustled off to get their drinks. When Ana glanced at Mason, he was studying her beneath lowered lids, a half smile on his lips. So that's what this was about. A test. Or better yet, a statement. No wonder Morgan had resorted to deception to get rid of him, and why they'd been hired by the senator from Colorado to babysit his son. She was trying to decide on a response when a cell phone rang.

Mason fished his phone from his jacket's breast pocket and glanced at the screen. "Excuse me a moment." He answered the phone and strode toward the front entrance, his voice carrying through the din of conversations.

Ana fixed a stern glare on the girls. "How old are you two?"

Rebecca lifted her chin. "I'm a sophomore at CU."

"Studying what?"

"I'm still undeclared."

Ana rapid-fired at Catelyn, "And you? What's your major?"

Catelyn averted her eyes. "I don't have one yet."

Fabulous. She probably wasn't out of high school. Ana felt a sudden rush of pity for them. Not even twenty, but working in such an unsavory business. "You two need to go. Now. Before he returns."

"But we didn't get paid—" Catelyn began before Rebecca hastily shushed her.

"Come on, our night's over." Rebecca picked up her handbag and grabbed Catelyn's arm.

“Don’t stop, even if he talks to you,” Ana warned, “or my next call is going to be to your parents.”

The older girl didn’t look fazed, but the terrified look on the younger one’s face as Rebecca hustled her out of the restaurant told Ana all she needed to know. Good. Did Catelyn have any idea what she’d almost gotten herself into? How this could have turned out if it wasn’t all a stunt to get a rise out of his new publicist?

“Where are they going?” Mason demanded as he approached the table. His voice caused the patrons at surrounding tables to turn in his direction.

“Home.” Ana gestured placidly to the seat opposite her. “Sit down, Mr. Mason.”

He scowled at her, but he sat.

“Let me make one thing clear. While I’m your publicist, there will be no more escorts or Tinder dates or anything that even smacks of sexual misconduct. We just need to get you through the next month without doing anything to disgrace your family name. Once you’re no longer my responsibility, you can do whatever you want.”

“Wait a second. You work for me—”

“No, Mr. Mason. I work for your father. A man who will be very displeased to find you spending time with underage escorts who should be home studying for their chemistry finals.”

Mason looked like he was about to argue, but she stilled him with a look. “Now that all the children are out of the room, I’m going to buy you an excellent meal and we’re going to discuss the ground rules for our business relationship. Which, by the way, does not include after-hours calls unless you’re in jail, about to be put in jail, or imminently facing a TV crew.”

He cracked a smile. “Morgan told you about that.”

“Morgan is too polite to tell you that you’re being an arrogant, juvenile tool.”

“But you’re not too polite?”

Ana knew her smile looked cold, if not downright predatory. It was a practiced expression she could drag out on cue. “I’ve been accused of many things, Mr. Mason, but that’s not one of them.” She glanced up and put on a much more welcoming smile. “Here comes our server with our drinks. If you don’t mind the suggestion, they serve a delicious rib eye.”

For the next two hours, Ana outlined her expectations for his behavior and went through the opportunities that she’d lined up for him earlier this evening—one, volunteering at the grand opening of a new free clothing store for the homeless in Five Points; and two, mentoring minority business owners through a new SBA program.

“You’ve got an undergrad degree from Harvard and an MBA from the London School of Economics. There’s no reason for you to be currently unemployed. Play it my way, repair your reputation, and I’ll have you in a six-figure consulting position by the end of the month.”

Mason studied her, a glimmer of respect surfacing for the first time. “Okay. If you think you can do that, I’m on board.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch with the details on Monday. I fully expect this to be a pleasant and productive month.”

They finished their meal and Ana paid, escaping out to the valet stand. Her car had just been brought around when a message from Lionel buzzed through her phone. How did dinner with the frat boy go?

Ana cracked a smile. Good. I put him on a short leash and appealed to his greed. He’s going to be too busy to be trouble.

I knew you could do it. This is why I assigned you to this account and not Ryan.

Thank you for the confidence. I’ll keep you posted.

Ana put her car in gear, preparing to pull into traffic. Then she stopped. She was supposed to head to Rachel's, where she'd normally spill all the ridiculous details about her latest ridiculous client. But suddenly she didn't have the heart for it. This whole situation made her feel dirty, as if managing the creep had somehow rubbed off on her. There was nothing funny about it.

She texted Rachel and Melody: Sorry, guys, I'm not going to make it. Rain check? I'm still coming to supper club tomorrow, no matter what.

Rachel: We understand.

Melody: Whew. That's good. I already ate your eclairs.

Ana smiled to herself and pulled into traffic for real this time, but the momentary surge of happiness didn't last. She'd been awake for eighteen hours already. Her eyes were practically crossed with exhaustion, and the balls of her feet ached from a full day in shoes that had been designed for looks and status, not comfort. By the time she pulled into the parking structure beneath her Lower Downtown condo building, she ached for nothing more than her soft bed. A shower could wait until morning. Heck, pajamas could wait until morning.

She rode the elevator up to the twelfth floor, made a beeline to her front door, and punched her code into the smart lock. It unlatched with a click and she pushed her way through with a sigh of relief.

Her oasis. Small by most standards, but spacious by LoDo's, it was twelve hundred square feet of elegant design and calming colors. Herringbone hardwood floors. Upholstery in velvet and satin. Muted antique oriental rugs. It might seem like it was orchestrated for show, but she rarely had guests, even her best friends. This was all for her own pleasure. It was just a shame she had so little time to enjoy it.

A flashing red light drew her attention to the marble-accented kitchen, and she dropped her bag beside the phone before dialing voice mail. She knew before the message began who it would

be—she only kept a home line because her mother refused to call her cell phone while she was at work. And she was always at work.

Flora Sanchez's familiar Manila-accented voice poured through the speaker in her usual combination of Filipino and English. "Ana, this is Mom. Can you call back? *Gusto ko malaman kung uuwi ka para sa birthday ng Daddy mo sa May. Da-dating din ang mga kapatid mo, gusto ka nilaang makita.*" *I want to know if you're coming home for your dad's birthday in May. Your sisters and brother will be here. They all want to see you.*

Ana deleted the message and dug in her bag for her planner. Under Monday's date, she jotted *Put in vacation request*. She had plenty of time to plan, since her dad's birthday was after Mason would no longer be her problem. She should be able to steal two days to fly home to Southern California for a birthday party. As soon as she confirmed her time off, she'd call her mom back and book her flight.

Then her eyes alighted on the grid at the bottom of her page—her daily habits. Everything from Scripture reading to making her bed to flossing her teeth. The only box left unchecked for today was *exercise*. Thanks to Mason, she'd missed the hot yoga class she'd scheduled before dinner.

It's late. Go to bed and do it tomorrow.

But that empty box glared at her, and she knew the blank space in an otherwise-filled week would eat at her. She hadn't achieved her toned, size-zero figure by skipping workouts just because she was tired.

She dragged herself to her bedroom with a deep sigh, traded her suit for a pair of shorts and a sports bra, and climbed onto the treadmill positioned in front of the wide-screen TV. She inserted the flat plastic key and pressed Start.

"Five miles, Ana. You can do this. It's only five miles."

And one more box checked to keep up her six-month streak. Just one more box for a perfect day.

Chapter Two

BRYAN SHAW HAD ALWAYS viewed Denver as a mid-tier city, smaller than the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles or the compact metropolis of New York, just large enough to offer the conveniences of urban life. But as he looked out the rear window of his Uber crawling through the gridlocked city, it felt as if he'd been catapulted into the distant future.

There were changes, of course. Development had sped along in his eight months away, building projects completed in his absence, others just beginning. But mostly it was his perspective that had changed. Colombia had crept into him—the countryside with its lush green foliage and relentless rainy season, the cities that were a shocking mix of old and new, the people with their welcoming attitudes and unhurried pace.

The city he'd grown up in felt slightly alien by contrast. But he couldn't deny it was good to be home.

"You can let me out here," he told his driver, pointing to the high-rise building ahead. The driver double-parked, something that would have elicited a barrage of horns in Bogotá, but here the traffic just flowed around them. "Thanks for the ride." He levered the door open and climbed out, dragging his battered nylon backpack with him.

The familiar marble foyer felt equally strange as he punched the Up button to call the elevator to the ground floor. What did it mean that his first stop after a long absence wasn't his home? What did it mean that he wasn't sure where home was even located?

Bryan rode the elevator up to the fifteenth floor, where he emerged and knocked at one of the four penthouse suites. A minute later, the door swung open to reveal a tall, dark-haired man about Bryan's age.

"Hey, Alex."

"Bryan?" Alex Kanin blinked at him, momentarily stunned. "You're back. Why didn't you call?"

"Sorry. Is Rachel here?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Come in." Alex swung the door wider, still seemingly stunned. Bryan dropped his bag on the polished concrete as Alex shut the door. And then his friend pounded him into a hug.

"Okay then," Bryan said, returning the gesture before carefully extricating himself. "It's nice to see you too, bro."

Alex laughed. He was Bryan's oldest friend, practically a brother, especially considering Alex had lived with the Shaws their senior year of high school while his parents taught at a university in Russia. He was maybe the only person who knew who Bryan truly was. Suddenly, his destination didn't seem so strange.

"Grab a seat," Alex said. "Want something to drink?"

"I'll take a pop if you have it." He settled himself onto the hard, modern sofa while Alex retrieved a can of Coke from his refrigerator. He tossed it to Bryan, then sat in the adjacent chair and waited.

When Bryan didn't volunteer anything, Alex said, "Are you going to make me drag it out of you? Where have you been?"

Bryan popped the top and took a long drink of his Coke

before answering. "Would it be too dramatic to say I met Jesus in Colombia?"

"Coming from you, a little."

Bryan turned the can around in his hand thoughtfully. "That's kind of what happened, though. God got my attention in the most dramatic way possible."

Alex just stared.

"Vivian came while I was climbing in Suesca, slept with me before she told me she was engaged to Luke Van Bakker, and then proceeded to almost kill herself on a route that was way out of her ability range. You're a writer. You can probably extrapolate what happened next."

"I can imagine Luke wasn't particularly forgiving of either of you."

"Enough to get Vivian home, I guess. Me . . . it didn't take him more than an hour to email the notice of termination."

"So what then? You became a yoga teacher in the mountains of Colombia? Joined a Benedictine monastery?"

"Not quite. I bought a coffee farm." Bryan enjoyed the look of disbelief that crossed Alex's face, the way he was trying to decide which question to ask first. He decided to end his friend's suspense. "You ever hear of Café Libertad?"

Alex shook his head.

"They help coca farmers transition to coffee. I originally signed on temporarily as a translator, but then . . ." Bryan broke off while he figured out how to explain the change that had begun inside him. "All that quiet, it gave me a lot of time to reflect on my life and how far I'd strayed from my values, from God. It's easy to creep away one step at a time . . . and then one day you realize you're calling yourself a Christian, but no one would ever be able to tell the difference."

Alex nodded thoughtfully. "What about climbing?"

"In the past now. I didn't plan on buying a coffee farm, by

the way. The owners were aging without family to take it over, and I didn't want the land to revert to cocaine production. So I bought it."

"So you're what? A coffee farmer? An importer?" Alex seemed like he was having a hard time wrapping his mind around the situation, and Bryan couldn't really blame him. The last time Alex had seen him, he'd been renting a room in a townhome with three other guys, month-to-month. The very idea of putting down roots or committing to anything more than a climbing clinic a few weeks ahead had been laughable.

Alex's expectant expression made him realize he hadn't answered the question. Not exactly. "The harvest will yield a few thousand pounds, and green coffee beans are a lot less lucrative than you'd think. We'd barely be breaking even if I wholesaled it."

"So what then?"

"I'm opening a roasting company."

Silence stretched a long moment, and then Alex cracked a smile. "You had me going there."

"It wasn't a joke. I just spent two months in Oregon learning how to roast. As soon as I get funding, I'm going to set up my operation. Hopefully before four thousand pounds of beans arrive on my parents' doorstep; I had to use them as my permanent address."

"I take it you haven't told them yet?"

Bryan shot Alex a look.

"Right. I would love to be able to help, but my money is all tied up in these condos. At least until we sell Rachel's place. Then we can pay off the loans for both units and start banking some cash."

"I would never ask you to do that anyway," Bryan said. And he wouldn't. He was already putting his entire life's savings at risk; he wasn't going to ask his best friend to do the same,

especially in light of his impending marriage. “How is Rachel, by the way?”

Now Alex’s face softened into a genuine smile. “She’s good. Busy with Bittersweet Café, her and Melody.”

“And planning a wedding?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure how much she’s actually doing. As soon as we set a date, Melody and Ana completely took over. Which is well enough, because Rachel has expanded the Saturday Night Supper Club to a weekly event at the café. They’re sold out through October.”

“Impressive,” Bryan said. He’d been at the café’s opening, but that felt like a lifetime ago now. He chugged the rest of the soda and set the can on the table. “Well, no more stalling. I guess I should go tell my parents I’m back.”

“Are you? Back?”

“Like it or not.”

“Good. Then you can be my best man.”

Bryan pushed himself off the sofa. “Naturally. I didn’t realize that was in question. Wish me luck.”

Alex walked him to the door. “Good luck. Hey, drop by the café for supper club tomorrow.”

“I thought you said it was sold out?”

“Friends-and-family night last Saturday of the month. I’ll even spring for your ticket since you’re a broke small-business owner.”

Bryan grinned. “Had I known it was that easy to get you to pick up the tab, I would have started a business years ago.” He hoisted his backpack and opened the door. “Don’t tell anyone but Rachel I’m back. I want to make a grand entrance.” Before Alex could reply, he gave a salute and strode to the elevator.

That had been easier than he’d expected. Then again, Alex had always had his back. He wasn’t so sure he would get the same reception from his parents.

* * *

Bryan grabbed his backpack from the backseat of his second Uber of the day and gave his driver a wave of thanks as he closed the door. Late-afternoon sunlight poured down on him, casting shadows across the brick pillars of the wrought-iron gate. When he'd left Colorado, it had been summer. Now, patches of snow clung to the wall in the shady spots, evidence of a winter that he'd missed and the newly minted spring that was about to start the process all over again. Eight months away. Eight months of climbing, making mistakes, and rebuilding his life into something new in Colombia and Portland. And now he stood just outside his parents' Capitol Hill mansion, preparing to beg for forgiveness, for both the silent absence and the things that had caused it.

In all the years he'd read about the Prodigal Son in the Bible, he'd never really cast himself in that role. He could only hope that his father was in a similarly forgiving mood.

Bryan punched his code into the keypad by the gate and waited for the click of the lock to admit him to the manicured grounds. He'd grown up here, but the 1920s behemoth hadn't always been a showplace—when his developer father and decorator mother had bought the property, the house had practically been crumbling to the ground. His earliest memories involved construction; he'd learned to write his ABCs in the layer of plaster dust that settled on every surface. Since then, Mitchell Shaw had become one of the biggest developers in Colorado and could easily afford a 10,000-square-foot estate in Cherry Creek, but they stayed here to demonstrate his dual commitment to preservation and revitalization.

His father wasn't in the habit of casting off things that held personal meaning.

He was just stalling now. Bryan squared his shoulders and

made his way up the circular drive, where he let himself in the front door. An empty foyer, punctuated by oriental rugs and a round table holding a flower arrangement, greeted him with silence.

"Mom? Dad?" he called. "Is anyone home?"

Nothing. And then the tap of footsteps in the upstairs hallway drew his attention to the staircase. His mother halted at the top of the steps, her expression as shocked as if she'd seen a ghost. "Bryan?"

"In the flesh."

She scrambled down the steps and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him so tightly he could barely breathe. "You have no idea how much I missed you. And now that I see you're alive and well, I'm going to kill you. Tagging me on Facebook every few weeks is not a replacement for a phone call!"

Bryan chuckled, even though he sensed it was not entirely a joke. "I missed you too, Mom. I'm sorry. I needed to get my head straight, and I couldn't call until I did."

"Then it must have been really skewed if it took you eight months to come home." She stepped back and studied him closely. "I never thought I would say it, but the beard suits you."

Bryan felt the bushy growth on his chin self-consciously. "Yeah, I haven't decided whether to keep it or not."

"I like it," Kathy said. "I don't, however, like the ponytail. You look homeless."

"I kind of am, Mom. I let the townhome go while I was gone. Not even really sure where my stuff is, except for my climbing gear. I don't suppose you might let me stay here for a while?"

"Do you have to ask?" Kathy tipped her head in the direction of the kitchen. "Come get something to eat. I'm going to call your father. He'll want to know you're back."

Bryan nodded uncomfortably and followed his mom

through the expansive living room into the equally large kitchen. Kathy bustled around, pulling bread from the pantry, deli meat from the drawer of the large Sub-Zero refrigerator. Only when she'd fixed an enormous sandwich and pushed it his way on a stoneware plate did she pick up the phone in the kitchen and dial his father.

"Mitchell, you need to come home. Bryan is back."

He couldn't hear his father's response, but the wide smile on Kathy's face made him think it wasn't negative. "I know," she said. "I'm feeding him in the meantime."

He bit into the sandwich, aware of his mom's eyes on him as she hung up, aware of all the questions lurking in her expression. She made it only a handful of minutes before she asked the only one that really mattered.

"Why?"

He carefully swallowed and put the sandwich down. "It's a long story, Mom, and I'd prefer to tell it to both of you together if you don't mind."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Did you hear that Alex is getting married?"

"I was there when he proposed, remember? He asked me to be his best man."

The key rattled in the front door, followed by heavy footsteps on the wood floor. His dad must have dropped everything and raced home. When Mitchell entered the kitchen, Bryan braced himself. But his father wordlessly crossed the room and pressed him into a bone-breaking hug.

"I'm so glad you're back, Son," he murmured, his voice sounding suspiciously husky.

Bryan pulled back before his own eyes could get misty. "I'm sorry, Dad. I had some things to figure out and I couldn't do it here." He looked between his parents. "Maybe you should take a seat."

Mitchell pulled up a stool beside Bryan at the island, and Kathy leaned against her husband so he could put his arm around her waist. Typical of his parents, presenting a united front.

Bryan cleared his throat. "I don't know where to begin."

"Start at the beginning," Kathy said with an encouraging smile.

The beginning. Not of this disappearance, but where his life had gone off the rails. "When I left the last time, almost four years ago, I had asked Vivian to marry me. She said no."

His parents exchanged a glance. This was something he'd never told them.

"I convinced myself I was over her. But you know what happened next. A lot of different women . . ." He trailed off, not wanting to go into detail about what they already suspected. "When I went to Colombia last year, I thought it would be good to go to Suesca and face those ghosts. Except Vivian saw my posts and came from Peru to see me.

"I thought she was back for me. And then she told me she was getting married. To Luke Van Bakker."

"Your sponsor?" Mitchell asked.

"Yes. I'm not going to lie—it was a kick in the gut. They'd been together for over a year, and he never saw fit to mention it to me. Anyway, I was done. I intended to leave Colombia, but she insisted on climbing La Bruja, and I wasn't willing to let anyone else belay for her. It went horribly wrong." He told them how she'd zippered off the rock, the injuries she'd sustained. "I didn't have any choice but to call Luke to get her home. He didn't take the fact we were together very well, and he basically fired me."

Silence from his parents, obviously unsure how to respond.

"In any case, a pro climber without a sponsor really isn't a pro. And Luke is vindictive. Once he figured out that Vivian

and I had—” he cleared his throat—“hooked up, he made sure no one would take my phone calls. So I guess we can safely say my climbing career is over.”

Mitchell sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Son.”

“No, you’re not. You always told me that climbing was a short-term job, not a long-term plan, and you were right.”

“Do you need money?” Kathy asked, ever the practical one.

Bryan laughed, but even he could hear the absence of humor. “I do, but not for the reason you think. I know you don’t think I listened to anything you said, but I do have a business degree. I lived way below my means for years and invested every free cent. With the way the stock market has gone, I had a pretty big nest egg.”

“Then why do you need money?” Kathy asked.

He looked between the two of them. “Because I bought a coffee farm in Colombia.”

For once, the Shaws were stunned speechless. His mom regained her composure first. “What do you know about coffee?”

“Quite a lot, actually. I spent four months working alongside the farmers, learning how to plant, grow, pick, and process.”

He filled them in on the mission of the importer he was working with, how his farm gave high-paying employment to local workers, how he was part of a co-op with other farms that would leverage their collective bargaining power to make a living wage in the region. “For the first time in years, growing coffee is more lucrative than cocaine. The entire region is being transformed because of Café Libertad.”

Mitchell exhaled slowly. “That’s a lot to take in. I’m proud of you for choosing a new direction and seeing it through. But I still don’t understand why you’re here if your farm is in Colombia.”

“We don’t yet produce enough green coffee beans to turn

a profit after expenses. So I'm importing my entire crop next month. I'm opening a roasting business."

Mitchell seemed to be weighing his words. "Do you realize how difficult that's going to be?"

"I do. I've spent the last two months working with a roaster in Oregon, learning the technique, studying his business model. There's no guarantee of success in anything, Dad. But I've got a great story to tell, and it's one I think people will respond to."

His father nodded slowly. "It seems you've thought this through. If you like, I'll take a look at your business plan."

"Thanks. That really wasn't meant to be a pitch, but I would appreciate a place to stay while I'm getting the business off the ground."

Kathy jumped in. "Of course. You don't even need to ask. Your old room is here any time you need it."

"Thank you." Bryan hopped off his stool to give them each a hug, then lifted his backpack. "If you don't mind, I'm going to unpack and then see if I can track down the stuff I left in the townhome."

He smiled and left the room, trying not to feel like a kid again as he returned to his childhood bedroom, trying even harder not to linger and overhear the inevitable conversations that would follow. His mom would be on his side, relieved that he'd turned from his "wild ways" and seemed to be focusing on having a normal life. His dad would be more skeptical, cite the business-failure figures, talk about how Bryan had shown no interest in business until his epiphany—all legitimate concerns. Both of them would wonder about the state of his faith.

The state of his faith? Shaky. The Prodigal Son story was a parable, an illustration of how God welcomed back the lost without holding their past wrongs against them. But what

Bryan really could have used right now was what came after the feast, from the lost son's perspective. The father was overjoyed, but no doubt the relatives sided with the older brother, maintaining their skepticism while rumors flew. How did the Prodigal earn back the trust of those who had written him off as a wastrel? How did he prove he'd truly changed and not just crawled home when he hit bottom?

More importantly, did the change actually stick?

Bryan climbed the stairs to his room, the first one on the left. It had been converted from his teen decor back to the elegant and traditional scheme of the rest of the house, but that didn't kill the memories. He shut the door and began unpacking the few possessions he'd lived the last nine months with: an extra pair of jeans, three shirts, some athletic wear, a mess of climbing gear. It now seemed ridiculous to have toted thirty pounds of webbing and cams and carabiners when he had no intention of ever setting hand or foot on a rock again. Maybe he just needed to bring it back with him to come full circle. Once he'd inventoried what was left of his gear in his car, still parked outside his parents' house where he'd left it, he would put it up for sale. Use it to fund equipment for the roastery. Move on to the next phase of his life.

He was about to take his pile of clothes down to the laundry room when a gentle knock came at the bedroom door. He opened it, expecting to see his mother, but his dad stood there instead.

"Can I come in for a minute?"

Bryan stood aside. "Of course."

Mitchell looked around the room as if it were somehow unfamiliar and then seated himself on the wingback chair near the door. "I owe you an apology."

Bryan cocked his head and sank down onto the edge of the bed. "For what?"

His dad sighed. "I knew you were going through something four years ago, but I never pushed. I didn't interfere. Maybe I should have."

"So my choices are your fault now?"

Mitchell looked at him in surprise. Bryan clasped his hands and leaned forward onto his knees. "I'm not sixteen years old, Dad. I've made my own decisions. Unfortunately, those decisions have landed me back at home. But that doesn't mean you bear any responsibility for my actions."

"But we raised you—"

"Right. You raised me. But it was my choice to pursue a climbing career. It was my choice to go off the rails after Vivian dumped me, and it was my choice to sleep with her when she came back. I'm basically reaping the consequences of that, just as you always warned me I would."

Mitchell stared at him, sadness the only emotion showing on his face. "I'm still sorry."

"I'm not." Bryan pushed himself up. "It wasn't until everything fell apart in Colombia that I took a good look at where I was headed. I'm turning thirty-six. I've been saying that climbing is my career, but it's really just been a placeholder, an excuse to live entirely for myself. Not for other people. Certainly not for God. And for what? I wasn't even all that happy."

"And then God put Café Libertad in my path, and I started to realize there might be something else for me out there. I just couldn't come back until I had it figured out. Until I could prove that I'd changed. I hope you understand that."

"I do." Mitchell rose and put his hand on Bryan's shoulder. "Whatever the reason, I'm glad you're back."

"Thanks, Dad."

Bryan watched as his father left the room, only then realizing what Mitchell hadn't said. He hadn't said anything about the viability of the business, hadn't offered his help. Which

was fine. The last thing Bryan wanted to do was to run back to Mitchell Shaw for help as he embarked on the first real challenge of his adult life.

That didn't mean he wasn't going to need help, though. He might know about coffee farming and roasting now, but his college degree didn't mean that he knew anything about running a business. And he only had one shot to get this right.

Chapter Three

FOR TEN SECONDS after Ana opened her eyes, she was happy.

All too quickly, yesterday's twin nightmares crashed over her like breaking waves, sweeping away those fragile particles of contentment. She might have mitigated the client issue, but she wasn't naive enough to think that was the end of it. Mason had proven he did things merely to get a rise out of his publicists, and there was little chance he would stop at underage escorts.

For all the distaste she had for her new client, he wasn't her biggest problem. Rachel and Alex still didn't have a wedding venue, and every day she procrastinated was one day closer to potential disaster.

But venues didn't open at 7 a.m. on Saturday. Ana hauled herself out of bed, brushed her teeth, squeezed into a fresh set of gym clothes. A cup of tea and half a slice of toast later, she was headed out to her usual Saturday morning spin class. Gibson didn't feel like he'd done his job until he'd made someone puke, so the real breakfast could wait until she was done.

A little more than an hour later, Ana left the gym, sweat-drenched and jelly-legged, but unaccountably proud that she

had not been the puker today. That honor had gone to a poor noob who didn't take the class's high-intensity warning seriously enough before booking his bike.

One task down, thirty-two to go.

She went home to shower and change, then sat down with a cup of coffee and her planner. First up was her Scripture reading and daily devotions—a book for busy women that was supposed to teach her how to surrender and breathe. She powered through the reading, but halfway through the reflection questions, the only thing she was reflecting on was the list of wedding venues waiting on her laptop. She stole looks at the dark screen every ten seconds until she finally gave up and put the devotional aside. She'd go back to it later after she'd dealt with this task. Even as she logged in, though, she knew it was probably a lost cause. What were the chances any halfway decent location would have cancellations at all, much less on the particular date they needed?

Three hours later, Ana had a spreadsheet with half the text grayed out, the other half with notations to call back the following week. She pinched the bridge of her nose for a long moment and then drained her coffee cup down to the cold dregs. It was useless. On Monday, she would call all the venues that hadn't responded, but she didn't have high hopes.

She had to tell Rachel. She wouldn't stop looking, but she needed both Rachel's and Alex's input to determine acceptable alternatives. She just hated the feeling that she'd somehow failed two of her favorite people in the world.

But since it was still hours until she could head to the restaurant for supper club, she clicked over to her email. Not surprisingly, she'd racked up dozens of messages since she left the office last night.

Despite his antics, Mason wasn't even her most pressing client. She was currently juggling several active files,

one of which involved a scandal surrounding allegations of performance-enhancing drugs against one of Colorado's most beloved Olympians, downhill skier Beth Cordero. Beth hadn't even tried to deny the accusations—she'd only come to Massey-Coleman in an attempt to stop the media firestorm that had followed her admission of guilt.

Ana certainly didn't approve of cheating, but when she'd heard Beth's story, she couldn't help but feel a measure of sympathy. Her mom had been the legendary slalom athlete Jeanine Cordero, both her career and life cut short by cancer in her thirties, when Beth was just an infant. Beth's father, Denton, had been determined to make over his daughter in his dead wife's image and devoted himself to her career, even homeschooling her while she trained. On the surface, Beth said, everything seemed great, but in private Denny had been abusive and overbearing, punishing her for bad training sessions and cutting her off from any influences in her life that he deemed unproductive.

The picture the athlete painted was of a woman bullied and isolated, who had never experienced life outside of skiing. Never willing to risk getting sued for slander, the firm had done its research and corroborated the story, though Beth's family and friends refused to go on record about the abuse.

Now Ana's real work began. Some heartfelt press conferences had preserved Beth's endorsements for now. Ana's real job was to take the momentum and convert it into charity work and speaking engagements. By the time she was done, Beth Cordero would be a positive role model and spokesperson for women suffering emotional abuse. No one would even remember the revoked gold medal.

But first, Ana had to craft a pitch for the speakers' bureaus. She wrote a compelling biography for Beth and then moved on to several less time-sensitive projects she'd been putting off

during regular work hours. When she finally glanced up, the clock told her it was already after six. She'd spent all day on the computer at her kitchen table. No wonder her eyelids felt like they were lined with sandpaper.

At least she got to spend the evening with her friends. She went to the bathroom to freshen up her makeup, then traded her T-shirt for a floral-printed chiffon button-down and slipped into a pair of bright-green pointy-toed flats. The cheerful patterns and colors made her smile. Spring kept threatening through bouts of snow; she was going to pretend that today's sunshine would stay. She transferred the contents of her purse into a more casual handbag, grabbed her keys, and headed downstairs for her car. She'd be early, purposely—better to tell Rachel the bad news in private.

Street parking on Old South Pearl in Platt Park was as bad as ever, cars lining the streets on both sides and down intersecting roads. She circled the block twice without finding a space, then gave up and pulled into the crowded alley behind the building. Both Rachel's old Toyota and Melody's Jeep were parked there, where they'd likely been since four a.m. Even nine months after opening, her friends were still working fourteen-hour days.

Ana stepped out of her SUV, avoiding a greasy puddle that had formed in the potholed asphalt, and moved toward the back door. Unlocked. She pushed through, the heat from the kitchen hitting her immediately in contrast to the cool outside air. "Hello?"

Melody saw her first. "Ana!" She turned away from what she was doing—labeling large round containers with Sharpies on masking tape—and held her arms out for a hug. "I'm glad you came early. We could use some help setting the table. We're running behind tonight."

Ana flicked a glance to the range, where Rachel stirred something in a gigantic pot with a long-handled spoon. They could be behind or on time, but you'd never know from looking at Rachel; in the kitchen, she always had the same measured stance and unreadable game face.

"Hey, Ana." Rachel offered one arm for a sideways half hug before turning back to her pot. "Sorry, I can't leave the risotto. How are you?"

"Long, crummy week. I'm glad to see you guys." Ana inhaled deeply. "Something smells amazing. What are we having?"

"Braised lamb shanks over parmesan-mushroom risotto. My guy brought in some morels this morning, and there was no way I was going to pass them up."

"I'm hungry already. What can I do?"

Rachel nodded in the direction of the dining room. "Tables are set up and the plates and flatware are on the front counter. Mark folded the napkins before he left, so you can just put those on the plates."

"Sure thing." Ana backtracked and put her purse and her wool coat in the staff room, not much more than a closet in the back of the kitchen, and then headed out front to get the tables ready for guests.

To say that Bittersweet Café was her happy place was perhaps an understatement. In the last two years, Rachel had left behind her high-pressure executive chef job and Melody her dead-end position in a chain bakery, then decided to open their dream restaurant together. The way all the details had come together was downright magical; nowhere in Denver's history had a functional café and bakery materialized in under four months. But Ana had no doubt there had been a healthy measure of divine intervention in the situation. She could feel it in the mood and the atmosphere of this place. Light,

welcoming, refreshing. It was no wonder they'd quickly developed a devoted following. They were already in the middle of plans to take over the vacant space in the strip mall beside them and expand to meet their ever-growing demand.

Ana couldn't be prouder.

If she were truthful, she was also a little jealous. She might be good at her job, and she was certainly well paid, but there was an allure to the idea of working with her best friends, being surrounded by delicious food and baked goods. Too bad she had absolutely no culinary talent. Her mom had made sure she could cook rice properly and prepare Filipino dishes like *adobong manok* and *kaldereta*, but her skills stopped there. Considering the fat and calorie content of those foods, she'd left her childhood meals behind in favor of an endless stream of grilled chicken or fish over salad.

The smaller two- and four-person tables had been pushed together into one large rectangle in the center of the main dining area, chairs set at each place. Stacks of square salad plates sat on the counter, along with bins of flatware. Ana did a quick count. Twelve tonight. Friends-and-family night tended to be smaller and quieter than the regular supper clubs, which were now running sixteen to twenty-four guests. Even that seemed a bit much to Rachel, but she had expanded the invitation list simply because she hated constantly turning people away.

Ana carried a stack of plates to the table and set one precisely in front of each chair, making sure the square edge of the dish was parallel to the edge of the table. Each piece of flatware was placed as carefully as the plate: two forks to the left, a knife and a spoon to the right, dessert fork horizontally above. She had to search a bit for the napkins, but she finally found them in a plastic bin behind the counter.

"Ana," Rachel called from the kitchen, "can you unlock the

front door and put out the private-party sign? Alex just texted me. He's looking for parking."

"Sure," she called back. She found the chalkboard A-frame sign beside the counter, flipped the lock on the door, and carried the board out onto the sidewalk. Someone—Melody, most likely—had hand-lettered the message *Closed for private party. Visit us tomorrow beginning at 6 a.m.* They were always closed in the evening, but a full house and an open door had a tendency to attract the curious.

Ana was surveying the table, trying to decide what it needed, when the bell on the front door jingled. She turned, a greeting for Alex on her lips, then froze.

Alex wasn't alone.

"You're back." It was a dumb, obvious thing to say, but as she looked over Bryan Shaw, she wasn't sure she'd have recognized him on the street. His usually short hair was shoulder-length, now pulled back in a ponytail, his typically clean-shaven face covered by a short beard. It was Bryan, but not.

"Hey, Ana." He approached her slowly with a smile, and they did that awkward thing where they tried to figure out whether a handshake or hug would be more appropriate. Apparently, he voted hug, because before she could decide for herself, his arms were around her. She gave him a squeeze back, inhaling deeply and then wishing she hadn't when the whiff of his familiar cologne put a tremor in her middle. "When did you get back in town?"

"So, I'm just going to go say hi to Rachel," Alex said, "since no one has noticed me anyway . . ."

Ana laughed, and a flush heated her cheeks. "Sorry, Alex. I promise, if you disappear without a trace for eight months, I will give you the same greeting."

"I'm holding you to that." Alex looked between both of them with a smile and then pushed into the kitchen.

Bryan watched his friend go with a self-conscious laugh. "I got back yesterday. I asked Alex not to say anything because I wanted to make a grand entrance."

"Then you're about a half hour too early."

He gave her his trademark half smile. "No, I'm not."

Ana let out a laugh. "Whew. For a second there, I thought you'd come back from Colombia a different person. Nice to see the Bryan I know is still in there."

Bryan looked inexplicably pained by the statement, but he shifted back on his heels and crossed his arms over his chest. "You look good, Ana. How have you been? Still saving the world one publicity crisis at a time?"

Ana leaned back against the edge of the counter, bracing her hands beside her. "More like saving people from their own stupidity one publicity crisis at a time. You remember that coffee shop in Five Points with the image problem?"

"The one that had to close because of their insensitive sign? I actually saw it on *Westword* while I was gone."

Ana shook her head. "No, the other one."

"What other one?"

"Exactly."

Bryan threw his head back and laughed. "I missed you. I missed all of you, in fact."

She let the pleasure of the words wash over her for a moment before she shut down the feeling with methodical brutality. It had always been like this between her and Bryan. A little flirtation, a little mutual appreciation, always dancing around the fact that whatever they might think or feel about each other, they'd never act on it. It was one thing to bring new people into their group—Alex had become part of it, as had Melody's boyfriend, Justin—but she and Bryan were owed equal loyalty from everyone else. Should they get together and it not work out, it would make things hopelessly awkward.

Had they learned nothing from watching *Friends*? The last few seasons, the plotline between Rachel Green and Ross Geller had been downright painful to witness.

Ana gestured to the table. "Come have a seat and tell me all about it. Unless you want to wait until everyone gets here."

The door chimed before the words were fully out of her mouth.

"Tell us what when everyone gets here?"

Ana laughed as Melody's impossibly good-looking pilot boyfriend entered the café. "Hi, Justin. Come on in. Melody's in the kitchen."

Justin smiled at Ana; then his eyes fell on Bryan. He extended a hand. "You're back."

"Appears so."

"Good trip?"

"I'm not sure I'd use the word *good*, but it was definitely illuminating." Bryan's expression became pensive. "No, I take that back. It was good. I'm just glad to be home."

Ana nodded thoughtfully, sensing there was much more to this story than he was letting on, but she didn't have time to ask before the door dinged and another group of supper club guests arrived at the café. Only then did she realize she'd missed her window to tell Rachel privately about the wedding venue problem.

* * *

Bryan hadn't expected to see Ana at the supper club, which was somewhat ridiculous. She, Rachel, and Melody had been friends for years, rarely separated during their time off. Or at least that had been the case until recently. Rachel had Alex, with a wedding looming on the horizon. Melody had Justin, apparently—though before Bryan had left town, they'd broken up and Justin had moved to Florida to run a charter aviation

business he'd purchased. He still wasn't quite sure what had happened, other than the fact that Justin was here.

But Ana . . .

He'd been interested since he met her at Alex's barbecue almost two years ago, and not in the way that he had been interested in most women. She was *interesting*: tough, abrupt, funny. Didn't take his flirting too seriously, dished it right back in a way that said she saw through the act. And while there was unmistakable chemistry between them, she was just as reluctant as he was to see where things might go.

Back then, it had been because he knew she wasn't the type to go for a casual hookup, and he'd been pretty sure Alex would destroy him if he slept with her and then broke up with her. Now, it was for a totally different reason. He was all too aware of his faults, all too aware of how easy it had been to abandon his values when he'd gotten his heart broken. Anything he had with a woman from here on out had to be a real relationship, something he was pretty sure he'd forgotten how to do since Vivian. Ana could not be his trial attempt at getting back on the straight and narrow.

Fortunately, the repeated chime of the front-door bell interrupted the questions he saw lingering in Ana's eyes and turned their attention to greeting the stream of new guests. There was Dina, Alex's younger sister, beautiful, tattooed, and pierced—also with a perennial crush on him that he was careful not to stoke. She was a full ten years younger than them and far more innocent than her appearance suggested. Also brilliant, a bona fide Mensa-level genius, but that was something she kept carefully hidden from everyone but those who knew her well. She'd brought along her friend Danielle, an equally pretty Latina who was every bit as outgoing as Dina herself.

Then came Andrew, a tall blond man with strong Nordic features and a lingering air of arrogance, along with a plain,

dark-haired woman trailing behind. Bryan sized Andrew up as he shook his hand. "I don't think we've met."

"I used to be Rachel's sous-chef at Paisley. I took over for her for a while after she left."

"Only for a while?"

"Paisley closed late last year. You didn't hear that?"

Bryan couldn't keep the surprise from his face. When Rachel had been in charge, the Larimer Square restaurant had been a rising star, garnering stellar reviews and constant buzz . . . until a social media scandal caused her partners to fire her. He'd bet they were regretting that move now. "No, I've been in South America for most of the last year. I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not," Andrew said. "What Maurice and Dan did to Rachel was lousy. I felt bad taking the spot, but I had to make a living."

Bryan's attention moved to the woman. She held her hand out and smiled. "I'm Andrew's wife, Laura."

"Nice to meet you, Laura." He instantly changed his opinion of her. She had ordinary features, but a look of undeniable intelligence. He could see she was sizing him up much like he'd done to Andrew a moment ago.

"So, what are you doing now if Paisley's closed?" He shifted his gaze back to Andrew.

"I'm a corporate chef. I work for a food conglomerate, developing recipes using their products."

"That sounds . . . interesting," Bryan said politely.

"It's okay."

"He hates it," Laura said flatly. "I've been trying to convince him to go back to restaurant cooking, but he's stubborn. Thought he had to give it up for me when we got married."

"I make a lot more doing what I do now, and I'm home evenings and weekends."

Laura rolled her eyes. “But back then you were actually happy.”

Bryan repressed his smile and excused himself before pushing through to the kitchen. Laura really was the perfect chef’s spouse—most lobbied for their significant others to take corporate positions so they could have more time together.

Rachel was stirring and slicing, completely focused, while Melody tossed a salad in a gigantic stainless-steel bowl.

“Can I help?”

Melody’s eyes widened. “Bryan? You’re back!” She set down the salad and went to hug him, but it was mostly wrists as she held her dressing-coated fingers out of the way. “No one told me!”

“I asked Alex to keep it a secret.”

“Hi, Bryan.” Rachel smiled, more subdued . . . but then again, his appearance came as no surprise to her. “Good to see you. We’ve missed you.”

“Thanks, Rach. I just talked to Andrew. I had no idea Paisley closed!”

She nodded. “In November. It’s kind of sad, after all the work I put into that place. Is it bad that I felt a little vindicated that it went under without me?”

“Probably.” Bryan grinned, and she chuckled. “I don’t blame you, though. I’d say it’s nothing less than they deserve.”

“I feel sorry for my staff. Fortunately, there’s a massive shortage of line cooks in Denver, so I’m sure they didn’t have any trouble finding positions. I just happen to know I was paying more than everyone but the most exclusive restaurants. Part of my employee-retention policy.”

“Which is why you were so successful, I’m sure. That and your amazing cooking.”

Rachel smiled. “I’ve already said I’m glad you’re back, Bryan. You don’t have to suck up.”

“I’m just hoping you’re still going to let your husband come

out and play after you're married." He sent a smirk toward where Alex leaned against the wall and slung an arm around Rachel's shoulder. "What can I do to help? If I'm sucking up, you should take full advantage."

She inclined her head toward Melody's station. "As soon as she puts the salad in serving bowls, you can put them on the table for me. And fill water glasses. There's a couple pitchers of ice water waiting over there."

"It would be my pleasure, Chef." Bryan dropped his arm and retrieved the water pitchers, then pushed through the door back into the dining room. He carefully filled the water glasses, pouring from the side to fill them with ice, then from the spout to top off each glass with water.

"You look like you've done that more than once," Ana observed.

"I used to wait tables in college."

"Really? I wouldn't have thought you needed to work your way through school."

"I didn't, at least not how you mean. But my parents were pretty clear that my climbing trips and my extracurricular activities were on my own dime. And I made a killing in tips."

"I bet you did."

Bryan sent her a curious look, wondering about the subtext to that statement, but Ana's face didn't give anything away. She had the best poker face of anyone he'd ever seen, hands down. No wonder she was such a good publicist.

Alex came through holding two big white ceramic bowls filled with salad. "You're making me look bad, Bryan. Rachel put me to work." He set them down on the table and backed off. Ana stepped forward and arranged them so each was equidistant from the plates surrounding it.

Bryan and Alex stared at her. She shrugged. "What? Rachel would have done the same thing."

“Probably true,” Alex said.

The door dinged once more and admitted an elegant brunette followed by a tall man with a shock of red hair. “Sorry we’re late,” the woman announced.

Bryan didn’t recognize her until Alex said, “You’re right on time, Camille. Come on in. I think you know everyone?”

Ah, Camille. She used to be the front-of-house manager at Paisley and was probably the closest thing Rachel had had to a work friend. If he recalled correctly, Camille had dated Andrew at one point. That could make tonight interesting.

But she greeted her old flame with a friendly smile and hug and then made the rounds introducing her boyfriend, Chuck. When she got to Bryan, she shook his hand. “Nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too.” He shook her boyfriend’s hand before turning his attention back to her. “What are you doing now?”

“Insurance.”

Bryan blinked.

“I know, it’s boring, but it’s stable and it pays well.” She shrugged. “Couldn’t stay in the industry forever, I guess.”

It looked like everyone had moved on except him, even Andrew and Camille. But that wasn’t really true. He’d moved on in a big way, quitting climbing and buying a coffee farm. He was simply in a holding pattern until he collected the funds to open his roasting business. Which needed to be soon—the timeline in his head, ticking down to his bean delivery, had two fewer days left on it, just since he’d been back in Denver.

Alex disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared a moment later. “Since everyone’s here, we can all take seats.”

They shuffled into place. Bryan attempted to anticipate where everyone was going to sit so he’d end up near Ana, but they still landed on opposite ends of the table and he couldn’t reshuffle without drawing too much attention to himself.

Melody came out first, bearing three baskets of bread, which she staggered with Ana's perfectly placed salad bowls, putting them down with just as much precision as her friend. So maybe they were all perfectionists when it came to table settings. She took a seat at the end of the table, and then Rachel came to stand behind the free chair at the head.

"Welcome, friends. I'm so glad you could all join us tonight. We're starting with a mesclun salad and fresh sourdough bread. Then we're moving on to a braised lamb chop over parmesan risotto. This is one of the few times that I decided to do a plated meal rather than family style, so I'll go in the back and get them going while you enjoy the salad."

"Oh, join us, Rachel," Dina said. "We hate to eat without you."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to miss the lamb chops. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Conversation hummed around the table as baskets and bowls were passed and the group helped themselves to the first course, but it was only light and meaningless. They were just finishing their salads when Rachel poked her head out of the kitchen.

It was a signal, apparently, because Melody immediately rose and began busing their dirty dishes, stacking them in a precarious balance on one arm. As soon as the table was clear, Rachel appeared with the first of the plates.

The food was beautifully arranged as always, its aroma making Bryan's stomach rumble even though he was already half-full from salad and bread. Melody helped Rachel put the dishes down, and everyone had a plate in front of them in surprisingly little time.

Bryan wasted no time attacking his, closing his eyes in happiness at the first bite of lamb. Colombian food had been good, hearty and flavorful. But he'd missed his friend's cooking and his favorite Denver restaurants. It was a different world for sure.

Ana was watching him in a way that made him think she'd read his mind and gave him a small smile. "So, are you going to tell us where you've been and what you've been doing? Or are you going to make us wait until dessert?"

"Honestly, I hadn't thought much past the lamb. It's amazing, Rachel. Thanks for letting me slip in at the last minute."

Rachel smiled her acknowledgment, and everyone at the table echoed his thoughts, but from the eyes fixed on him, he knew he wouldn't get to enjoy his meal until he explained.

Might as well be blunt. "I bought a coffee farm in Colombia." He went through the whole story for what felt like the dozenth time, though he left out the loss of his sponsorship and the situation with Vivian, of course. Then he went on to the real kicker. "I'm going to open a roasting business here in Colorado. But before I can, I'm looking for funding to help me get set up. Most of my assets are sunk into the farm itself."

Ana was the first to speak up. "Your dad wouldn't help?"

"He's looking over a proposal, but he's pretty risk averse, even if it's his own son." Bryan paused. "*Especial*ly when it's his own son. And I'd rather have an outside partner if I can manage it. Family and business usually don't mix."

"Any leads?" Alex asked.

Bryan took a bite of the risotto and almost got too distracted to continue. It was perfect. "I have a couple of friends that I'm going to approach. We'll see what happens." *Friends* might be overstating it a little bit. *Acquaintances* was probably a better word. But Denver wasn't a large city, and considering who his father was, he had a pretty good idea of who might invest and who wouldn't.

"What's the business going to be called?" Melody asked.

"The farm is called Flor de Oro, but nothing has really stuck yet for the roastery."

Guests began throwing out potential names, but once again

he felt Ana's eyes on him, assessing. Or maybe it just seemed that way to him. He hadn't expected to feel this aware of her presence in the room. Apparently, time and distance hadn't dimmed his attraction to her.

When the main course was finished and all plates were cleared, Melody brought out their dessert: strawberry custard tarts. "We'd normally have specialty coffee to serve, but our barista, Mark, had an emergency. We do have some regular drip, and it's pretty good if I do say so myself."

"I can pull shots," Ana said.

Now everyone looked at her, including Rachel and Melody.

"What?"

"I didn't know you knew anything about coffee," Bryan said.

She gave him a slight smile. "You know very little about me." She rose from her seat. "What does everyone want?"

"You don't have to do that, Ana," Rachel said quickly. "Sit down and enjoy dessert. Black coffee will go well with the tarts anyway."

The others murmured their agreement, and Ana sank back into her seat and picked up her dessert fork. But Bryan's curiosity was piqued. Ana was perhaps the most professional, focused person he knew besides his own dad. When had she learned how to pull espresso shots?

He barely kept the questions to himself until the supper was over, and he purposely lingered until everyone but the girls, their boyfriends, and Ana were left. He moved to Ana's side. "I don't suppose the offer is still open? I wouldn't mind a cortado right now."

Ana studied him for a second. "You just want to see if I can really do it."

"Maybe."

"Well, I can, but it's not worth getting the machine dirty for one shot. Another time, maybe."

"I'll hold you to that. How did you learn all this anyway?"

Ana shrugged. "Like most people did. Needed a job with flexible hours. I was a decent barista and made good tips."

"What else do you know about coffee?"

"I was an assistant manager, so I know a little about running a shop. A bit about flavor and bean selection, but little about the actual mechanics of the roasting. Why?"

Bryan hadn't even fully formulated why he was asking, but it came out of his mouth all the same. "When I get the business up and running, I'm going to need a sales manager. Someone who understands business and marketing and publicity, and has some coffee experience too, so it all sounds natural. I don't suppose that's something you'd be interested in?"

She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "I'm flattered that you'd ask. But I like my job—I'm good at my job—and I don't intend on leaving it anytime soon." Her eyes took on a mischievous twinkle. "Besides, you couldn't afford me."

He laughed. "Probably not. Would you ever consider being a consultant?"

"I might consider it." She gave him a secretive smile. "Good night, Bryan."

She slipped into the kitchen, ostensibly to say goodbye, but she never came back. Bryan sat down in one of the vacated seats, his mind buzzing. Until now he hadn't really thought about it, but he did need an operations manager. He would be completely consumed with the importing and the roasting. He hadn't given much consideration to everything else that would need to be done to actually sell his beans and make a profit. Messaging, packaging, sales and distribution. Suddenly, the month that he'd given himself to find a place seemed ridiculously naive. If he didn't have the other elements in place, he'd be hemorrhaging money while he figured it all out. And that was the dumbest business move he could make.

He absolutely needed help. And now he was pretty certain that Ana was the one to give it.

* * *

Ana slipped back into the kitchen, a smile lingering on her face. Seeing Bryan had been a surprise, but at least it was a pleasant one. He seemed different after his long absence. There were still glimpses of that flirtatious nature, but it was tempered somehow. Was it just the responsibility he felt, buying a farm in Colombia? Or was it something else? Alex had said Bryan only disappeared when he had trouble with a woman, but to her knowledge, he hadn't been seeing anyone when he left. Not that she'd have any reason to know for sure.

"I see that smile," Melody said from where she was cleaning up her bench. "Don't try to hide it. You were glad to see Bryan."

"I was, actually." She paused. "He asked me to work for him."

"Really?" Rachel's eyebrows lifted. "That's a new one. What did you say?"

"I told him he couldn't afford me. I'll help him out a little, though. At least with the paperwork." She paused. "Rachel, I need to talk to you for a minute."

At the serious tone, Rachel stopped what she was doing and turned. "What is it?"

Better to just have out with it. "The venue you and Alex chose isn't available. They double-booked."

Rachel blinked. "How could that happen?"

"Calendar snafu, apparently. I'm so sorry, Rachel. I feel responsible."

"Why? You're not the one who double-booked the venue."

"Yeah, but I pushed you toward that one when there were other spots still available . . ."

"Stop." Rachel dropped her towel and moved to rest both

hands on Ana's shoulders. "Both Alex and I agreed that was the perfect place. We asked you to book it, and if you'll recall, *we're* the ones who signed the contract."

Ana exhaled. She should have known that always-calm Rachel would react this way. "I'm still looking for alternatives. I'm halfway through my list with no luck, but something has to turn up."

"It will." Rachel dropped her hands and went back to wiping down her station. "We'll figure out something."

"What about the lodge in Silverlark where Justin took me last year?" Melody suggested. "That place is gorgeous and it can hold tons of people."

Rachel considered for a moment. "That's an option. But it's pretty far, isn't it? Everyone would have to drive, or we'd have to charter buses to take them up there."

"That could be fun," Melody said.

"I'll make a note," Ana said. "Don't talk to Justin yet, though. A venue in Denver would be preferred, especially because of the out-of-town guests."

Melody made a zip motion across her lips and winked at Ana as if to say *Told you she wouldn't freak*. Ana still wasn't sure how Rachel managed to stay so calm. Had it been her wedding, she'd be panicked. It wasn't even her wedding and she was still panicked.

"Did I tell you we're getting ready to put my house on the market?" Rachel said suddenly. "Alex is coming over tomorrow night to help me paint. We're going to try to get it up in May. With any luck, we'll get an offer right away and be able to close escrow right after the wedding."

"That's great, Rachel," Ana said. "Are you going to miss your place?"

She paused to consider. "Maybe a little. It's the first house I ever actually owned. The first time I had a salary that could

support a mortgage. But Alex's place is amazing and it would be silly to give it up to move into mine."

"But his only has one bedroom," Melody said. "What happens when there's little baby Kanins running around?"

"We thought maybe we'd remodel. The condo is big enough to add another bedroom. The living area is cavernous."

Melody gasped. "You *have* thought about it then!"

"Not right away, of course. But yeah. I mean, he's turning thirty-six. I'm turning thirty-two. We've got some time, but not a lot of time."

Melody sighed happily. "Rachel as a mom. I can just picture it. Your kids are going to be flat-out gorgeous. Won't they, Ana?"

"Without a doubt." Ana smiled, but inwardly she couldn't help but feel a stab of envy. Rachel was getting married soon and potentially having kids. Melody was happily in a relationship with a great guy. And she . . . well, her night out with Christopher Mason had been better than some of her recent dates. "Next thing we know, it'll be you and Justin."

"What about me?" Justin pushed through the door into the kitchen and went straight to Melody, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind and planting a kiss on her cheek. "Are you almost ready to go?"

"In a couple of minutes. I'll meet you out front."

Justin seemed to realize that he was interrupting something and took the hint. He kissed her once more and returned to the front of the house.

Ana and Rachel stared expectantly, but Melody just shrugged. "I'm trying not to get ahead of myself. He's back in Colorado and he lives nearby . . . That's good enough for now."

"How does he like the new job?" Rachel asked. "I keep forgetting to ask him."

"It's good. He likes having a regular route and he's home every night by seven. It beats his AvionElite schedule."

When Melody and Justin met, he had been a pilot for a fractional company that sold shares of private jets, which meant he was gone several weeks out of the month. He'd been in the process of buying his dream charter business, but its location in Florida made the romance look nearly impossible. After a lot of heartache, he'd taken a job with Mountain State Airways, a commuter airline that flew between Colorado Springs, Denver, Grand Junction, and Salt Lake City. He and Melody might not be talking marriage, but the fact he had come back was a statement of commitment.

More commitment than Ana had ever been able to elicit from a man.

She straightened abruptly and smiled at her friends. "I better go now. I'm going to check into some new venues for your wedding, Rachel, and I'll let you know what I come up with."

Rachel hugged her hard. "Thanks, Ana. I really appreciate you doing this."

"Of course." She shifted to give Melody a hug goodbye too, then dug her keys from her purse. "Are we still coming over for dinner on Wednesday?"

Rachel grimaced. "I'm sorry. I forgot Alex and I are going to his parents' house that night."

"Wow," Melody said. "This isn't the first time, right?"

"No, but it's been a while."

"Not a problem," Ana said. "Let me know if you reschedule." She threw one last smile in their direction, strode out the back door, and unlocked the driver's side of her black Mercedes.

Where she sat, in the dark, feeling unaccountably lonely.

No, not lonely. Left out. Left behind.

Which was stupid. After all, hadn't she always been the hard-charging one? The career-oriented one? It wasn't as if she didn't have a social life. She dated. A lot. It was just that none of those dates had ended in something lasting like Rachel's and

Melody's relationships. All the guys she met were either too self-absorbed or too needy. Where were the normal ones who were happy to spend some free time together but otherwise allowed her to have her own life?

But it wasn't just that. It was that in Rachel and Melody finding their happily-ever-afters and their business together, they'd become a tight little unit of two. It wasn't intentional, of course, and it was as much Ana's fault as theirs. Hadn't she been the one to throw them over in favor of her new problem client last night?

She cranked the key in the ignition and the motor purred to life, nearly silent in the cabin of the luxury behemoth. It was completely ungrateful to want more than she already had; it was downright spiteful to resent her friends' happiness. She sent a prayer of apology skyward, crossed herself automatically, and backed out of the narrow parking spot.

She was just unsettled because of all the unknowns in her life right now. The new client, the wedding venue. Once she got those things figured out, she'd be feeling like her old self once more.