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The Beaumont Children

SARAH M. ANDERSON

By Request

Sarah Anderson

The Beaumont Children: His Son, Her Secret

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Anderson S. M.

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A new generation of Beaumont's are finding love…His Son, Her SecretByron Beaumont has never been able to forget Leona Harper – or her betrayal. So when he becomes her new boss, he demands answers. Byron had trusted her, made love to her, but Leona kept her identity hidden. Yet what he gets is another surprise. Leona has hidden something – someone – else!Falling for Her Fake FiancéBusiness magnate Ethan Logan never fails. And if proposing to gorgeous redhead Francis Beaumont seals the deal on his latest takeover, he'll do it. It's the perfect plan – until Ethan realises he wants her for more than just business…His Illegitimate HeirZeb Richards is Beaumont by blood and he will take back what's rightfully his, even if that means dealing with Casey Johnson. She's fiery, insubordinate and opinionated – until one night of wild abandon shifts the balance of power. But their passionate night has consequences…

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The Beaumont Children
His Son, Her Secret
Sarah M. Anderson
Falling For Her Fake Fiancé
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His Illegitimate Heir
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SARAH M. ANDERSON may live east of the Mississippi River, but her heart lies out West on the Great Plains. Sarah#s book *A Man of Privilege* won an RT Reviewers' Choice Best Book Award in 2012.

Sarah spends her days having conversations with imaginary cowboys and American Indians. Find out more about Sarah#s love of cowboys and Indians at www.sarahmanderson.com and sign up for the newrelease newsletter at www.eepurl.com/nv39b.

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His Son, Her Secret

Sarah M. Anderson

To Joelle Charbonneau and Blythe Gifford, who took me under their wings when I was new and clueless, held my hands when I stumbled, and who even became friends wibth my mom. Thank you for being guides on my journey, ladies!

One

"This place is a dump," Byron Beaumont announced. His words echoed off the stone walls, making the submerged space sound haunted.

"Don't see it as it is," his older brother Matthew said through the speaker in Byron's phone. It was much easier for Matthew to call this one in, rather than make the long journey to Denver from California, where he was happily living in sin. "See it as what it will be."

Byron did another slow turn, inspecting the extent of the neglect as he tried not to think about Matthew—or any of his older brothers—being happily engaged or married. The Beaumonts hadn't been, until recently, the marrying kind.

Yet it hadn't been so long ago that he'd thought *he* was the marrying kind. And then it had all blown up in his face. And while he'd been licking his wounds, his brothers—normally workaholics and playboys—had been pairing off with women who were, by all accounts, great for them.

Once again, Byron was the one who didn't conform to Beaumont expectations.

Forcibly, he turned his attention back to the space before him. The vaulted ceiling was arched, but the parts that weren't arched were quite low. Cobwebs dangled from everything, including the single bare lightbulb in the middle of the room, which cast deep shadows into the corners. The giant

pillars supporting the arches were evenly spaced, taking up a huge amount of the floor. Inches of dust coated the low half-moon windows at eye level. What Byron could see of the outside looked to be weeds. And the whole space smelled of mold.

"And what will it be? Razed, I hope."

"No," Byron's oldest half brother, Chadwick Beaumont, said. The word was crisp and authoritative, which was normal for Chadwick. However, the part where he lifted his daughter out of his wife's arms and onto his shoulders so she could see better was not. "This is underneath the brewery. It was originally a warehouse but we think you can do something better with it."

Byron snorted. Yeah, right.

Serena Beaumont, Chadwick's wife, stepped next to Byron so that Matthew could see her on the phone. "Percheron Drafts has had a great launch, thanks to Matthew's hard work. But we want this brewery to be more than just a craft beer."

"We want to hit the old company where it counts," Matthew said. "A large number of our former customers continue to be unhappy about how the Beaumont Brewery was sold away from our family. The bigger we can make Percheron Drafts, the better we can siphon off our old customers."

"And to do that," Serena went on in a sweet voice at direct odds with a discussion about corporate politics, "we need to offer our customers something they cannot get from Beaumont Brewery."

"Phillip is working with our graphic designer on incorporating his team of Percherons into all of the Percheron Draft marketing, but we have to be sensitive to trademark issues," Chadwick added.

"Exactly," Matthew agreed. "So our distinctive element can't be the horses, not yet."

Byron rolled his eyes. He should have brought his twin sister, Frances, so he would have someone to back him up. He was being steamrollered into something that seemed doomed from the start.

"You three have *got* to be kidding me. You want me to open a restaurant in this dungeon?" He looked around at the dust and the mildew. "No. It's not going to happen. This place is a dump. I can't cook in this environment and there's no way in hell I would expect anyone to eat here, either." He eyed the baby gurgling on Chadwick's shoulder. "In fact, I'm not sure any of us should be breathing this air without HazMat masks. When was the last time the doors were even opened?"

Matthew looked at Serena. "Did you show him the workroom?"

"No. I'll do that now." She walked toward a set of doors in the far back of the room. They were heavy wooden things on rusting hinges, wide enough a pair of Percheron horses could pull a wagon through them.

"I've got it, babe," Chadwick said as Serena struggled to get the huge latch lifted. "Here, hold Catherine," he said to Byron.

Suddenly, Byron had a baby in his arms. He almost dropped the phone as Catherine leaned back to look up at her uncle.

"Um, hey," Byron said nervously. He didn't know much of anything about babies in general or this baby in particular. All he knew was that she was Serena's daughter from a previous relationship and Chadwick had formally adopted her.

Catherine's face wrinkled in doubt at this new development. Byron didn't even know how old the little girl was. Six months? A year? He had no idea. He couldn't be sure he was even holding her right. However, he was becoming reasonably confident that this small human was about to start crying. Her face screwed up and she started to turn red.

"Um, Chadwick? Serena?"

Luckily, Chadwick got the doors open with a hideous squealing noise, which distracted the baby. Then Serena lifted Catherine out of Byron's arms. "Thanks," she said, as if Byron had done anything other than not drop the infant.

"You're welcome."

Matthew was laughing, Byron realized. “What?” he whispered at his brother.

“The look on your face...” Matthew appeared to be slapping his knee. “Man, have you ever even held a baby before?”

“I’m a chef—not a babysitter,” Byron hissed back. “Have you ever foamed truffle oil?”

Matthew held up his hands in surrender. “I give, I give. Besides, no one said that starting a restaurant would involve child care. You’re off the hook, baby-wise.”

“Byron?” Serena said. She waved him toward the doors. “Come see this.”

Unwillingly, Byron crossed the length of the dank room and walked up the sloping ramp to the workroom. What he saw almost took his breath away.

Instead of the dirt and decay that characterized the old warehouse, the workroom had been upgraded at some point in the past twenty years. Stainless-steel cabinets and countertops fit against the stone walls—but these walls had been painted white. The overhanging industrial lighting was harsh, but it kept the room from looking like a pit in hell. Some cobwebs hung here and there, but the contrast between this room and the other was stunning.

This, Byron thought, *had potential*.

“Now,” Matthew was saying as Byron looked at the copper pipes that led down into a sink that was almost three feet long, “as we understand it, the last people who used this brewery to brew beer upgraded the workroom. That’s where they experimented with ingredients in small batches.”

Byron walked over to the six-burner stove. It was a professional model. “It’s better,” he agreed. “But this isn’t equipped for restaurant service. I can’t cook on only six burners. It’s still a complete teardown. I’d still be starting from scratch.”

There was a pause, then Matthew said, “Isn’t that what you want?”

“What?”

“Yes, well,” Chadwick cleared his throat. “We thought that, with your being in Europe for over a year...”

“That you’d be more interested in a fresh start,” Serena finished diplomatically. “A place you could call your own. Where you call the shots.”

Byron stared at his family. “What are you talking about?” But the question was a dodge. He knew *exactly* what they were thinking.

That he’d had a job working for Rory McMaken in his flagship restaurant, Sauce, in Denver and that not only had Byron been thrown out of the place over what everyone thought were “creative differences” but that Byron had left the country and gone to France and then Spain because he couldn’t handle the flack McMaken had given him and the entire Beaumont family on his show on the Foodie TV network.

Too bad they didn’t know what had really happened.

Byron’s contact with his family had been intentionally limited over the past twelve months—his twin sister Frances notwithstanding. Nearly all of the family news had filtered down through Frances. That’s how Byron had learned that Chadwick had not only gotten divorced but had then also married his secretary and adopted her daughter. And that’s how Byron had learned Phillip was marrying his horse trainer. No doubt, Frances was the only reason anyone knew where Byron had been.

Still, Byron was touched by his family’s concern. He’d more or less gone off the grid to protect them from the fallout of his one great mistake—Leona Harper. Yet here they were, trying to convince him to return to Denver by giving him the blank slate he’d been trying to find.

Chadwick started to say something but paused and looked at his wife. Something unspoken passed between them. Just the sight of it stung Byron like lemon juice in a paper cut.

“You wouldn’t have to get independent financing,” Serena told Byron. “The up-front costs would be covered between the settlement you received from the sale of the Beaumont Brewery and the capital that Percheron Drafts can provide.”

"We bought the entire building outright," Chadwick added. "Rent would be next to nothing compared to what it would be in downtown Denver. The restaurant would have to cover its own utilities and payroll, but that's about it. You'd have near total financial freedom."

"And," Matthew chimed in, "you could do whatever you wanted. Whatever theme you wanted to build upon, whatever decorating scheme you wanted to use, whatever cuisine you wanted to serve—burgers and fries or foamed truffle oil or whatever. The only caveat would be that Percheron Drafts beer would be the primary focus of the beverage menu since the restaurant is in the basement of the brewery. Otherwise, you'd have carte blanche."

Byron looked from Chadwick to Serena to Matthew's face on the screen. "You guys really think this will sell beer?"

"I can give you a copy of the cost-benefit analysis I prepared," Serena said. Chadwick beamed at her, which was odd. The brother Byron remembered didn't beam a whole hell of a lot.

Byron could not believe he was considering this. He liked living in Madrid. His Spanish was improving and he liked working at El Gallio, the restaurant helmed by a chef who cared more about food and ingredients and people than his own brand name.

It'd been a year. A year of working his way up the food chain, from no-star restaurants to one-star Michelin establishments to El Gallio, a three-star restaurant—one of the highest-ranked places in the world. He had made a name for himself that had absolutely nothing to do with his father and the Beaumonts, and he was damned proud of that. Would he really give all that up to come home for good?

More than anything, he liked the near total anonymity of life in Europe. There, no one cared that he was a Beaumont or that he'd left the States under a swirling cloud of gossip. No one gave a damn what happened with the Beaumont Brewery or Percheron Drafts or what any of his siblings had done to make headlines that day.

No one thought about the long-running feud between the Beaumonts and the Harpers that had led to the forced sale of the Beaumont Brewery.

No one thought about Byron and Leona Harper.

And that was how he liked it.

Leona...

If he were going to move back home, he knew he'd have to confront her. They had unfinished business and not even a year in Europe could change that. He wanted to look her in the face and have her tell him *why*. That's all he wanted. Why had she lied to him for almost a year about who she really was? Why had she picked her family over him? Why had she thrown away everything they'd planned—everything he'd wanted to give her?

In the course of the past year, Byron had worked and worked and *worked* to forget her. He had to accept the fact that he might not ever forget her or her betrayal of him—of them. Fine. That was part of life. Everyone got their heart ripped out of their chest and handed to them at least once.

He didn't want her back. Why would he? So she and her father could try to destroy him all over again?

No, what he wanted was a little payback.

The question was how to go about it.

Then he remembered something. Before it'd all fallen so spectacularly apart, Leona had been in school for industrial design. They'd talked about the restaurant they'd open together, how she'd design it and he'd run it. A blank slate that was theirs and theirs alone.

It'd been a year. She might have a job or her own firm or whatever. If he hired her, she would work for him. She would have to do as he said. He could prove that she didn't have any power over him—that she couldn't hurt him. He was not the same naive boy who'd let love blind him while he worked for an egomaniac. *He* was a chef. *He* would have his own restaurant. *He* was his own boss. *He* was in charge.

He was a Beaumont, damn it. It was time to start acting like one.

"I can use whomever I want to do the interior design?"

"Of course," Chadwick and Matthew said at the same time.

Byron looked at the workroom and then through the doors to the dungeon of the old warehouse. "I cannot believe I'm even considering this," he muttered. He could go back to Spain, back to the new life he'd made for himself, free of his past.

Except...

He would never be free of his past, not really. And he was done hiding.

He looked at his brothers and Serena, each hopeful that he would come back into the family fold.

This was a mistake. But then, when it came to Leona, Byron would probably always make the worst choice.

"I'll do it."

* * *

"Leona?" May's voice came through the speaker on her phone.

Leona hurriedly picked up before her boss, Marvin Lutefisk, head of Lutefisk Design, could hear the personal call. "I'm here. What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Percy's a little fussy. I think he might have another ear infection."

Leona sighed. "Do we still have some drops from the last round?" She could hardly afford another hundred-dollar trip to the doctor, who would look at Percy's ears for three seconds and write a prescription.

But the other option wasn't much better. If Percy got three—now two—more ear infections, they would have to talk about putting tubes in his ears, and even that minor outpatient surgery was far beyond Leona's budget.

"A little bit..." May sounded unconvincing.

"I'll...get some more," Leona announced. Maybe she could sweet-talk the nurses into a free sample?

Just like she'd done nearly every single day since Percy's birth, Leona thought about how different things would be if Byron Beaumont were still in her life. It wouldn't necessarily solve her health care issues, but her little sister May treated Leona as if she had the means to fix any problem, anytime.

Just once Leona wanted to lean on someone, instead of being the one who took all the weight.

But daydreaming about what might have been didn't pay the bills, so she told May, "Listen, I'm still at work. If he gets too bad, call the pediatrician. I can take him in tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay. You'll be home for dinner, right? I have class tonight, don't forget."

"I won't." Just then, her boss walked past her cubicle. "Gotta go," she whispered and hung up.

"Leona," Marvin said in his nasal tone. Unconsciously, he reached up and patted his comb-over back into position. "Busy?"

Leona put on her best smile. "Just finishing up a client phone call, Mr. Lutefisk. What's up?"

Marvin smiled encouragingly, his eyes beaming at her through thick lenses. He really wasn't a bad boss—that she knew. Marvin was giving her a chance to be someone other than Leon Harper's daughter, and that was all she could ask. That and the chance to get her foot in the door of industrial design. Leona had always dreamed of designing restaurants and bars—public spaces where form and function blended with a practical application of art and design. She hadn't really planned on doing storefronts for malls and the like, but everyone had to start somewhere.

"We've had an inquiry," Marvin said. "For a new brewpub on the south side of the city." Marvin tilted his head to the side and gave her a look. "We don't normally do this sort of thing here at Lutefisk Design but the caller asked for you specifically."

A trill of excitement coursed through her. A restaurant? And they'd asked for *her* by name? This was good. Great, even. But Leona remembered who she was talking to. "Are you comfortable with me being the primary on this one? If you'd rather handle it yourself, I'd be happy to assist."

It hurt to make the offer. If she was the primary designer instead of the assistant, she'd get a much bigger percentage of the commission and that could be more than enough to cover Percy's medical costs. She could pay off some of May's student loans and...

She couldn't get ahead of herself. Marvin was very particular about the level of involvement his assistants engaged in.

"Well..." Marvin pushed his glasses up. "The caller was very specific. He requested you."

"Really? I mean, that's great," Leona said, trying to keep her cool. How had this happened? Maybe that last job for an upscale boutique on the Sixteenth Street Mall? The owner had been thrilled with the changes Leona had made to Marvin's plan. Maybe that's where the reference came from?

"But he wants you to survey the site today. This afternoon. Do you have time?"

She almost said *hell, yes!* But she managed to slam the brakes on her mouth. Years of trying to keep her father happy when he was in one of his moods had trained her to say exactly what a man in a position of authority needed to hear. "I need to finish up the paperwork for that stationery store..."

Marvin waved this away. "That will keep. Go on—see if this is a job worth taking. Charlene has the address."

"Thank you." Leona gathered up her tablet computer—one of her true luxuries—and grabbed her purse. She got the address from Charlene, the receptionist, and hurried to the car.

A brewpub. One that was on the far south side of the city, she noted as she programmed the address into her Global Positioning System. There wasn't any other information to go with the address—like which brewery this was for—but that was probably a good sign. Instead of doing an upgrading project, maybe this would be a brand-new venture. That would not only mean more billable hours but the chance to make this project the showcase she'd need when she started her own firm.

The GPS estimated the pub's location was about forty minutes away. Leona called May and updated her on her whereabouts and then she hit the road.

Thirty-seven minutes later, Leona drove past a small sign that read Percheron Drafts as she turned into a driveway that led to a series of old brick buildings. She looked up at the tall smokestack in awe. White smoke puffed out lazily, but that was practically the only sign of life.

Percheron Drafts...why did that name sound familiar? She'd heard it somewhere, but she didn't actually drink beer. She was going to have to fake it for this meeting. She'd have time to do the research tonight.

The GPS guided her underneath a walkway, around the back of the building and told her to park on a gravel lot that had weeds growing everywhere. Ahead she saw a ramp that led down to an open door.

Okay, she thought as she turned the car off and grabbed her things. So maybe the building was old, but this certainly wasn't an already established restaurant. Heck, she didn't even see another car parked here. Was this the right place?

She got out and put on her professional smile. Then—like something out of a dream—a man walked through the doors and up the ramp. The sunlight caught the red in his hair and he smiled at her.

She knew that walk, that hair. She knew that smile—lopsided and warm and happy to see her.

Oh, God.

Byron.

Percheron Drafts... It suddenly clicked. That was the name of the brewery the Beaumont family had started after their family business had been sold—and she only knew about that because it was her father who'd forced the sale.

Panic kicked in. He was coming toward her, his lean legs closing the distance rapidly. If he got too close, he'd see the baby seat in the back of her car.

Her head began to swim. She wasn't ready for this. He'd walked out on her. He'd believed her father over her and simply disappeared—just like her father had said all Beaumont men did. Beaumonts took whatever woman they wanted and when they were done, they simply abandoned them—and kept the children.

She'd known she'd have to confront him eventually. But now? Right freaking *now*?

She wasn't ready. She hadn't lost all the baby weight and, as a result, she was wearing the only kind of business-casual attire she could afford—the kind from discount stores. She couldn't even be sure that Percy hadn't spit up on her blouse this morning.

When she'd imagined facing the man who'd broken her heart and abandoned her, she'd wanted to look her very best to make him physically hurt. She hadn't wanted to look like a rumpled single mother struggling to get by.

Even if he was the reason she was exactly that.

But she couldn't let him see into the back of the car. If he didn't know about Percy, she wasn't going to tell him until she'd had time to come up with a plan. Because what if he did the Beaumont thing and demanded her child? She could not lose her son. She couldn't let Byron raise the boy to be yet another Beaumont in the line of Beaumont men. She had to protect her baby.

So, against her better judgment, she walked toward him.

Oh, this wasn't fair. It just wasn't. Byron's hair had gotten a little longer and he wore it pulled back into a low ponytail, which took all of the natural curl out of it—except for one piece that had come free. His lanky frame had filled out a little, giving him a more muscular look that was positively sinful in the white button-up shirt he wore cuffed at the sleeves.

He looked good. Heck, he looked better than good. And she looked...dumpy. Damn it all.

They met in the middle of the parking lot, stopping less than two feet from each other. "Leona," he said in his deep baritone voice as he looked at her. His eyes were a deeper blue now—or maybe that was just the bright sun. God, he was *so* handsome.

She would not be swayed by his good looks. Those looks lied, just like he did.

"Byron," she replied. Because what else could she say here? *Where have you been? I had your son after you left me? I don't know if I want to kiss you or strangle you?*

This was no big deal, she tried to tell herself. It was just the former love of her life, the father of her son—suddenly back after a year's absence. And apparently hiring her for a job. A flash of anger gave her strength. If he was back, why hadn't he just called her? Why did he have to hire her?

Unless...he hadn't come back for her.

He'd left without her, after all, jetting off to Europe. That'd been as much information as Leona had been able to get out of Byron's twin sister, Frances. Europe—as far away from Leona as he could get without leaving the planet. Or so it had felt.

And now he was back and hiring her. For a job she desperately needed. This was not him sweeping back into her life and making everything right. This was not him needing her.

So she did not flinch as he looked her up and down as if he expected her to fall into his arms and tell him how damned much she'd missed him. She would not give him the satisfaction. Yes, the past year had been the hardest year of her life. But she wasn't the same silly little girl who believed love would somehow conquer all. The past year had shown her how tough she could be. It was time for Byron to realize the same thing.

But it was difficult to keep her head up as his gaze traveled over her. He'd always done that—looked at her as though she was the most beautiful woman on the planet. Even when they'd worked together at that restaurant and the cream of the high-society crop had come into the restaurant every single night—even when other women had thrown themselves at his Beaumont name—Byron had always had eyes only for *her*.

She shivered at the memory of the way he used to look at her—at the way he was looking at her right now.

"You cut your hair," he noted.

Her mouth opened, the truth on the tip of her tongue—she'd cut it because Percy liked to yank it while he was nursing. She clamped down on that impulse. The words sat in the back of her throat, a lead weight that held her tongue still. She would give him absolutely nothing to use against her. She would not let him hurt her again.

"I like it," he hurried to add when she couldn't think of a single reasonable thing to say in response.

She blushed at the compliment. Her fingers itched to tuck the short bob behind her ears, but she held fast to the straps of her bag. She was not here for Byron, just like he hadn't been there for her. She was here to do a job and that was final. "Do you really need an interior designer or did you call me away from my job just to note I've changed my style?" *Since you left.*

She didn't say those last words out loud, but they seemed to hang in between them anyway.

Byron took another step toward her. He reached up. Leona held her breath as he trailed the very tips of his fingers over her cheek. It was almost as if he couldn't believe she was really here, either.

Then he reached down and picked up her left hand. His thumb rubbed over her ring finger—her bare ring finger. "Leona..." he murmured, his voice husky with what she recognized as need. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Everything about her body tightened at the sound of her name from his mouth, his lips on her hand—tightened so much that she had to close her eyes because if she looked into the depths of Byron's beautiful blue eyes for one second longer, she'd be lost all over again.

It'd always been this way. There'd been something about Byron Beaumont that had pulled her in from the very beginning—something that should have sent her running the other way.

After all, her father had been drumming his hatred of all things Beaumont into her head for as long as she could remember. She knew all about Hardwick Beaumont, her father's nemesis, and his heirs. How the Beaumonts were dangerous, how they seduced young and innocent women and then cast them aside as if they were nothing.

Just as Leona had been seduced and cast aside.

So she did not give. She ignored her body's reaction to Byron, ignored the old memories that the mere touch of his lips brought rushing back to her. She kept her eyes closed and her focus on the job.

The job she needed because she was raising Byron's son on her own. A son he did not know about.

She needed to tell him.

But she couldn't. Not yet. Not until she figured out what he was doing here. Not until she knew where she stood with him. She was no longer young and innocent and she was not someone who would forget a year's worth of heartache and loneliness with the whisper of her name, thank you very much.

God, what a mess.

A tense second passed between them and then Byron dropped her hand. She felt him step away from her and only then did she open her eyes.

He now stood several feet away, looking at her differently—harder, meaner almost.

Another flash of panic hit her—did he already know about Percy? Or was he just mad that she wasn't falling at her feet in gratitude for being acknowledged?

"I need a designer," he said quietly. He didn't sound angry, which was at direct odds with the way he was looking at her. "I'm going to be opening up my own restaurant."

"Here?"

"Here," he agreed, sounding resigned to it. "It's a massive job and I—" she saw him swallow "—I wanted to see if it was the kind of thing you were still interested it."

"You're going to stay in Denver?" The question came out with more of an edge than she meant it to, but that was the thing she needed to know. If he were going to stay in Denver, then...

Then he'd have to know about Percy. They'd have to figure something out, something involving child support and visitation and...

Well, not their relationship. There was no relationship. That part of her life was over now.

And if he were opening up his own restaurant—her mind spun around the facts. Her father, Leon Harper, would find out that Byron had come home.

Oh, *God*. Her father would get out his old axes and grind them all over again. Her father would shove his way back into her life, ignoring all the ways she had tried to extricate herself from her parents. Her father would do everything he could to destroy Byron—again.

Her father would do everything to punish *her* again.

"Yes," Byron said, turning away from her and looking up at the old buildings. "I've come home."

Two

Byron walked into the darkened room that, somehow, would become a restaurant. Somehow. "Here we are. The dungeon."

Behind him, he heard Leona cough lightly. "Is that the theme you're working with?"

"No."

What the hell was he doing? Touching her face? Kissing her hand? That was not part of his plan. His plan was to hire her, get his restaurant going and kick her right back out of his life—this time, on his terms. She hadn't needed him. He didn't need her. Except for design purposes.

But that's not what had happened because something as simple as seeing Leona Harper again—and seeing that she wasn't wearing a wedding ring—had blown all to hell his simple plan to get simple answers.

There was nothing simple about Leona. A fact she'd made abundantly clear when she'd closed her eyes—when she'd refused to even look at him.

"Pity," she sniffed. "You wouldn't have to change a thing."

He grinned in spite of himself. Leona had always been something of a contradiction. She was, in general, a quiet woman who avoided confrontation. But when she'd been alone with him, she'd let out the real her—snarky and sarcastic with a biting observation ready at all times. She'd made him laugh—him. He'd thought he was too jaded, too cynical to laugh anymore, to feel much of anything anymore. But he'd laughed with her. He'd had all these feelings with her. For her.

He'd loved her. Or thought he had. But maybe that'd all been part of the trick, a Harper trapping a Beaumont. She hadn't told him who she was, after all, until it was too late.

"So if you're not going with torture chamber," she went on, "what do you want?"

"Whatever."

"Be serious, Byron." If he hadn't been looking at her, he wouldn't have seen the tiny stamp of her foot that set off eddies of dust.

He paused. "I am being serious. You can do whatever you want. I can cook what I want. The only caveat is that the beverage menu has to feature our beer. The restaurant can be whatever it wants."

Clutching her tablet to her chest, she gave him a long look that he couldn't quite make out in the dim light. "You have to have some idea of what you're interested in," she finally said in a soft voice.

"I do. I've always known what I wanted." He turned away from her. This was a bad idea. But then again, it was Leona—she'd always been a bad idea. "But I'm used to not getting it."

She gasped, but he kept walking back toward the soon-to-be-kitchen. He couldn't let her get under his skin. He never should have asked her here. He was safer in Spain, where she was nothing but a memory—not a flesh and blood woman who would always push him past the point of reason.

The reasonable thing to do was to keep as much space between the Beaumonts and the Harpers as possible. That's the way it'd always been, before he'd unwittingly crossed that line. That's the way it should have stayed.

He dragged open the doors to the workroom and flipped on all the lights. "This needs to be upgraded considerably," he said. He couldn't fix the past, couldn't undo his great mistake. But he

could stop making it over again. He just had to focus on the job—it was the reason they were both here. He needed to find a way to be Byron Beaumont in a place where his last name permanently branded him, and he needed to make sure that Leona Harper knew she would never exert any power over him ever again.

She followed him into the cleaner space. “I see.” She took several pictures with her tablet. “Do you have a menu yet?”

“No. I only agreed to do this yesterday. I thought I’d be on my way back to Madrid by now.”

“Madrid? Is *that* where you went?”

Of course she wouldn’t know. She probably hadn’t bothered to look him up at all.

But there was something in the way she said it—as if she couldn’t believe that was the answer—that made him turn back to her. She stared at him with big eyes and this time, there was no hiding that look. She was stunned—confused? She was hurt.

Well, that made two of them “Yes. Well, I spent six months in France first. Then Spain.”

Her eyes cut down to his left hand—his ring finger. “Did you...”

He tensed. “No. I was working.”

She exhaled. “Ah.” But that was all she said. He was about to turn away when she added, “Where did you work?”

“George, you remember him?”

“Your father’s old chef?”

For some reason, the fact that she remembered who George was made Byron relax a little. It wasn’t like she’d forgotten him. Not entirely, anyway. “Yes. One of his old friends from Le Cordon Bleu gave me a job in Paris. Then I heard about an opening at El Gallio in Madrid and took the job.”

Her eyes widened again. “You were at El Gallio? That’s a three-star restaurant!”

He relaxed more. She remembered. Even though her reaction was probably all part of the same ruse to undermine the Beaumont family, he couldn’t help himself.

For months, he and Leona had talked about restaurants—how they’d love to travel and dine at the world’s best establishments and then open up their own. She’d design everything and Byron would handle the food, and it’d be so much better than working for Rory McMaken, the egotistical bastard.

Leona spoke, pulling him out of the past. “You’re leaving behind El Gallio to open your own restaurant *here*?”

“Crazy, right?” He looked around the workroom. “Don’t get me wrong. I loved Europe. No one there knew or cared that I was a Beaumont. I could just be Byron, a chef. That was...” *Freeing.*

He’d been free of the family drama, free of the long-standing feud between the Beaumonts and the Harpers.

“That must have been amazing,” she said in a wistful tone. Which was so at odds with how he remembered the way things had gone down that he turned back to her in surprise.

“Yeah. I wasn’t sure I wanted to come back to all of this. But this is an opportunity I can’t pass up. It’s a chance to be a part of the family business on my terms.”

“I see. So you’ve decided to be a Beaumont, then.” Her voice was quiet, as if he’d somehow confirmed her worst fears.

He would not let her get away with using guilt on him. Guilt? For what? He was the injured party here. She’d lied about who she was—not once, but for almost a year. And then she’d cast him aside the moment her father asked her to. Hell, for all he knew, that had always been the plan. It’d only been after he’d left the country that Leon Harper had managed to sell the Beaumont Brewery out from under the Beaumonts. Maybe he’d told Leona to split one of them off—divide and then conquer.

Right. If anyone should be feeling guilty here, it was her. He’d never lied about his last name or his family. He’d never made promises and then broken them. Thank God he hadn’t actually asked her to marry him before she betrayed him.

“I’ve always been a Beaumont,” he answered decisively. “And we are not to be trifled with.”

He shouldn't have said that last bit, but he couldn't help it. He was the boss here. She worked for him. Emotionally, he didn't need her. If she was getting any ideas about turning the tables on him, she'd best forget them now.

She looked away.

"Anyway," he went on, focusing on the job. *His* restaurant. "I'm starting from scratch and I wanted..." Unexpectedly, his words dried up. He wanted so much, but like he'd said, he'd gotten used to disappointment. "I know there was a time in our past when we talked about a restaurant."

Even though she was studying the tips of her shoes very closely, he still saw her eyes close.

He remembered that look of defeat—he'd only seen it one other time—when her father, Leon Harper himself, had shown up at Sauce and gotten Byron fired and demanded that Leona come home with her parents right now or else. Leona had looked at the ground and closed her eyes and Byron had said "babe" and...

Well. And here they were.

"If you don't want the job, that's fine. I know that Harpers and Beaumonts don't work well together and I wouldn't want to make your father mad." He didn't quite manage to say *father* without sneering.

He watched her chest rise and fall with a deep breath. "I want..."

Her words were so quiet that he couldn't hear her. He stepped in closer and took a deep breath.

Which was a mistake. The scent of Leona—sweet and soft, roses and vanilla—was all it took to transport him to another time and place, before he'd realized that she wasn't just someone with the last name of Harper, but one of *those* Harpers.

He leaned forward, unable to stop himself. He'd never been able to stay away from her, not from the first moment she'd been hired at Sauce as a hostess. "What do you want, Leona?"

"I need to tell you..." Her words were still little more than a whisper.

He touched her then, which was another mistake. But she took what control he had and blew it to bits. He cupped her face in his hand and lifted her chin until he could look into her hazel eyes. "What do you need?"

Her eyes widened again as his face moved within inches of hers, and she exhaled, something that sounded a hell of a lot like satisfaction. His gut clenched. Despite her lies and betrayal, the messy ending to their relationship and the long year on a different continent—despite it all—he wanted her.

"The job," she said in a voice that didn't even make it to a whisper. "I need the job, Byron."

She didn't kiss him, didn't tell him she was so sorry she'd picked her family over him. At no point did she apologize for lying to him. She just stood there.

"Right, right." She couldn't be clearer. She was here for the job.

Not for him.

* * *

Her heart pounded and she wasn't sure she was still breathing.

Byron had dropped his hand and turned back to the stove, leaving her in a state of paralysis.

If he was going to stay in Denver, he had to know and the longer she didn't tell him—well, that would just make everything worse.

Somehow. She wasn't sure how things could get much worse, frankly. Byron hiring her to design a restaurant—and then switching between unbridled lust and a cold shoulder?

That thought made her angry. Why did he have to hire her to see her? He could have called. Sent a text.

The anger felt good. It gave her back some power. She was not a helpless girl at the mercies of the men in her life, not anymore. She'd gotten away from her father and had a son and done just fine without Byron. So what if all he had to do was look at her and her knees turned to jelly? Didn't matter. He'd left her behind. She was only here for the paycheck. Not for him.

She could not tell him about Percy, not when she couldn't be sure what version of Byron she would get. She'd spent the past year carving out a life that made her as happy as possible—a job she liked and a family she loved, with May and Percy. She'd spent a whole year free to make her own choices and live her own life. She'd stopped being Leon Harper's wayward oldest daughter, and she'd stopped dreaming of being Byron Beaumont's wife. She was just Leona Harper and that was a good thing.

Now she had to remember that.

"Well," she started, then cleared her throat to get her voice working properly. "I guess what I need is a menu. It doesn't have to be specific, but are you going to serve burgers and fries or haute cuisine or what? That will guide the rest of the design choices."

"Something in the middle," he replied quickly. "Accessible food and beer, but better than burgers and fries. You can get that anywhere. I want this to be a different kind of restaurant—not about me, but about the meal. The experience." He looked out at the depressing room that she was somehow going to transform into a dining hall. "A different experience than *this*," he added with a shake of his head.

"Okay, that's a good start. What else?"

"Fusion," he added. "I was cooking things in Europe that I didn't cook here. Locally sourced ingredients, advanced techniques—the whole nine yards."

She took notes on her tablet. "Any ideas for the actual menu items?"

"A few."

She waited for him to elaborate, but when he didn't, she looked up again. "Such as?"

He didn't look at her. "Why don't you come by the house tomorrow and I'll make you a tasting menu? You can tell me what might work and what doesn't."

She should say no. She should insist that their interactions be limited to this dank building. "The house?"

"The Beaumont Mansion. I'm staying there until I get my own place." He pivoted and fixed her with a look that she'd always been powerless to resist. "If you can tolerate being in the lair of the Beaumonts, that is."

"I tolerate you, don't I?" she snapped back. She would not allow him to make her the bad guy, and she would not let him paint her as the coward. He was the one who'd run off. She was the one who'd stayed and dealt with the fallout.

She didn't know how she'd expected him to respond, but that lazy smile? That wasn't it. "Shall we say six, then?"

Leona mentally ran through her calendar. May had class tonight—but tomorrow night she should be able to stay with Percy.

"Who else will be home?" Because no matter what had happened between Leona and Byron, that didn't change the larger fact that the Beaumonts and the Harpers got on much worse than oil and water ever had.

He shrugged. "Chadwick and his family live there full-time, but they eat on their own schedule. Frances just moved back in, but she's rarely home. A couple of my younger half siblings are still there—but again, everyone's on their own schedule. Should be just us."

For a brief, insane second, she entertained the notion of bringing Percy with her. But the moment the thought occurred to her, she dismissed it. The Beaumonts were notorious for keeping the children from broken relationships. That's what her father had always told her—Hardwick Beaumont always got rid of the women and kept the babies, never letting the children see their mothers again. That's what Byron had said happened to him and his siblings. It wasn't until later in his life that he'd gotten to know his mother.

At the time, that story had broken her heart for him. He'd been a lost little boy in a cold, unloving house. But now she knew better. He hadn't been looking for sympathy.

He'd been warning her. And she was more the fool for not realizing it until it was too late.

She was done being the fool. No, she would not bring Percy. Not until she had a better grasp on Byron's reaction to the idea of having a five-month-old son. Not until she knew if he would decree that the boy would be better off a Beaumont instead of a Harper.

Byron had to know about his child eventually, but she could *not* lose her son.

"All right," she finally said. "Dinner tomorrow night at six. I'll draft a few ideas and you can provide feedback." Her phone chimed—it was a text from May, reminding Leona about her class tonight. "Anything else?"

The question hung in the air like the cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Byron looked at her with such longing that she almost weakened.

Then the look shifted and anything warm or welcoming was gone and all that was left was an iciness she hadn't seen before. It chilled her to the bone.

"No," he said, his voice freezing. "There's nothing else I need from you."

That was an answer, all right.

But not the one she wanted to hear.

Three

"Your sauce is going to burn."

This simple observation from George made Byron jump. "Damn." He hurried over to reduce the heat under the saucepan, mentally kicking himself for making a rookie mistake.

George Jackson chuckled from his perch on a stool—the same place he'd been sitting for the past thirty-five years. Mothers and stepmothers came and went, more children showed up—being a Beaumont meant living in a constant state of uncertainty. Except for the kitchen. Except for George. Sure, his brown skin was more wrinkled and, yes, more of his hair was white than not. But otherwise, he was the same man—one of the very few, black or white, who didn't take crap from any Beaumont. Not even Hardwick. Maybe that's why Hardwick had kept George around and why Chadwick had kept him on after Hardwick's death. George was constant and honest.

Like right now. "Boy, you're a wreck."

"I'm fine," Byron lied. Which was pointless because George knew him far too well to buy that line.

George shook his head. "Why are you trying so hard to impress this girl? I thought she was the whole reason you left town."

"I'm not," Byron said, stirring the scalded sauce. "We're working together. She's designing the restaurant. I'm preparing food that might be on the menu in said restaurant. That's not trying to impress her."

George chuckled again. "Yeah, sure it's not. You Beaumont men are all alike," he added under his breath.

"I am absolutely not like my father and you know it," Byron shot off, checking the roast in the oven. "I've never married anyone, much less a string of people, and I certainly don't have any kids running around."

George snorted at this. "Be that as it may, you're exactly like your old man. Even like Chadwick, sitting up there with his second wife. None of you all could be honest with yourselves when it came to women." He seemed to reconsider this statement. "Well, maybe not Chadwick this time. Miss Serena is different. Hope your brother doesn't screw it up. But my point is, you all are fools."

"Thanks, George," Byron replied sarcastically. "That means a lot, coming from you."

From a long way away, the doorbell rang. "Watch the sauce," Byron said as he hurried out of the kitchen.

The Beaumont Mansion was a huge building that had been built by his grandfather, John Beaumont, after prohibition and after World War II, when beer had been legal and soldiers had come home to drink it. The Beaumont Brewery had barely managed to stay afloat for twenty years, and

then suddenly John had been making money faster than he could count it. He'd built several new buildings on the brewery campus as well as the mansion, a 15,000 square-foot pile of brick designed to show up the older mansions of the silver barons. The mansion had turrets and stained glass and gargoyles, for God's sake. Nothing was ever over-the-top to a Beaumont, apparently.

Byron had always hated this house, the way it made people act. The house was toxic with the ghosts of John and Hardwick. This was not a house that had known happiness. He couldn't understand why Chadwick insisted on raising his family here.

Byron hadn't even bothered to unpack the rest of his stuff because he wasn't going to be here long enough to settle in. He'd get a nice apartment with a good kitchen close to the Percheron Drafts brewery and that'd be fine. In the meantime, he'd spend as much time in the one room that had always been free from drama and grief—the kitchen.

He almost ran into Chadwick, who was coming downstairs to answer the door. "I've got it," Byron said, sidestepping his oldest brother.

Chadwick made no move to go back upstairs. "Expecting company?"

"It's the interior designer," Byron replied, happy to have that truth to hide behind. "I've prepared a sampling of dishes for her so we can build the theme of the restaurant around them."

"Ah, good." Chadwick looked at him, that stern look that always made Byron feel as though he wasn't measuring up. "Anything else I should know?"

Byron froze and the doorbell rang again. "George is making apple cobbler for dessert tonight," he said.

Then—weirdly—Chadwick smiled. It wasn't something Byron remembered happening when they were growing up. Back then, Chadwick had been imposing and their father's clear favorite, and Byron had been the irritating little brother who liked to play in the kitchen.

"If you need another opinion, let me know," Chadwick said, turning to head back upstairs. But that was all. No judgments, no cutting words—not even a dismissive glance.

"Yeah, will do," Byron said, waiting until Chadwick had disappeared before he opened the door.

There stood Leona. Something in his chest eased. It wasn't as if she was dressed to kill—in fact, she looked quite businesslike with a coordinating skirt and jacket. For the first time, he realized how much she'd changed in the past year—something that went much deeper than just her hair. *Maybe*, an insidious voice in his head whispered, *she's moved on and you haven't.*

Perhaps that was true. But there was no missing the fact that he was glad to see her. He should hate her and all the Harpers. Not a one of them were to be trusted.

He needed to remember that. "Hi. Come in."

She paused. Despite their year-long relationship, he'd never once brought her back to the mansion nor had she ever asked to visit. That had been part of what had attracted him to her—she had no interest in the trappings of Beaumont wealth and fame.

He hadn't realized her disinterest was because she had her own money. Maybe George had been right. Byron *was* a fool.

"Thank you." She stepped into the house and he closed the door behind her. "Oh," she said, staring up at the vaulted ceilings and crystal chandeliers. "This is lovely."

"Not my style," he admitted. "This way."

He led her down the wide hallway that bisected the first floor, past the formal dining room, the receiving room, the men's parlor, the women's parlor and the library. Finally, they reached the hallway that led around the back of the dining room and down the six steps to the kitchen.

The whole time, they walked silently. Byron didn't know much about the Harper house—it wasn't as if Leon Harper would invite him over—but he was sure this level of wealth wasn't unfamiliar to Leona and he had no desire to rehash old memories of his parents slamming doors after yet another disastrous meal.

Byron opened the door to the kitchen. "Here we are," he said, holding the door for Leona.

She stepped into the warm room. Early-evening sunlight glinted through the windows set above the countertop. The room had an impressive view of the Rocky Mountains. The light reflected off the rows of copper pots and pans that hung from racks, bathing the room in comfortable warmth.

Leona gasped. “This is *beautiful*.” She looked at him, her eyes full of understanding, and in that moment, he nearly forgot how she’d lied and broken his heart. This was *his* Leona, the one he’d shared his deepest thoughts and feelings with. “Oh, Byron...”

“And George,” George said, straightening from where he’d bent over to check the oven.

“Oh!” Leona took a step back in surprise and ran right into Byron. Instinctively, his arm went around her waist, steadying her—and pulling her into his chest. Heat—and maybe something more—flowed between them and he suddenly had to fight the urge to press his lips against the base of her neck, in the spot where she’d always loved to be kissed.

She pulled away from him. “George! I’ve heard so much about you! It’s wonderful to finally meet you in person.”

Then, to Byron’s surprise—and George’s, given his expression—Leona walked right up to the older man and hugged him.

“Yeah,” George said in shock, shooting Byron a look. “I’ve heard—well,” he quickly corrected when Byron shook his head. “It’s good to finally meet you, too.”

Byron exhaled in relief. George was the only person who knew the entire story about Leona—he hadn’t even told Frances the whole thing. God only knew what the older man might have said to Leona.

“George is advising on the menu,” Byron told her when she finally released George from the hug. “He’ll be dining with us tonight.”

“Oh. Okay.” For some reason, Leona looked...disappointed?

Had she been thinking this would be an intimate dinner for two? She wasn’t dressed for it—she looked as though she’d come directly from work. There would be no hot dates. Not now, not at any time in the future. If that’s what she was angling for, she was in for a surprise.

A timer went off and Byron pushed that thought from his mind. He had food to prepare, after all. “This is going to be a tapas-style meal—all small plates,” he explained, directing Leona to a stool across from George’s normal perch. “Chadwick has all the current Percheron Drafts in stock so we can pair them up.” He opened up one of the three refrigerators in the room, the one with all the beverages. “Which would you like to start with?”

Leona blinked at him. “I don’t drink.”

He stared at her. This was a new development. They’d always shared wine with a meal. Odd. “All right,” he said slowly, snagging a White Horse Pale Ale for himself. “Then I’ll get you some water.”

Then he got to work. He plated the braised lamb shoulder, the *croquetas de jamón serrano*, the coq au vin, the ratatouille, the herb-crusted swordfish and the duck confit. He ladled the vichyssoise soup into a small bowl, and did the same with the bowl of Castilian roasted garlic soup and the gazpacho. George sliced the French bread and the homemade root vegetable chips fried in truffle oil.

Leona took a picture of every dish and made notes as Byron explained what the dishes were. “I don’t know if I should have a hamburger and fries on the menu,” he told her as he spooned the hollandaise sauce onto the asparagus spears. “What do you think?”

“It’s a safe dish,” she replied. “If you can handle having it on the menu...”

Byron sighed. “Yeah, yeah. Food for the masses and all that.”

They all sat down. Leona looked at him. Was she blushing? “It’s been a long time since you cooked for me.”

Before Byron could come up with a response, George said, “Yeah, same here.” He took a bite of the duck confit. “I’ll give you this, boy. You’ve gotten better.”

“Oh?” Leona said.

"When he started in my kitchen," George went on, "he could barely make cereal."

"Hey! I was what—five?"

"Four," George corrected him. He turned his attention back to Leona. "He wanted more cookies and I told him he had to work for them—he had to wash dishes."

Leona beamed at George. Then she shot a reproving glance at Byron. "He never told me that."

"Oh, he didn't do it at first. But the boy always had a weak spot for my chocolate chip cookies. He came back a few weeks later, after..." George trailed off thoughtfully.

Byron knew what the older man was thinking about—that Byron's parents had fought horribly at dinner, screaming obscenities and throwing dishes. A plate had nearly hit Chadwick in the head and Byron and Frances had ducked to avoid flying soup. He and Frances had been crying and their father had yelled at them.

Byron had run away from the noise. Frances had come with him and they'd wound up in the kitchen. It was the safest place he could think of, somewhere his father would never go. Frances had no interest in working for a cookie and a glass of warm milk, but Byron had needed...something. Anything that would take him away from the stress and drama, although that's not how he'd thought of it at the time. No, at the time, he'd just wanted to feel like everything was going to be okay.

Washing the dishes required enough focus that it had distracted him from what he'd seen at dinner. And then he'd gotten a cookie and a pat on the shoulder and George had told him he'd done a good job and next time George would show him how to bake the cookies himself. And that had made everything okay.

"I washed the dishes," he told Leona. "The cookies were worth it."

"You did an absolutely lousy job, I might add," George said with a chuckle.

Byron groaned. "I got better. Here, try the gazpacho." He ladled a few spoonfuls into Leona's bowl. "It's not quite as good as it was in Spain—the peppers aren't as fresh."

George scoffed as Leona tasted the soup. "Boy, don't tell them what they don't know. She never had the stuff you were making in Madrid."

"Mmm," Leona said, licking her spoon. Byron found himself staring at her mouth as her tongue moved slowly over the surface of the spoon. She caught him looking and dropped her gaze. He swore she was blushing as she cleared her throat and said, "He's right. As long as we can say 'locally sourced ingredients'—preferably with the name of the farm where you get your vegetables—that's what foodies value."

"We can do that. There's enough space around the brewery that I could also have some dirt hauled in and grow my own herbs and the like."

Leona's eyes lit up. "Would you? That'd be a great selling feature."

Byron liked it when she looked at him like that, even though he knew damned well that he shouldn't. But sitting here with her, talking about a restaurant they were going to open within months...

He'd missed her. He'd never stopped missing her. And as much as he knew he couldn't let himself fall under her spell again—couldn't risk getting his heart broken a second time—he just wanted to wrap his arm around her shoulders and hold her to him.

She would burn him. That he knew. That was the nature of the Harpers whenever they were around the Beaumonts.

But watching her savor the meal he'd cooked for her, talking and laughing with George...

He wanted to play in the flames again.

Four

Everything was, unsurprisingly, delicious. Leona especially liked the *croquetas*—she'd never had them before. Yes, the evening was full of good food and comfortable conversation. It should have been relaxing—fun, even.

The only problem was, she still hadn't told Byron about Percy. And, as George regaled her with story after story of Byron learning how to cook the hard way, she couldn't figure out how to break the news to him without running the risk of losing Percy.

Byron served three desserts—an almond cake that was gluten-free, peaches soaked in wine and yogurt, and a flan flavored with vanilla and lavender. She looked at her notes. A vegetarian dish, gluten-free options—with the hamburger, he'd have a menu that met most dietary needs.

"You like peaches, right?" he said as he set half of a peach in front of her.

"I do," she told him. Seemingly against her will, she looked up at him. Byron stood over her, close enough that she could feel the warmth of his body. He remembered that peaches were her favorite. There'd been a time when he'd cooked for her, peach cobblers and grilled peaches and peach ice cream—anything he could come up with. Those had been things he'd made just for her.

"Thank you," she told him, her voice soft.

"I hope the wine sauce is okay." He didn't move back. "I didn't know..."

"It's all right." She used to drink wine, back when he'd make her dinner and pick out a bottle and they'd spend the evening savoring the food and the rest of the night savoring each other. But she hadn't drunk a thing while pregnant and then she'd been breast-feeding and pumping and who had the money for alcohol anyway?

He stood there for a moment longer. Leona held her breath, unable to break the gaze. All of her self-preservation tactics—clinging to the memory of being cast aside by a Beaumont, just like her father had warned her, and the very real fear that Byron would take her son away from her—they all fell away as she looked up at him. For a clear, beautiful second, there was only Leona and Byron and everything was as it should be.

The second ended when the door to the kitchen flew open with a bang. Byron jumped back. "George!" a bright female voice said. "Have you seen— Oh, *there* you are."

Leona looked over her shoulder and her heart sank. There stood Frances Beaumont in a stunning green dress and five-inch heels. "Byron, I have been texting you all...day..." Frances's voice trailed off as she saw Leona. They'd met a few times before. Frances had liked her then. But that felt like a long time ago.

Byron cleared his throat. "Frances, you remember—"

"Leona." Frances said the word as if it were something vile. Then she grabbed Byron by the arm and hauled him several feet away. "What is *she* doing here?" Frances added in a harsh whisper that everyone in the room had no trouble understanding.

Leona turned her gaze back to the luscious desserts. But her stomach felt as if a lead weight had settled into it.

"She's helping with the restaurant," Byron whispered back in a quieter voice.

"You're *trusting* her? Are you insane?" This time, Frances made no effort to lower her voice.

Leona stood. She did not have to sit here and take this assault on her character. Byron was the one who'd abandoned her, not the other way around. If anything, she shouldn't trust *him*. She didn't.

"I'll show myself out. George, it was a pleasure meeting you. Byron, I'll look over my notes and come up with some suggestions." She met Frances's glare as she gathered her things. "Frances."

"I'll walk you out," Byron offered, which made Frances hiss at him. But he ignored his twin and held the door for Leona.

"Good meeting you, too," George called out after her. "Come back anytime."

Which was followed by Frances gasping, "George! You're not helping..."

And then Leona and Byron were down the hall, the sounds of the kitchen fading behind them. They walked in silence through the massive entry hall. The evening had been, up to this point, an unmitigated disaster. Byron's cooking was amazing and, yes, George was just as sweet as she'd always pictured him.

But Byron had this habit of looking at her as if he wanted her, which didn't mesh with the otherwise icy shoulder he'd given her. He confused her and after everything he'd put her through, that seemed like the final insult.

She could not let him get to her, just like she couldn't let Frances's undisguised hatred get to her. Byron had left. He'd done exactly what his father had done and simply walked away. He didn't care for her—certainly not enough to fight for what they'd had.

She simply could not allow herself to care for him. It was not only dangerous to her heart, but also to Percy's well-being. She had to protect her son.

Thus resolved, she expected to say goodbye to Byron at the front door and call it a day. But Byron opened the door and stepped outside with her, pulling it shut behind her.

She walked past him, shivering in the chilly autumn air. She would not lean into him and let his warmth surround her. She did not need him. She did not want him. She could not let him ruin everything she'd worked so hard for and that was that.

Once the door was shut, he took a step into her. He wasn't touching her, not yet. "I'm sorry about Frances," he said in a quiet voice. "She can be a little...protective."

A part of Leona—the old part that cowered before her father—wanted to tell Byron it was all right and she'd smooth things over. But that part wasn't going to save her son. So she didn't. "Obviously." He looked confused, as if he couldn't guess that his sister would have been less than helpful in tracking Byron down. "I have no interest in reliving the past. That's not why I'm here."

She didn't know what she expected him to do—but lifting his hand and cupping her cheek like she'd said something sweet wasn't it. "Why are you here, then?"

"For the job." To her horror, Leona felt herself leaning forward, closer to his chest, to his mouth. "Byron..."

But before the words could leave her lips, a noise that sounded like a herd of elephants came through the door. Byron grabbed her by the arm and led her away. "I'll walk you to your car," he said.

As they walked, his hand slid down her arm until his fingers interlaced with hers. It wasn't a seductive gesture, but it warmed her anyway. He'd always held her hand whenever they were alone, whether they were watching a movie or watching the sun set over the mountains. She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked. If only things had been different. If only...

She jerked to a stop less than five feet from her car. And the telltale car seat in the back.

"What?" Byron asked.

"I just..." She fumbled around for something to say and came up with nothing.

So she did the only thing she could think of to distract him.

She kissed him.

It wasn't supposed to be sexual, not for her. It was supposed to distract him while it bought her enough time to think of a better exit strategy.

But the feeling of Byron against her drove all rational thought from her mind. She melted into him. His hands settled on her waist and, as the kiss deepened, the pads of his fingertips began to dig into her hips. He pulled her into him. Her bag dropped to the ground as she looped her arms around his neck and held him tight.

She hadn't allowed herself to think about this, about how he used to make her feel. She'd made herself focus on how much she hated him, hated how he'd abandoned her—she hadn't allowed herself to remember the good parts.

Heat flooded her body and pooled low in her stomach as she opened her mouth for him. She wanted this, wanted him. She couldn't help it. She'd never been able to stay away from him. Some things never changed.

"I missed you," he whispered against her neck before he kissed the spot right under her ear.

Her knees wobbled. "Oh, Byron, I missed you, too. I—"

Suddenly, he pulled away from her so fast that she stumbled forward. His hand went around her waist to catch her, but his attention was focused on something behind her.

The car.

"What's that?" he demanded, taking a step toward the backseat of the car.

"What?" Again, her voice was wobbly. Everything about her was wobbly because this was the official moment of reckoning.

"That's a baby seat." He let go of her. "You have a baby seat in the back of your car." This statement seemed to force him back a couple of steps. He cast a critical eye over Leona.

She wanted to cower but she refused. She was done cowering before any hard gaze, whether it was her father's or her former lover's. So she lifted her chin and straightened her back and refused to buckle.

"You—you've changed."

"Yes."

"You had a *baby*?"

She had to swallow twice to get her throat to work. "I did."

Byron's mouth dropped open. He tried to shut it, but it didn't work. "Whose?"

Leona couldn't help it. She wasn't cowering, by God, but she couldn't stand here and watch, either. She closed her eyes. "Yours."

"Mine?"

She opened her eyes to see that Byron was pacing away from her. Then he spun back. "I have a baby? And you didn't tell *me*?"

"I was—I was going to."

"When?" The word was a knife that sliced through the air and embedded itself midchest, right where her heart was. "And what? You had to kiss me? This I have to hear, Leona. I have to know the rationale behind *this*." He crossed his arms and glared at her.

No cowering. Not allowed. "I— You— You left me. I can't lose him."

It was hard to tell in the dim light from a faraway lamppost, but she swore all the color drained out of Byron's face. "Him?"

"Percy. I named him Percy." She bent over and retrieved her tablet from her bag. After a few taps, she had the most recent picture of Percy up on the screen. The little boy was sitting on her lap, trying to eat a board book. May had taken the photo just a couple of weeks ago. "Percy," she said again, holding the tablet out to Byron.

He stared at the computer, then at her. "I *left*? I left you pregnant?"

She nodded.

"And you didn't think it was a good idea to let me know you were pregnant? That you had *my son*?" His voice was getting louder.

"You left," she pleaded. Now that he knew, she had to make him see reason. Why hadn't she assumed he'd be this mad at her? For a ridiculous second, she wanted to beg for forgiveness, say whatever it took to calm him down—whatever it took so that he wouldn't take her son from her.

But she wouldn't beg. Not anymore. She'd fight the good fight. "You were gone by the time I got away from my father and I was afraid that your family would take Percy away—"

Byron froze midturn. "Wait—what?"

"I got away from my father. I took my little sister with me. May. She's watching Percy now."

Byron moved quickly, grabbing her by both arms. "Your sister? Is watching *my* son?"

"*Our* son, yes—"

He half shoved her, half lifted her up and carried her to the car. "Take me to him. Right now."

"All right," she said, retreating to grab her bag and fishing her keys out of the pocket.

They drove in painful silence. Her apartment was out in Aurora, which meant a solid thirty minutes of feeling Byron's rage from the passenger seat.

She was miserable. Just when she had a moment of hope, thinking maybe there was still something between them, something good—and it hadn't lasted. It would never last with Byron. It would always be like this—the two of them straddling the thin line between love and hate.

If only she wasn't a Harper. If only he wasn't a Beaumont. If only they'd been two nameless nobodies who could fall in love and live happily ever after in complete obscurity.

But no. It wasn't to be. He hated her right now because she'd kept quiet.

They pulled into the apartment complex parking lot. "You live here?" Byron asked. She could hear the confusion in his voice.

"Yes. This was all we could afford."

"And your parents? Your father?"

She got out of the car. "Please don't mention my father around May. She's...still nervous about him."

"Why?"

"Just...don't." Because she didn't want to go into why her parents were terrible people right after she'd finally told Byron about the baby. She grabbed her bag and locked the car. "This way."

Byron followed her up the two flights of stairs to the third floor of the apartment complex. "Here we are," she told him, unlocking the door.

"Oh, thank goodness you're home," May said from the couch, where Percy was crying. "I really think he's got another ear infection and—oh!" She recoiled in horror at the sight of Byron.

"It's all right," Leona told her little sister. "I told him."

May stood, cradling Percy in her arms. "He didn't come to take Percy, did he?"

"No," Byron said a little too loudly. "I just came to meet my son."

May's gaze darted between Leona and Byron like a rabbit trapped between a fox and a rock. And Byron was definitely the fox. "It's okay?"

Byron stepped up next to her. "Hello, May. It's nice to meet you. I'm Byron Beaumont."

Percy looked at Leona and held out his chubby little arms. May couldn't seem to do anything except stare in openmouthed horror at Byron.

"Let me have him," Leona finally said. She laid her bag on the kitchen table and took Percy from her sister and whispered, "It's going to be okay."

May attempted a smile and failed. "I'll just go. To my room." She all but sprinted down the hall. Seconds later, her door clicked shut.

"Hey, baby," Leona said, hugging Percy tight. "Aunt May says you have another ear infection. Do your ears hurt?"

Percy made a high-pitched whine in the back of his throat.

"I know," she agreed. "No fun at all." She looked over at Byron, who was gaping at the two of them. "I'm going to go find his ear drops. Do you want to hold him while I look?"

If possible, Byron looked terrified at this suggestion. "He has red hair."

Leona smiled down at her son. He had his fingers jammed into his mouth and he was getting drool all over her work blouse. "Yes, it's coming in redder. He takes after you."

Byron took a step back. "He takes after me," he repeated in a stunned whisper. "How old?"

"Sit down. I need to get his drops. Then we'll talk."

Almost robotically, Byron walked over to the couch and sat heavily.

"Percy, baby, this is your father," she whispered to her son as she sat him on Byron's lap. "Just hold him for a second, okay?"

"Um..." came the uncertain reply.

Leona moved quickly. She hurried to the bedroom and stripped out of her suit. She grabbed a clean pair of yoga pants and a long-sleeved tee and then rushed to Percy's room. "May?" she called out. The walls were thin enough that her sister should have no trouble hearing her. "Where are the drops?"

"I couldn't find them," May replied through the wall. "Are you sure he's okay?"

"He's Percy's father," Leona replied quietly. "He has a right to know."

There was a pause. "If Father finds out he's back..."

Yeah, that was a problem. Leon Harper would not take kindly to Byron's return any more than he'd taken kindly to Leona leaving with May. They'd reached an uneasy truce in the family since Percy had been born, but Leona didn't want anything to set off her father. She didn't even want to think about how low he might sink to get even with the Beaumonts.

She did a hurried check of the medicine cabinet and then checked her bedside table—ah. There they were—on the floor. They must have gotten knocked off and rolled under the bed. Leona fished the bottle out and held it up to the light. The little bottle was only one-fourth full, but that would have to do for now.

When she got back to the living room, Percy was leaning back against Byron's chest, starting up at him with curious eyes. "Here," she said, sitting down next to them. "I need to put the drops in."

She tilted Percy onto her lap. "Mommy's going to count to ten, ready? One..." She put the drops in and counted very slowly.

Byron rested his hand on Percy's feet, and then picked up one foot and held it against his palm. "This is really happening, isn't it?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"...Ten," she said in a happy voice. "That's such a good boy! Let's roll over." She lifted Percy so that he faced her. "Yes," she told Byron, "it all happened." Then she began to count brightly again.

All of it—finding out Byron was exactly like all the other Beaumonts, realizing her father was right, keeping Percy far away from any Beaumont, long nights worrying how she was going to make it all work—it'd all happened.

Without Byron.

When she got to ten again, she sat Percy up. He was half on her lap, half on Byron's lap, safely stuck in the space between them. He looked up at Byron and smiled a drooly smile.

Byron managed a weak grin and then stroked Percy's hair. "How old?"

"Almost six months. I was three months pregnant when..." She couldn't bring herself to say, "when you left." At least, not out loud.

"I don't— You didn't—" He took a deep breath. "Why didn't you tell me? I mean, I could have helped out. I could *know* him."

She sighed. She'd long since put the events of that night behind her—or so she'd thought. But the pain felt as fresh as it ever had.

"He's a good baby," she said, desperate to avoid the hurt of remembering. "He's teething and that leads to a lot of ear infections, but that's about the only problem. He's happy and he eats well. And we...we do all right. He's got his own room here." Which was why they were so far out on the edge of Denver. The rents were cheaper, so they could afford a three-bedroom apartment. "I work for Lutefisk Design and May is finishing up college. She watches him when she doesn't have classes, but when she does, we have him in a day care. He likes it there," she added.

Percy squirmed against them. "It's his bedtime," Leona explained when Byron tensed. "You could help me get him ready for bed. If you want."

"Yeah," Byron said. "Sure."

She picked Percy up and carried him into the small bedroom. They'd found most of the furniture at resale shops. They had a crib, a glider and an old dresser that doubled as a changing table.

Leona laid Percy out on the changing table. With Byron watching, she changed the baby's diaper and got him into a clean set of footie jammies. Then she lifted him up. "Sit," she told Byron. To his credit, he sat in the glider and held out his hands for the baby. He didn't look less shell-shocked, but she appreciated the effort.

Leona leaned over the small basket that held the books. “How about...” Percy reached his hands out for the worn copy of *Pat the Bunny*. “All right,” she agreed. “Can you read to him while I wash my hands?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

She hurried to the bathroom, which was on the other side of May’s room. In the distance, she heard Byron’s deep voice read the simple story.

May’s door opened and she popped her head out. “He’s not staying, is he?”

“May,” Leona said in a quiet whisper. “No, I don’t think he’s staying.”

May shot her a disbelieving look. “You don’t *think*? Leona, you know what he’s like. He’s a Beaumont. What if he wants to take Percy with him?”

Leona washed her hands in the bathroom. That was the question, wasn’t it? Byron had the weight of the Beaumont name and family fortune behind him. And what did Leona have? She had May and Percy. She knew what lawyers could do to a woman. Her own father had regaled the family with tales of how he’d left his first wife penniless after she’d been seduced by Byron’s father.

“I don’t think he’ll do that,” she told May, who hovered in the doorway as if she expected to have to bolt at any second. Once, Leona would have said yes, Byron would take the boy and she’d never see her baby again.

But now? At dinner tonight he’d been the Byron she’d once thought she’d known. Caring, attentive, thoughtful. Heck, he’d even apologized for Frances’s behavior. Those were not the actions of a man out to destroy her.

Of course, that had been before he’d seen the car seat. She had absolutely no idea what he was thinking now.

“I’m sorry,” May said. “I’m just worried.”

“I know.” Leona dried her hands and gripped May by the shoulders. “I won’t let him take Percy. I promise.”

May’s eyes watered. “I don’t want him to hurt you again.”

Leona pulled May into a tight hug. “I won’t let him,” she promised.

“Leona?” Byron called out. “We’re done. Now what?”

At the sound of Byron’s voice, May hurried back to her bedroom and shut the door.

Leona paused to take a deep breath. She couldn’t let Byron break her heart again. She couldn’t lose her son. And if they could keep her father out of it, that’d be great, too.

Sure. No problem.

Byron was rocking Percy, whose eyes were half closed. “Hi,” he said when she entered the room.

Despite it all, she smiled at him. To see him holding Percy—she had dreamed of this moment.

This was what she’d wanted before that horrible night when it’d all fallen apart. For the months they’d been seeing each other, she’d thought about Byron being a father—being a husband. Helping with the babies, because of course they’d have children together. She and Byron were different than their families. Better. Electric. They were going to love each other for the rest of their lives.

Then he’d left before she’d gotten the chance to tell him she was pregnant and Leona had put those old dreams away.

She couldn’t help it. Part of her still wanted those dreams, even knowing how much of a Beaumont he was.

But that vision of them growing old together was just that—a vision.

It could never happen.

Five

Byron’s head was a mess as Leona took the boy—his son!—from him. No, *mess* was too generous a word for the muddle of emotions and thoughts all struggling to be heard.

He had a son—that was the first thing he had to make sense of. He had a son and Leona hadn't told him. She had lied to him again—maybe he shouldn't be so damned surprised. After all, she'd had no problem hiding her family from him before. Why was it so shocking that she would hide his son from him now?

It was obvious she loved the boy. She'd been sweet and gentle with him and this thing right now—nursing—was obviously something they did every night.

Byron walked back into the main part of the apartment. The place wasn't fancy—a standard apartment with beige walls, beige carpeting and beige countertops in the kitchen. A set of patio doors indicated that there was a small deck outside. There were a few pictures on the wall, all of May and Leona and Percy. Mostly of Percy. None of Byron. But then, why should there be?

He realized he was standing in the kitchen, opening the cabinets, drawers and the fridge, looking for something to cook. He always retreated to the kitchen when he was upset, even when he'd been a little kid.

Cooking was predictable. There was comfort in the routine. If he followed the recipe, he knew how the dish would turn out.

Leona had apples. Byron could make applesauce. There—that was a good plan. That was him taking care of his son. Everyone had to eat.

He peeled the apples and got them simmering in the pot. Then he debated the ingredients—would Percy like cinnamon or would it be too strong for him? Would Leona want the applesauce to be unsweetened? In the end, Byron went with a little lemon juice to brighten the flavor.

As he cooked, he tried to think. Why hadn't she told him? It wasn't as though he'd gone off the grid. Yes, he'd been in Europe but he'd been findable. Frances, at least, had always known where he was. He'd kept his email address. He hadn't disappeared. Hell, even a birth announcement would have been okay, but there'd been nothing. Just another lie.

He needed answers—and while he was thinking about it, he still needed to know why she thought he'd left her and what did she mean, she and her sister had "gotten away from" their father?

She'd *gone* with her father. Leon Harper was her father and she hadn't told Byron that truth. And when Harper had demanded Leona come with him, she had. She'd left Byron standing on the sidewalk, in the rain, his heart in shards at his feet.

If she'd dumped him, he could have dealt with it. He might have still wound up in Europe, but if she'd said "Gee, Byron, this just isn't working, we should see other people, it's not you, it's me and we can still be friends" or whatever, he'd have moved on.

But she'd lied to him. She was the daughter of the man who was hell-bent on destroying Byron and his entire family. By all accounts, the man was doing a hell of a job at it, too. The brewery—a hundred and sixty-six years of Beaumont history and ownership—was gone, all because of Leon Harper. And his daughters.

Byron knew what betrayal looked like. He knew his father had cheated on his wives. He knew that at least one of the ex-wives had cheated on Hardwick. Byron knew there was always a risk that any relationship could go wrong. The Beaumonts didn't have exclusive rights to dysfunctional marriages.

But when he'd been with Leona, he'd managed to convince himself that he was different. That they were different. Byron and Leona had loved each other.

Or had they?

She'd lied to him before. Twice. Was she lying again? Even if she was, would he be able to tell the difference?

Apples were not going to solve that mystery. He had more pressing issues to deal with.

Percy was his son. Byron wanted to be there for the boy, to let Percy know that Byron loved him in the big ways and the little ways. All the ways Byron's own father had never loved Byron.

But how was that going to happen? He was still living in the mansion—he didn't even have his own place. And getting a restaurant off the ground wasn't a nine-to-five job, that was for damned sure. Not now, not ever. How could he make sure he was a part of Percy's life?

The sauce was halfway done when Leona came into the kitchen. She was wearing leggings and a T-shirt but there was still something about her. There'd *always* been something about her.

"Ah," she said when she saw the bubbling apples. She gave him a small smile. "I should have known."

"Applesauce. For Percy," he explained. "Just apples and a little lemon. I didn't know if cinnamon would be too much for him."

"It smells wonderful. He loves apples."

They stood there silently for a minute.

"It's not a big batch. Do you have a container for it?"

Leona dug out a plastic bowl and Byron moved all the dirty dishes to the sink. Yes, he needed answers. But honestly? He had no idea where to start. So he didn't. He did the dishes instead.

The uncomfortable silence lingered for a few more minutes as he washed the knife and the cutting board. Leona dried. Finally, she broke the silence.

"We should come up with a plan, I guess."

"A plan?"

"Yes. If you're really going to stay—"

"I am," he interrupted, stung by the insinuation that he'd bolt.

"Then we need a plan." She swallowed, her gaze focused on the sink. "A custody plan. I know I can't keep Percy from you, but I'm not going to just give up custody."

"You already kept him from me." She winced but he refused to feel bad for her. "And I didn't say you had to give up custody. But why didn't you tell me?" he demanded. "Why did you keep this from me?"

"I thought..." She dropped the dish towel on the counter and turned away from him. "I thought you didn't want anything to do with me. Your phone was disconnected and you were in Europe—pretty damned far away from here."

That was true. But it was the way she said it that confused him. He looked at the back of her head as if he could peer inside and find the answers he was looking for. "You could have sent an email."

"I could have," she agreed. Her shoulders heaved with a massive sigh. "I should have. But I was afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

She turned to him, her wide eyes even wider. "Of you, Byron. Of all the Beaumonts."

He gaped at her. Before he could remind her that he was not the one who'd lied, she went on, "And we left home with only as much as we could carry, and I had to get a job. Being pregnant wasn't as fun as it seems on television and May had classes and...and you weren't here. And I guess I convinced myself that you weren't coming back and it was just me and May and Percy on our own. It was better that way. We didn't need anyone else."

He dried off his hands and placed them on her shoulders. "I could have helped. Even if...even if I didn't come back, I still could have helped. Child support or whatever. You shouldn't have had to do this on your own."

She dropped her head and he heard her sniff. "Well, you're here now. I can't change what happened in the past but if you're going to stay—"

"I am," he told her again.

"Then, yes. Child support and custody visits. But I can't lose him, Byron." Her voice broke over this last bit. "Please don't try to punish me by taking him."

The anguish in her voice—her assumption that he'd exact some sort of twisted revenge... He spun her around and lifted her chin until she had no choice but to look him in the eye. Child support

and custody visits were all very clinical-sounding things, like the few hours a year that he was shipped off with Frances and Matthew to visit their mother, who'd then spend most of the visit trying not to cry.

That's not what he wanted. He was not his father, for God's sake. He was better than that.

Except, was he? He'd gotten a woman pregnant and then left her in the lurch, completely alone with no other resources. Yeah, he'd thought her father would still be paying the bills and yeah, she'd rejected him, but when the facts of the situation were laid plain, he'd left her alone just when she'd needed him most.

She was right. That was exactly what Hardwick Beaumont would have done.

"I'm not going to take him away from you," Byron told her, feeling the certainty of the words. "Because you're both going to come live with me."

* * *

Leona's mouth fell open in shock. *"What?"*

Byron's grip tightened on her shoulders. "I don't have a place yet. You can either move into the mansion with me or help me pick something out—whatever you think is better. But you need to move in with me as soon as possible."

Maybe this wasn't happening. Maybe none of it was happening—not Byron returning, not him kissing her, not him reading a bedtime story to Percy. She could be hallucinating the whole kit and caboodle.

Sadly, the way he was holding her, the look in his eyes? She knew she wasn't hallucinating a damned thing. And that was a problem.

"You want me to pack up and come with you?"

The tendons in his neck tightened. "I want my son with me. And if that means you have to be with me, then so be it."

Ah. So he didn't want her, not really. He would put up with her if that got him what he wanted, though. His words cut like a dull butter knife—painful and ragged.

She'd promised May she would not let Byron hurt her again.

She hated lying to her sister.

Still, Leona was making remarkable progress. She didn't agree to Byron's demands just to keep the peace, and she didn't dissolve into useless tears and, most important, she didn't do both of them at the same time. Those days were done. She might not be able to be strong enough to protect her own heart, but she had to protect Percy.

So she cleared her throat. "What if it's not a good idea for us to live together?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

She couldn't look at that hardness, couldn't bear to feel the pain again. So she closed her eyes. She couldn't help it. "Look, I know we had something once but it fell apart."

"But—" he started to interrupt.

She cut him off. "And it doesn't even matter who did what. If we live together...we'll have to face those choices every single day."

Every day she'd have to wake up knowing that Byron was mere feet away, not oceans and continents. Every single day she'd have to look him in the eye to discuss what Percy had done and every single damned day, he'd probably cook her a meal and she'd love it.

And every day—every minute—she'd wonder when it was all going to end.

Byron pulled her in closer and she felt his hot breath on her ear. "You listen to me, Leona Harper." Panic blossomed in her stomach at his cold tone. "Maybe it doesn't matter who did what, maybe it does. That doesn't change the fact that I have a son and I am *not* going to stand aside a moment longer because you think it might be awkward around the breakfast table. You *will* move in with me and, until further notice, we *will* raise our son together."

An unspoken *or else* hung in the small space between his lips and her ear.

She would not cry, by God. She wouldn't do it. Not in front of him. Not in front of any man. Not anymore. She was an adult responsible for her sister and her son and she would *not* give.

"I can't afford very much. That's why we live here."

"I will pay for it," he replied firmly.

"But—"

"No buts, Leona. You've had to cover everything for a year. It's my turn to step up to the plate. It's the least I can do."

God, that sounded so good. She could live with him, let him take care of her, of Percy, with his part of the Beaumont fortune. She wouldn't be teetering on the edge of genteel poverty anymore. Things like doctor's visits and ear drops wouldn't be monumental mountains she struggled to climb. Byron had the ways and means to make that part of her life easy.

Of course, if she'd wanted easy—if she'd wanted to step back and let someone else call all the shots in her life—she'd still be living under her father's roof. She'd still be subjected to his rantings and ravings about the Beaumonts in general and Byron in specific.

Yes, that was easier. But it was not better.

She couldn't allow herself to be dependent on a man again, especially a man who'd already left her high and dry once. Byron could not be trusted, not on a kiss and a promise. Because this time it wouldn't just be her heart in danger. It'd be Percy's, too.

"May," Leona managed to say without her voice cracking. "She watches him. I can't just leave her." It was the best defense she had. May was twenty, yes—but she was a fragile young woman who was not ready to be thrown out on her own because a billionaire's son demanded it.

"Percy loves her," she offered, hoping that would help.

It didn't. Byron sighed wearily. Then, unexpectedly, his grip loosened. He didn't lean back, though—he just skimmed his hands up and down her upper arms. "Is that the deal? I have to provide accommodations for your sister before you'll move in with me?"

Once, they'd talked about moving in together. She'd been staying over at his place more and more—which had run the risk of drawing her father's attention to her activities. She'd known then that when her father found out, it would be a problem. But Leona hadn't cared because waking up in Byron's arms was worth the risk.

Of course, once she'd been sure that he'd marry her right away, when she told Byron she was pregnant. It wouldn't have mattered who her father was because Byron loved her and she loved him. She'd been sure that once she told him the truth he'd realize she hadn't been trying to hide anything. She'd just wanted someone who didn't care about her last name. She'd thought she'd found that man.

She was still paying for that mistake. She couldn't afford any more.

"I won't move into the mansion."

"Fine. I was going to look for a place close to the restaurant anyway." His hands were still moving up and down her arms and dang it all, she was leaning into his touch. "Is that all right with you? Or do you need to be closer to your job?"

She leaned her forehead against his shoulder. It wasn't much of a choice, not after he'd demanded that she uproot her whole life to be with him for the sake of their son. But he'd still thrown her a small bone. "The office is downtown. As long as we're not too far out, it should be about the same travel time."

"I'll make some calls in the morning. We'll move as soon as possible."

What was she going to tell her sister? *No, I'm not going to let him break my heart again, but by the way—pack up everything you own because we're all going to set up house together.*

May would be furious.

Still, Leona didn't think she could refuse. What were the alternatives? Byron was not interested in coming by to visit Percy here and, as far as she could tell, the only other possibility was Byron suing for custody. She couldn't let that happen—where would she get the money to defend herself?

Lawyers weren't cheap, that she knew. She couldn't ask her parents for help, either. If her father knew Byron wanted the boy... It'd be an all-out war.

And if she lost? Once, she'd thought she knew Byron. But he'd turned out to be more of a Beaumont than she ever would have guessed. She had no idea what lengths he would go to, and she didn't really want to find out the hard way.

It was a risk she couldn't take. It'd be a short-term solution, she tried to tell herself. Just until they could get a formalized custody agreement arranged.

Byron's arms went around her, holding her to his chest. "I don't want to punish you, Leona," he said. None of the coldness was left in his tone. "But he's my son, too."

"I know." That's what she wanted to believe.

"It won't be bad, will it?" He swallowed. "At least, better than living with your parents?"

She shuddered at the thought. "We'll have to have rules. No fighting or anything in front of the baby."

"Okay," he agreed. "But I'm not looking for a fight."

If only she could believe that. There was one other important detail that had to be settled before she agreed. "We'll sleep in separate bedrooms. Just because we're living together doesn't mean I want you back."

His hands stilled and then he snorted. "This is for Percy. You can have your own bedroom. I don't expect you to sleep with me." There was a brief pause. "It'd probably be best if we keep things simple between us until we decide on what to do next."

"Agreed," she said. Which completely disregarded the fact that, at this very moment, he was holding her in a highly not-simple way. Could she really expect either of them to maintain a respectable distance? "Simple is better."

"And you'll keep helping me with the restaurant?"

"Yes." The absolute last thing she could do now was quit her job. Even if Byron was covering the rent, she still needed to maintain her independence. He might not be looking for a fight—and she wasn't exactly spoiling for one, either—but if things went wrong, she needed to be able to pick up and start over again.

Again.

He swallowed. "And your parents? Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't want my son anywhere near your father."

"They're not a part of this. I cut ties when we left."

He leaned back and looked her in the eye again. "Why did you leave? I mean, we'd talked about getting our own place or you moving in with me—but you wouldn't do it then."

The corners of her mouth turned down as she pushed back against tears. She hadn't moved in with Byron before because moving in would mean telling him who she really was and she hadn't wanted to risk it. Looking back, she should have. But instead, she'd convinced herself that once she finished college and got a job—that would be the time to leave home. But she didn't explain any of that. Instead she said, "May and I had to get out. My father was...unbearable." She shuddered again at the memory of her father's completely unfiltered rage.

"Did he hit you?" Byron demanded, a fierce look in his eyes.

"No." But there are other ways to make a person hurt. "He threatened to have me declared unfit and to take the baby after he was born."

"He did *what*?"

"Because it was you." This time, she couldn't push the tears back. "Because of who you are. He wanted to make sure you'd never get the baby."

For years, her father had berated Leona, her sister, her mother. All of them bore the brunt of his rage. And she'd put up with it for far longer than she should have because she hadn't known any better.

Until she'd met Byron. Until he'd shown her that there was a different way to live, that people could actually care for each other. If only she'd been brave enough before...

But then again, now she knew Byron's true colors. She could have escaped her father only to be stuck with a man who'd abandon her anyway.

Still, it had been those times with Byron that had given her the courage to leave home, single, pregnant and with May. She'd realized then that she had to get out while she could, before Leon Harper got ahold of her son.

Byron was staring at her in total shock. "He would, wouldn't he?"

She nodded.

A moment passed as he gaped at her. "Then there's only one thing to do," he finally said in a shaky voice.

No, she wanted to say, even though she didn't know what that one thing was. She knew she wasn't going to like it, wasn't going to want it.

"We have to get married."

Six

This was his life now, he realized. Proposing marriage in whispers to a woman who was crying, all so they wouldn't wake the baby. "Why hasn't he done it yet? Why hasn't he taken Percy away from you?"

"I don't know."

"It's the only way to keep Percy safe, Leona, and you know it."

If they weren't married, what was to stop her father from charging in like a bull elephant at any second? Byron had been out of the picture for a year. He didn't know the specifics of family law, but he was pretty sure his absence would count against him. He would beat Leon—he was the boy's father—but it would be a long, exhausting battle.

Memories of his mother mixed in with all the current confusion—not just the screaming fights, but how his father had had all of her things loaded into a moving van before he'd served her with divorce papers. How his mother had never quite recovered from being kicked out, from being steamrollered in court and losing her children.

Could Byron let that happen to Leona? Could he live with himself if she was the collateral damage in yet another Beaumont-Harper legal battle?

He should. She'd lied to him—twice. And not about whether or not she'd spent too much money or hated his cooking or any of those petty things other people lied about. She'd lied about who she was and the fact that she'd given birth to Byron's son.

And yet... He couldn't do it. Because Leona was right about one thing—it didn't really matter who'd done what a year ago. He couldn't bear to think of her being destroyed like his mother had been. That was a risk he wasn't willing to take.

He could barely think right now. Babies and apartments and a wedding. A ring. And a restaurant. Couldn't forget that.

And applesauce. He turned to the stove—yeah, it was done. He shut the burner off to let it cool. For some insane reason, he wondered if Leona had chocolate chips. If ever there was a time for cookies, this was it.

He turned back to Leona. She stood there looking as if he'd threatened her to within an inch of her life. Maybe he had. But what were his options? He could not let Leon Harper get his claws into Percy. Everything else was secondary.

"At least until we're sure your father can't take over," he rationalized. "And you can still have a private bedroom. I..." He took a deep breath. "I cared for you a great deal. I hope that we can at least be friends."

She dropped her gaze and he had the distinct feeling that he was making things worse. "Friends."

"For Percy's sake."

"Can I...think about it? Tomorrow's Friday. We probably couldn't get an appointment to get married for a week or two anyway."

"Sure." He tried to sound friendly about it, but he didn't think he made it. "But I'll start looking for places tomorrow." Because even if she didn't marry him, they still needed to live together.

But she'd marry him. She had to.

He should go. He'd just asked her to move in and marry him within the space of a few minutes, and the pull to make cookies was only getting stronger. She needed to think, too. "When will I see you tomorrow?" he asked.

"I have to go to the office and update my boss on the project and draft a few ideas for you. I promised," she added with a watery smile.

"Lunch, then? I'll have something ready for us."

"Not at the mansion, right?" Another small shudder went through her.

"No," he readily agreed. He didn't want another run-in with Frances. "At the restaurant."

"All right. Tomorrow around noon."

He transferred the applesauce into the container and sealed it. "For Percy," he said, holding out the still-warm sauce.

"For Percy," she agreed.

She didn't sound happy about it.

* * *

Byron went straight to the kitchen. It was late, though—George was already gone. The normally warm, bright room was dark and quiet, except for the echo of his footsteps off the tiled floors.

He flipped on the lights and assembled ingredients. Chocolate chip cookies were a must. For lunch tomorrow, he told himself. And he could try a few sandwiches. It was reasonable to think that he'd want to have a simple lunch menu.

He fell into the familiar routine of creaming the sugar and folding in the chips while the oven preheated. He didn't even have to think about this recipe anymore.

Had he really asked Leona to marry him? Because she'd given birth to a son—*his* son, the one with matching red hair?

He needed a ring. He hadn't bought one the first time around. A ring would show her he was serious about this.

"There you are."

Byron spun to see Frances standing in the doorway. Instead of the gown she'd been wearing earlier, she was in a pair of pajamas—thick, fleecy ones with a bright turquoise plaid pattern. She looked fifteen years younger than their twenty-nine years.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied. "Does something have to be wrong?"

Frances gave him a knowing smile. "You're baking cookies and God only knows what else at ten at night? You and I both know that something's wrong." A shadow darkened her face. "It's Leona, isn't it? I can't believe you hired her, Byron. Do you enjoy getting jerked around?"

He slammed a bowl down on the island countertop.

"Jeez," Frances said, giving him a long look. "Spill it."

He didn't want to but Frances was his twin. They couldn't keep secrets from each other if they tried. "You're going to tell me why you suddenly moved back home?"

An embarrassed blush raced over her cheeks. "I made a bad investment."

"You're broke?"

"Don't tell Chadwick. You know how he is," she pleaded. "I can't stand to hear another 'I told you so' from him."

"Frannie..."

"Whatever," she said, brushing away his concern with a cynical shrug of her shoulders. "I'll be fine. Just getting back on my feet. But that's neither here nor there. Now spill it. You're baking cookies because..."

He took a deep breath. If he did it fast... "I have a son."

Frances's cynicism fell away. "You *what*?"

"Just like our old man, huh? Get a woman pregnant and then bail on her," he said bitterly. "Leona has a baby boy named Percy. He's got red hair." That probably wasn't the most important thing to know about the boy, but Byron felt it was the thing that sealed the deal.

"Who else knows?"

"Her family." Frances made a face of revulsion. "She lives with her sister, who watches Percy. They don't have anything to do with their father."

"Oh, I see. And this is what she told you? Because we all know how very trustworthy she is. Do I need to remind you that this is the woman who didn't even see fit to tell you she was Leon Harper's daughter, even after you'd started sleeping with her?"

"No, you do not need to remind me of that," he snapped. "It doesn't change the fact that Percy is my son." He realized he was whisking the cookie batter with more force than was required. He made himself set the bowl down.

"And you're sure," Frances asked.

"Yes."

She shook her head in some combination of disbelief and pity. "God only knows what she's been saying about you. And her father? You have to get that kid away from her."

"I told her we had to get married. Immediately." Frances gasped in true horror.

"Are you nuts? You want to marry into that family of—vipers?"

"That's why I have to marry her—to make sure Harper can't take Percy away from us."

"Listen to you. *Us.* There is no *us*. There's you and a woman who broke your heart and then hid a baby from you." Unexpectedly, her eyes watered. "I already lost you for a year. You weren't here because of *that* woman. No one else understands me like you do. I missed having my twin here."

The last thing he needed right now was more guilt. "I missed you, too. But I'm back now," he told her.

Frances sniffed. "Isn't there another way? Do you have to marry her?"

"Yes." He got out the scoop he used for the batter and began to dish it out onto the baking mats. "It's the only way to make things right."

Or more right. After all, he hadn't spoken of undying love, of treasuring her forever. This was a marriage of necessity. They would have separate rooms. Her sister was going to live with them.

"You need to be careful, Byron."

He wanted to say, when was he not careful? But he knew what Frances would say to that—if he'd been careful the first time, he'd have realized that Leona Harper was Leon Harper's daughter. And, of course, if he'd been careful, he wouldn't have had a child he never knew.

But he hadn't been careful. He'd just wanted her. It hadn't mattered whose daughter she was. It hadn't mattered that every time he tried to ask about her family, she changed the subject. What had mattered was that they were together.

Well. He was finally going to make that come true. They would be together—for the sake of their son, if nothing else.

"I'll call Matthew. He'll get the lawyers going on it." There. That was a perfectly reasonable thing to say. After all, if he'd learned anything from his father, it was that marriages were temporary and a man with a fortune should *always* have a prenup.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know." He scooped out the second-to-last cookie's worth of dough and then offered the bowl to Frances. That'd always been her favorite part, licking the bowls. "Look, I just found this out tonight. I'm still trying to get my head wrapped around it."

She took the bowl and sat on a stool, swiping her finger through the batter. "Is he cute? Your son?"

Byron thought about the pale blue eyes, the shock of red hair and the drooly smile. "Yeah. Really cute."

Frances shook her head, but at least she was grinning as she did so. "You should see the smile on your face. Congratulations, Byron—you're a father."

Seven

"We're *what*? You're *what*?" May stared at Leona.

"I'm going to marry Byron." *I think*, she mentally added.

May's mouth opened, closed and opened again. "When? Oh, to heck with when. Why?"

"He's Percy's father. And no one wants Father to get involved in a custody battle. If I'm married to Byron, Father can't take Percy from us." These were all perfectly rational reasons for this sudden change of course. But rational had nothing to do with the way Leona's stomach was in a knot that might never get untied.

"And what about me?" May demanded, her eyes flashing.

It was, hands down, the angriest Leona had ever heard her little sister. Any other day, Leona might celebrate this development—May was speaking out instead of meekly taking whatever life dished out.

But it wasn't helping Leona's unmovable knot. "You can come with us. We'll get a bigger place—more than enough room for you to have your own space." May looked at Leona as if she'd grown a third head. Leona decided to change tactics. "Or you can stay here. I know this is closer to your college..."

"What about Percy? I don't want to live with a Beaumont, but I'm the one who takes care of him."

Leona winced at the dismissive way May said *Beaumont*. "I know. We'll find a way to make it work."

May looked doubtful, but she didn't say anything else. Instead, she turned and headed back to bed.

Leona went to her room and lay down on the double bed, but she didn't sleep. Her mind raced through all the options. Marrying Byron. Moving in with him. Being a family, at least during the day. Sleeping in separate bedrooms.

What other options did she have? Every time she asked herself that question, she came back to the same answer. None. But she kept asking it, just to be sure.

The separate bedrooms thing was nonnegotiable. It had to be. Even now, she could feel his lips on hers, feel a year's worth of sexual frustration begging to be released by his hands.

Sex with Byron had been fun and magical and wonderful. In his arms, she'd been special.

Was it wrong to want that back in her life? No, that wasn't the right question. Was it wrong to want that with Byron—again?

But separate bedrooms it was. Because she could not confuse sex with love. Fool me once, shame on you. But fool me twice...

She was no fool. Not any longer.

Finally, exhausted, she turned her attention back to the only thing that could possibly distract her from Byron—the restaurant. She needed some ideas for tomorrow.

She drifted off to sleep thinking about Percherons.

* * *

Byron shook the tablecloth out over the small metal bistro table he'd snagged off one of the mansion's patios. Then he set up the matching chairs around it. He'd brought a candle because...well, because. Once upon a time, he'd planned a romantic candlelit dinner where he would ask for her hand in marriage. The ring he'd picked out this morning felt as if it was burning a hole in his pocket.

But he'd finally decided that the dungeon was too musty to eat in and it was far too windy outside to have a flame burning, so he let it rest. Candles were not required.

He had a picnic basket filled with three kinds of sandwiches, potato salad and gazpacho. He'd packed the almond cake from last night and had two bottles of iced tea. This wasn't his ideal meal, but as he was quickly learning, he had to go with the flow.

Just another tasting, he tried to tell himself as he set out the silverware. No big deal.

Except it was huge. He'd called Matthew—this situation seemed too important to discuss over a text—but Matthew hadn't picked up, which wasn't like him. So Byron had been forced to leave a vague, "Something's come up and I need to talk to you," message.

Byron had also called a Realtor and laid out his specifications. And he'd even called the county clerk to find out what he needed to get married.

Now he had to wait. He and Leona could get married next week, but he needed the prenup first.

Finally, after what felt like a long wait but was actually only a few minutes past noon, Leona's car rolled up. She sat behind the wheel for a few moments. Byron got the feeling she was psyching herself up.

Then she got out of the car. She was wearing another suit—the consummate businesswoman. But there was something more about her, something that had attracted him to her from the very first time he'd laid eyes on her. After all this time, he still couldn't say what that something was.

Whatever it was, he wanted to pull her into his arms and not let go. He'd hired her for a very specific reason—to make sure she knew she couldn't hurt him. But instead? He'd found out just how much he couldn't trust her.

He would not give in to the physical temptation that Leona represented. This marriage proposal wasn't about sex. It was about doing whatever it took to make sure his son was safe.

"Hi," she said. She looked at the outdoor table.

Was she nervous? Fine. Good. He didn't want her to think she held all the cards. The sooner she realized he was calling the shots, the better.

He stood and put his hands on her shoulders. She tensed and he swore he felt a current of electricity pass between them. But he wouldn't give in and pull her into his arms. He couldn't let her affect him. Not anymore. "Have you given any more thought to my question?"

Leona notched an eyebrow at him. That was better, he thought. He loved it when she was snarky and sarcastic—not shell-shocked. "I don't remember your asking me anything. I seem to remember more of a direct order."

Byron pulled the small, robin's-egg-blue box out of his pocket. Leona gasped. "Ah. Yes. That was a mistake." He opened the box. The sunlight caught the emerald-cut diamond and threw sparkles across the tablecloth. "Leona, will you marry me?"

If only he'd asked her a year ago...but even as he thought that, he remembered how she'd hidden her name, her family from him. Would she have said yes, if he'd asked her then? Or would she have laughed in his face? Would it have changed everything—or would it all still have happened exactly the same way?

Anything snarky about her fell away as she gaped at the ring, then him, then back at the ring. She reached out to touch the box but pulled her hand back. "We need to discuss work," she finally said in a firm voice. "Mr. Lutefisk is very particular about his employees having personal conversations while they're on the clock. He'll be calling to check in about an hour from now. He's letting me handle this project on my own, but he keeps close tabs on all of his employees' projects."

What a load of crap. She was stalling and he didn't like it. "Leona. This isn't just a 'personal conversation.' This is our life—together."

She gave him a baleful look that, despite all of his best intentions to not let her get to him, made him feel guilty. Then fire flashed through her eyes. "I work. This is my job. You can't think that hiring me and proposing means you get to control every minute of my life, Byron. Because if so, I have an answer to your question. I don't think you'll like it."

In spite of himself, he grinned. "When did you get this feisty?"

"When you left me," she snapped. "Now are we going to discuss the job for which you hired me or not?"

The accusation stung. "That's not how I remember it going down," he said, frustration bubbling up.

She shrugged out of his grasp and sat down at the table as if she was mad at the chair. "I'm not talking about it now. I. Am. Working."

"Fine. When can we discuss nonwork stuff?"

"After five."

"When can I see Percy again?"

She looked up at him, her jaw set. "Ah, now *that* was a question. Lovely. You can see him tonight, after five. I assumed you'd come visit him." Byron gave her a look and she rolled her eyes. "As you can see, I'm not trying to hide him from you. Can we please get to work?"

"Fine." He'd let it go for now. But he left the ring on the table, where it glittered prettily.

Leona pulled out her tablet and handed it over. "We have three basic choices for the interior—we can try to lighten it up, keep it dim, or go for broke and make it very dark."

Byron looked at the preliminary colors she'd chosen. One was a bright yellow with warm red accents. The next was gray with a cooler red and the last choice was a deep red that would look almost black in the shadows. "I like the yellow. I don't want the restaurant so dim that people have to use their cell phones to read the menu."

"Agreed," she said. She flicked the screen to the next page. "I thought we'd want to play off the Percheron Drafts in the name—Percheron Pub?"

"No."

"White Horse Saloon?"

He gave her a dirty look.

"No, I didn't think so." She grinned back. This was better—this was them as equals. This was what he'd missed. He had the sudden urge to lean over and kiss her like he'd kissed her last night, right before his world had changed forever. "I also considered bringing in the European influences. What do you think about Caballo de Tiro?"

"That's—what?" He thought for a second. "Workhorse?"

"Draft horse, literally. Which fits the brand and also highlights the Spanish influences you're bringing."

He glanced at her and saw she wore a satisfied smile. "You like that one, don't you?"

"It is my favorite, it's true. I wasn't sure if you'd get the translation."

"I picked up enough French and Spanish to get by." He gave her a look. "At least, enough to cook and fend off advances."

She glanced back at the ring. "Oh?"

He could hear that she was trying to sound disinterested, but she wasn't quite succeeding. "It was...well, I guess the good news was that no one cared that I was a Beaumont. That was great, actually. But a lot of people were intrigued by the American with red hair."

Which was a huge understatement. In Paris and then Madrid, not a week went by when he didn't leave work to find a beautiful woman—or occasionally a beautiful man—waiting for him.

"I guess that was probably fun." Leona was now staring at her plate, pushing the potato salad around with her fork.

"Actually, it wasn't."

She opened her mouth to say something but then changed her mind. "Right. We're working. What do you think of the name?"

He sighed. "Right. Working." Besides, he didn't exactly want to tell her that, at several points during his self-imposed exile, he'd decided to take a particularly lovely woman up on her offer, just to get Leona out of his system—only to back out before they got anywhere near a bed.

He forced himself to focus. This restaurant was his dream, after all. Caballo de Tiro—it had a good ring to it, and wasn't too complicated to pronounce.

"I thought we could bring in touches that suggest a draft horse—wagon wheels that are repurposed as chandeliers, maybe a wagon set up outside—it's reasonable to think parents might bring their children," she added. "A wagon could be both decoration and something to distract kids."

He flipped back to the colors. "So you'd paint the walls this color yellow, have red accents—"

"The tablecloths, napkins, that sort of thing, yes."

"And accent with weathered wood?"

"And leather," she added, leaning over to flick to another screen, which had several chairs pictured. "Rich brown leather for the seating. And maybe a few harnesses that will serve as picture frames on the walls. The whole experience would be warm and comfortable—formal without being stuffy."

"I like it. Let's go with that. Caballo de Tiro."

Leona looked pleased. "That was easy. I have some other ideas..."

Byron tried not to sigh. The restaurant was important, but he felt as though he was spinning his wheels. He wanted to get back to everything else—how Percy was, if she'd marry him or if she'd fight him every step of the way—and what, exactly, she'd meant by saying *he'd* left *her*.

She shot him a look. "You hired me, after all."

"I know," he groaned. "But five o'clock seems like a long time off."

"Byron, focus. I need the specs of the kitchen and then I need to call contractors and get a timeline set up, and my boss wants that as soon as possible. I'll formalize the sketches of the interior and exterior a bit more and..."

Byron's phone rang. "The Realtor," he said with relief. At least one thing was happening quickly. "You eat and then we'll talk ovens."

"Deal," she said.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. The Realtor had a list of single-family homes ready, and she wanted Byron to come in on Saturday. Leona wanted to discuss kitchen appliances and table placements.

It was enough to give a man whiplash. It'd only been a few months ago that he'd settled into his cramped Madrid apartment, working late nights cooking for a world-famous chef and wandering the city alone, trying to lose himself in another culture.

Trying to forget about Leona Harper.

Now he would be running his own restaurant and living with Leona while they raised their son.

For a brief moment, as Leona talked about bathroom sink options, Byron wanted to go back to Madrid. Right now. This was insane, that's what it was. Proposing to Leona so he could ensure he'd never lose custody of his son? Going to look at houses tomorrow? Debating what "message" bathroom faucets "communicated" to customers?

Living with Leona—the woman who'd nearly destroyed him? Whose father had done everything to ruin his family?

But a Beaumont would not cut and run or admit defeat. His father had not been much of a father, but Byron remembered the last conversation he'd had with Hardwick Beaumont. His father had been sitting behind his massive desk, a look of disgust on his face as he took in Byron's flour-dusted pants. "Son," he'd intoned as if he were passing a death sentence, "this cooking thing—it's not right. It's not what a Beaumont does. It's servant work."

It hadn't been the first time Byron had considered running away. He'd just wanted to cook in peace and quiet, without being constantly harassed about how he wasn't good enough. He'd been all of sixteen and thought he'd known how the world worked.

But, being sixteen, he hadn't. Instead, he'd mouthed off. "You want me to go? Then I'll go. I don't have to stay here and take your insults."

He'd expected to be disowned, frankly. No one talked back to Hardwick Beaumont, especially not his disappointment of a son. Hardwick's lips had twisted into a sneer and Byron had braced himself.

Then, to his everlasting shock, Hardwick had said, "A Beaumont does not cut and run, boy. We know what we want and we fight for it, to hell with what anyone else says." He'd leaned forward, his hard gaze locked on Byron. "If I ever hear you talk about giving up again, I'll make sure you have nothing to give up. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." Byron had been pissed at the threat, but underneath, he'd also been confused. Had his father—what? Given him permission to keep rebelling?

He had turned and started to walk out of Hardwick's office when his father had called out, "The rack of lamb last night—was that you or George?"

It'd been a huge success, as far as Byron had been concerned. Even his half siblings had enjoyed the meal. "I cooked it. George supervised."

There'd been a long pause and Byron hadn't been sure if he'd been dismissed or not. Then Hardwick had said, "I expect you to present yourself as a Beaumont in the rest of the house. I don't want to see flour anywhere on your clothes ever again. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

And he hadn't left home. He'd stayed and put up with his father's crap about how he did servant's work and gotten better and better at cooking. Every so often, his father would look at him over the dinner dishes and say "that meal was especially good." Which was as close to a compliment as Byron had ever gotten out of him.

He hadn't thought about that chat, such as it was, in a long time. Not too long after that, Hardwick had keeled over dead of a heart attack. Frances scolded Byron about the flour in his hair, but no one had accused him of embarrassing the Beaumont name by insisting on doing servant's work. He hadn't had to fight for what he wanted anymore.

He'd *stopped* fighting for what he'd wanted.

Including Leona. Instead of fighting for her, he'd run away to Europe.

Well. Things had changed. He was in charge now and he knew what he wanted. He wanted Leona to marry him and he wanted to be a part of his son's life.

It was high time to start acting like a Beaumont.

* * *

Finally, it was five o'clock. Leona had made him look at color samples and shaped plates and steak knives and he didn't even know what all. Whatever was her favorite was what he went with—she was the designer, after all. What he cared about was the food.

He rinsed the lunch dishes in the sink and packed everything back into his car—except for the ring. That he put in his pocket. She'd left it on the table, and it made him nervous to have a twenty-thousand-dollar piece of jewelry sitting around.

She would wear it. She would accept his proposal.

This thought was followed by a quieter one, which barely whispered across his consciousness.

She would be his.

And why not? They were going to live together. They were going to get married. Why shouldn't he reclaim what he'd once had? As long as he could have her without letting her get under his skin like she had the first time. He'd always loved being with her. They were good together. He wanted to think they still could have that same magic in bed.

He could enjoy Leona but this time, he would not let his feelings for her blind him to the truth. She was still a liar. He had to keep his guard up, that was all.

She walked to her car door. "You want to follow me out? Assuming you're coming home with me..."

The ring was going to burn him clean through. "Yes, I'm coming home with you."

She looked at him then, her lips curved into a small smile and again he had to fight the urge to kiss her.

Oh, to hell with fighting that urge.

He closed the distance between them in three strides and pulled her into him. She made a small squeaking noise when he kissed her, but he didn't care.

He kissed her like he'd dreamed of kissing her for a long, cold year—like he'd kissed her last night. She might not be good for him—not now, not ever—but he couldn't stay away from her.

After a moment, she kissed him back. Her arms went around his neck and her mouth opened for him and he swept his tongue inside, tasting her sweetness.

He broke the kiss but he didn't let go of her. "Since we're off the clock," he whispered against her ear.

Her chest heaved against his for a moment as she clung to him. Then, apparently with great effort, she pulled away. "Byron," she said in a warning tone. "You can't keep kissing me like that."

"Is there another way you'd like me to kiss you?"

"No—I mean—it's just—you made it pretty clear that you only wanted to marry me for the baby's sake. And we are going to have separate rooms and..." She took a deep breath. "And you cared for me once. But not anymore."

He pulled the ring out of his pocket. "Would it be bad? Between us, I mean."

"I just need to know what to expect, that's all. One minute you're mad at me and the next you're cooking for me and saying I'll have my own room and then you're kissing me and offering me a ring—is it a family ring?"

He slipped the diamond out of the case and held it in the palm of his hand. "No. I bought it this morning." Something that wasn't tainted by her family name or his. Something that was theirs and theirs alone.

"Oh, okay. I guess it doesn't matter."

That made him smile. "It matters. I don't even know what Percy's full name is—is it Harper or Beaumont?"

"Percy Harper Beaumont. You're listed on the birth certificate as his father. But I gave him my name as a middle name."

She'd given the boy Byron's name. For some reason, that made him happy. He stepped back into her and lifted her head up so he could look her in the eye. "Thank you for that."

Her eyelids fluttered. "You're doing it again," she murmured.

"Leona." He cupped her face in his hands and waited until she looked him in the eyes. "You know what I want. The question is, what do you want?" As he recalled, she was the one who'd asked for a separate bed yet had also kissed him back twice now.

"We need to get going," she replied, completely ignoring his question. "May will worry." And with that, she turned and walked back to her car.

Byron stared after her for a moment and then shoved the ring in his pocket.

Beaumonts fought for what they wanted...to hell with what anyone else said.

Leona was about to learn how far he'd go to get what he wanted.

Eight

Leona fumbled with the keys in the lock of her apartment door. She didn't know why she was more nervous bringing Byron home with her this time, but she was. Even now, he stood too close to her, watching her. Waiting, no doubt, for an answer to his question.

If only she knew what she wanted.

"May?" She called out when she finally got the door open. "We're home."

Percy made a shrill noise. "Hi, baby," Leona said, walking into the living room and picking him up. "Did you miss me?"

May stood and said, "The doctor prescribed more drops. They're on the changing table."

"Thanks," Leona said.

There was an awkward pause as May glared at Byron without actually looking at him. "Right. I'll be back late."

"Have fun," Leona called after her as May grabbed her jacket and her purse.

That only got her a dirty look. Then May was gone.

Byron sighed. "I actually asked the Realtor if she could find us a place with a nice one-bedroom close by. I get the feeling May might not want to look at me every day."

"I'm not sure if she's going to move or not," Leona told him. If she didn't, Leona would have to keep paying rent on the apartment. Which might not be a bad plan—if it didn't work out with Byron, she could come back. "Here, hold Percy. I've got to change."

Byron sat down on the couch again and took the baby. Today, he looked slightly more confident. Or, at the very least, he looked less panicked. "How's my boy today?"

Percy made a face at him.

Leona hurried back to her room and changed into one of her prettier casual tops and a pair of jeans. She was not dressing for Byron's approval, not really. She was just being...comfortable.

Yeah, right.

When she got back to the living room, she found Byron and Percy stretched out on the floor together, both on their tummies. Byron was smiling at Percy, encouraging him. Leona wanted to stand there and watch them. This was what she'd dreamed of before Byron left her—having him all to herself, with no Beaumonts and no Harpers around to complicate things. They were going to have a family one day—they'd talked about it.

And then he'd gone and proved himself to be a Beaumont just like all the rest. He'd left her, like her father had always warned her Beaumonts did. And now he was back, issuing orders and expecting them to be followed to the letter.

She couldn't trust him. All this stuff he was doing—the ring, the apartment, talking about being a family—all of it was because he thought he wanted it. It had nothing to do with what she wanted. And the moment he changed his mind, it could all be taken away from her again.

She wanted to tie herself to a man she could count on, a man who would not treat her as if she were a ball and chain around his neck like her father treated her mother, and yet would also not treat her as if she were disposable and forgettable like all Beaumonts treated women.

She wanted stability and happiness and safety for herself, her son and her sister.

There'd been a time when she'd thought Byron was all of that and more.

She could not make that mistake a second time.

She focused on the safety and happiness of her son because right now, that was the thing that drove every other action. She would sacrifice her own heart to save his. "Having fun?"

"I was curious to see if he'd roll over," Byron replied, propping himself up on his elbow.

"He hasn't gotten that far yet." She sat down on the floor on the other side of Percy. "How are your ears, baby?"

Percy made a grunting noise as he tried to push himself up. “I know,” she told the baby. “It’s so hard to look around when you’re on your tummy.”

She rubbed his back and looked at Byron. He was staring at her as if he’d never seen her before. “What?”

“You haven’t answered my questions—any of them.”

“Ask me again,” she told him, steeling herself to making it official.

“Will you move in with me?”

Letting Percy have this—a loving relationship with his father? Even if it meant torturing herself with her greatest love and her greatest mistake every single day for the rest of her life?

It was no contest.

“Yes.”

“Will you come with me tomorrow to look at places? You can bring Percy, too, since he’s going to be living there. He might have an opinion.”

She couldn’t help but grin. It was a thoughtful thing to say. If only everything he said and did was that thoughtful. “Yes.”

He stared at her for a moment longer. There was something in his eyes, something deep and serious. “Will you marry me?”

She needed to say yes. For Percy. But... “I need to know what this marriage will actually be before I agree to it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Will you see other women?”

“No.” He didn’t hesitate at all, which was good, she guessed. There was a pause. “You?”

“No. I have too much on my plate to even think about dating.”

That got her a nice smile. “So we’re agreed. No seeing other people. What else?”

Just the small matter of the facts. And the fact was that Beaumonts always cheated. Hardwick Beaumont always took the kids. Beaumonts were not to be trusted, no matter what.

“If it doesn’t work out,” she asked in a quiet voice as she picked up Percy and held him to her chest, “you won’t take him away from me, will you?”

Byron sat up, as well. He leaned forward and kissed the top of Percy’s head and said, “I am not my father, Leona.”

She didn’t reply. The silence seemed to stretch, pushing him away from her.

“And what about you?” His voice had turned colder. “If it doesn’t work out, you won’t take him and disappear? I will not stand for another lie, Leona. Because if you betray me again...” The words trailed off, but there was no give in his voice.

A cold chill ran up her spine. The threat was implicit. If she did something he didn’t like, he would make her suffer for it.

“I never lied.” It sounded weak to her own ears. “I told you my last name.”

“Is that what you tell yourself? It wasn’t a bald-faced lie, therefore you’re completely innocent? How touching.” He held out his arms for Percy.

She held her baby so tightly that he started to fuss. Byron sighed, the only acknowledgment of her feelings. “I want things to be different, you know. I don’t want to be my parents.” He came and sat beside her. Percy squirmed in her arms and she had no choice but to hand him over to Byron. “I know exactly what my father did to my mother,” he went on in a quiet voice. “I would never, ever do that to you or to Percy.”

She shouldn’t believe him, shouldn’t trust him. But he said it with such conviction that she couldn’t help it. She looked down at her son, who was happily trying to suck on all his fingers at once. “I need help with him. If May doesn’t move down with us, we’ll have to find a day care for him and that’s not cheap. The drops for his ears aren’t cheap, and I didn’t know how I was going to pay for Percy’s surgery to get tubes, either. For the ear infections.”

"I'll take care of it. All of it." He said it in an almost dismissive way, as if he'd never had to worry about money.

Well, maybe he hadn't. After all, she hadn't, either—not until she'd walked away from her father and his fortune. There'd been a very real price for her independence, but it'd been one she was willing to pay to keep Percy happy and safe.

Would she really give up that hard-fought independence and let Byron call the shots just because it was best for her son—even if it wasn't anywhere close to what was best for her?

No, she would not panic. She forced herself to breath and keep her head on her shoulders. "What about your family?"

"What about them?"

She gave him a hard look. "You saw how Frances reacted to me. If we get married, are they going to be...difficult about it?"

He grimaced. "Things have changed. It's almost like we all finally figured out that Hardwick is really and truly dead and we don't have to be what he thought we were anymore. Even Chadwick is different now. He smiles and everything."

"I wish my father realized that, too," she said wistfully. If only they could all just go on with their lives without a decades-old feud to haunt them.

Percy made the high whining noise that signaled he was getting hungry. "Oh, I should be making dinner."

She started to get up, but Byron was quicker. "Let me. What else does he eat?"

"He liked the applesauce," she called after him as he headed for the kitchen. "And yogurt and cereal. But it's still mostly baby food at this point."

Byron ducked his head around the kitchen door, a jar of what looked like green beans and mashed potatoes in his hand. "This stuff?" He made a face.

"Yes, that stuff," she replied, trying not to be defensive about it. "That's a good brand—all organic, no added anything."

After giving her a dismissive look, Byron disappeared back into the kitchen. Leona stood and checked Percy's diaper. "I have a feeling," she told the baby as she carried him back to the changing table, "that he's going to start from scratch."

She wasn't wrong about that. By the time she got Percy changed, Byron had peeled potatoes boiling and a can of green beans heating. "I don't like using the canned stuff," he told her in his chef voice. "I'll pick up some fresh or frozen ones for him."

"You don't have to..." He cut her off with a look. She sighed in resignation. "Fine. Go ahead."

In forty minutes, they sat down to mashed potatoes and green beans—Percy's being slightly more mashed together than theirs—and pan-fried chicken in a parmesan crust. "This is delicious," she said in between spooning Percy's dinner into his mouth and taking bites of her own. Percy agreed by thumping the top of his high-chair tray with both hands and opening his mouth for more.

"Good," Byron said, watching Percy swallow another mouthful. "I used to cook for the new kids, you know. When my dad would remarry and his new wife had babies. Dad expected us all to like the same things he did, but it was hard for a four-year-old to really get into steak au poivre, you know? George always had something else for us, but we had to eat it in the kitchen so neither of our parents would catch us." He looked at his plate. "That was a long time ago."

"That sounds a lot like dinners in my house growing up."

Byron looked at her. "We never really did discuss your past. You always changed the subject." He stabbed at his chicken viciously. "And I never caught on."

She couldn't tell who he was madder at—her or himself. "I knew who you were—it was hard to miss that last name. But I..." She sighed. "I wanted something different than Harpers versus Beaumonts. I wanted to see if you were really what my father claimed you were. I wanted to know if you liked me for me, not because I was heiress to a fortune."

She'd never gotten the chance to say those words out loud to him. Everything had happened so fast that night... "I just wanted to be something more than Leon Harper's daughter."

Byron set down his fork. "You were." He stood, picked up his plate and headed back to the kitchen. "You were..."

Leona leaned forward to catch the end of that sentence because it seemed important. But when she didn't hear the ending, she got up and followed Byron into the kitchen. "What?"

"Nothing," he said gruffly, scraping his plate into the trash and running hot water into the sink.

"Byron." She stood next to him and put her hand on his shoulder in an attempt to turn him toward her. He didn't budge. *"What?"*

"You should have told me," he replied, grabbing his plate and scrubbing it furiously. "It wouldn't have mattered if you'd told me yourself. Instead I had to learn it from your father."

Guilt, which had been creeping around the edges of their conversation for the past few minutes, burst out into the open. "I wanted to. But I didn't want to risk ruining the best thing that had ever happened to me."

For a second, she thought he was going to give her that smile, the one that always melted her. But then his face hardened. "You didn't trust me."

She stared at him as a new emotion pushed back at the guilt—anger. "First off," she snapped, "I'm not the one who bailed. I was right here, dealing with the fallout of you abandoning me. I went on with my life when all I wanted to do was run and hide, too. I did not have that luxury, Byron."

Byron opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. "Secondly, this is exactly why I haven't said yes to your marriage proposal. At least this time it wasn't an order, but I simply do not know when you're going to switch from doting father to angry ex-lover."

Percy began to fuss, no doubt unhappy about being left behind while everyone else was in the kitchen. However, for the first time in her life, Leona didn't rush off to pick him up.

"And finally, you didn't trust me, either. Four days, Byron. That's how long it took to get away from my father—and you were gone. *Gone.* You couldn't even stick around for a damn week to wait for me." Unexpectedly, her throat closed up, but she would not crack. "So you'll forgive me if I want a little more reassurance that you're not going to up and disappear again, that you're not going to marry me only to dump me and take my son."

"You need me," he said in a quiet voice.

Percy let out a wail of impatience. Leona heard a spoon clatter to the ground.

"I need child support," she corrected him. "I need a job. You have yet to prove to me that I need *you*."

And with that, she turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Nine

It was hard to focus on bathing Percy with Leona's words ringing in Byron's ears. Wasn't offering to marry her enough reassurance that he wasn't going to disappear and take the baby? Marriage was... Okay, maybe it wasn't a permanent legal bond, but it was not something to be taken lightly. Once they were legally wed, it wasn't as though he could just walk off with the boy. Didn't she see that?

Besides, where were the reassurances *he* needed? The promises that she wouldn't lie to him again? Or that she wouldn't sic her father and his horde of lawyers upon Byron and his family? The reassurance that she wasn't just waiting until he let his guard down all the way to hit him where it would hurt the most—Percy? She'd already lied to him twice. Even if that had been a series of massive misunderstandings, it didn't change the fact that she had lied to him for months and months. How could he trust her, really?

Of course, he didn't get far in these thoughts because Percy slapped at his bathwater, splashing it into Byron's face. The baby made a trilling noise as a toy boat floated past him. There was more splashing. Byron's shirt was getting soaked and Percy was not getting any cleaner.

Just then, Percy twisted to reach the boat and Byron lost his grip. “Whoa!” he cried as Percy’s head dunked under the water.

Immediately, Leona was next to him, pulling Percy upright. “I’ll hold him,” she said and amazingly, she didn’t sound panicked. “You wash.”

“I’m sorry,” Byron said as Percy sputtered and coughed. He let out a disgruntled cry but stopped when Leona nudged the boat back in front of him.

“It’s okay,” she said softly and Byron was surprised to see she was smiling. “It’ll get easier.”

“If you say so,” he said, scrubbing Percy’s legs as fast as he could.

The argument—well, it wasn’t quite an argument, but it’d certainly been more than a discussion—hung in the air between them. As they finished Percy’s bath and got him ready for bed, Byron thought about what Leona had said. That she hadn’t told him who her family was because she didn’t want to be a Harper.

Did he believe her?

For the past year, he’d been operating under the assumption that she’d misled him on purpose, that she’d intentionally withheld the information so she could use her family name against him at the right time. And hadn’t the right time been that awful night?

But maybe...maybe that’s not what had happened.

He ran through his memories again—of Rory calling him out and, when Byron mouthed off, firing him. Of taking a swing at Rory because, damn it, he’d put up with enough of that man’s crap over the year and a half he’d worked there and that was not how it was supposed to end.

And then Bruce—the pastry chef Byron had counted as a friend—had grabbed him from behind and physically hauled him out of the restaurant and thrown him down on the sidewalk, just in time to see Leona getting into Leon Harper’s chauffeured vehicle.

Except...had she? Or had Leon shoved his daughter into the car? It’d been dark and rainy and Byron had thought...

Had it been part of the lie? Or was she now telling the truth? Was she being truthful about the lies she’d already told? Was that even a thing?

This was what she did to him. She spun his head around and around until he didn’t know which way was up anymore.

While Leona nursed Percy, Byron furiously washed and dried the dishes, trying to remember exactly what Leon Harper had done in the minute before he’d gotten up into Byron’s stunned face and taunted him.

That’s when Leona came back into the kitchen.

“He go down okay?” Byron asked, because it seemed like the thing a parent would ask about.

“I gave him something for his ears. Hopefully he’ll sleep for at least a couple of hours.”

“Hopefully?” A couple of hours did not seem like enough.

Leona gave him a tired smile. “That’s why we were looking at tubes.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He dried another dish. “How many ear infections has he had?”

“I’ve lost count. May gets up with him sometimes, but he usually just wants to nurse.”

Byron’s gaze dropped to her chest. She wasn’t wearing a bra and he could see the outline of her nipples poking through the thin fabric of her shirt. Lust hit him hard and low as his mind chose exactly that moment to remember the kiss from earlier this evening and the one from last night.

“A-*hem*,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Sorry,” he replied, focusing all his attention back on the pots and pans.

Leona sighed. “Are you sure we should live together?”

He tensed. Damn it, this was going from bad to worse. “As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to a regular custody agreement where we each have Percy for a week or two and then trade, with child support and the like.” She paused. “It might be better that way.”

“Better for who? Not better for Percy—not when your father can take him. No way.”

She grabbed a towel and one of the few remaining pots. “Byron, I don’t want this to be hard.”

“Hard?” He snorted. “I hate to burst your bubble, but nothing about this is easy.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “All I’m saying is that you’re obviously still mad at me and I don’t want Percy to grow up in a household where his parents are constantly sniping at each other. That doesn’t make me the bad guy here.”

“I didn’t say you were the bad guy. And I’m not mad at you.” He was, however, getting pretty pissed at himself. He couldn’t be doing a worse job fighting for what he wanted if he tried. His father was probably rolling over in his grave.

If Hardwick Beaumont were still here, he’d slap Byron on the shoulder and say, “Stop screwing around. She’s just a woman, for God’s sake. You’re a Beaumont. Act like one.”

Except Byron didn’t want to be a Beaumont if it meant bending Leona and Percy to his will just because he could. He didn’t want to rule by force and fear.

She glared at him. “No, but you don’t have to say the words, Byron. Your actions speak quite loudly.”

“Oh, yeah? Then what does this say?” He grabbed her by the arms and hauled her to him. The kiss was not sweet or gentle—it was hard and unbending. He might not be able to get her to say yes to his proposal, but he was damned sure she wasn’t going to say no.

After a moment, she bent. Her head slanted sideways and she opened her mouth for him with a sigh. He deepened the kiss. Could he kiss her like this without getting lost in the soft sweetness of her body?

Because that’s what she was now, all soft and warm in his arms. His pulse beat out a faster rhythm. When she broke the kiss, he let her. “What are we going to do, Byron?”

“We’ll do a trial run. I’ll get us a place and you and Percy can come stay for a little while—say a week or two. You won’t have to pack up all your things here. And if it doesn’t work...” He paused and swallowed. He didn’t want to admit it might not work. He didn’t want to be wrong. But he had to give her something, a fallback to prove that he wouldn’t hold her hostage once he had her and Percy with him. “If it doesn’t work, then we’ll go to your plan.”

He could do that. He could trust her enough to bring her under his roof. And once he had her there, then he could figure out which part of her story was the truth—or if she was still lying to him.

For some reason that could only be described as self-destructive, he wanted to take her at her word.

She leaned back to look at him. “And if it does?”

Her eyes were wide—but not with fear. Instead, she looked hopeful. And hope looked good on her. He lifted his hand and stroked her cheek. “If it does, I’ll ask you to marry me again.”

She leaned into his touch and exhaled through slightly parted lips. He’d kissed her to end the argument and remind her that he was in control, but instead of it dampening his desire for her, it’d only ramped it up. He needed her—only her. No one, not even sensual European women, could satisfy him like this woman did.

“Two weeks?” she said softly, staring into his eyes.

He could get lost in her light brown eyes. As corny as the sentiment was, it was true. “Yeah,” he said, his head dipping to meet hers. “That sounds good.”

“Mmm,” was all she could say because by then, Byron was kissing her and she was kissing him back and there weren’t any more words, any more negotiations. There was just him and her, the way it had been. The way it should still be.

The kiss deepened when she touched his lips with her tongue. It was a hesitant touch, as though she wasn’t sure what would happen next.

Byron knew what he wanted to happen. He wanted to sweep her off her feet and carry her back to the bedroom and spend the rest of the night remembering what they’d once had. He didn’t want to think about betrayal and lies. He just wanted *her*.

He swept his tongue into her mouth and felt her body respond. Old memories—good ones of the first time he'd kissed her—came rushing back. She'd been hesitant then, too. Now he knew it was because he was a Beaumont but back then he'd thought it was because she was sweet and innocent and afraid he'd push her too far. So he'd just kissed her good-night against the side of her car before she drove home alone.

Which was what he should do now. He should kiss her long and hard and then remove himself from the apartment. He should go home and take care of business himself instead of burying his body into hers over and over again. He shouldn't push his luck. Hell, he didn't have much luck left to push.

But Leona ran her fingers through his hair and leaned back, exposing her neck as she moaned, "Oh, Byron," and he was lost. He would always be lost to her.

He kissed her on the spot just under her ear and was rewarded with a shudder of pleasure. "Tell me what you want," he whispered. "Do you want me?"

She didn't answer right away, so he kissed her again. Their tongues tangled as heat built between them. Every moment he spent holding her made it that much harder to walk away and soon he would barely be able to walk at all. But he didn't care. If she brought him to his knees, so be it.

"Tell me," he demanded again. This time he took a step forward and pivoted, leaning her up against the counter. He slid his hands under her bottom and lifted her. Her body felt *so* good in his hands. "Tell me you want me." As he said it, he tilted his knee forward and pushed her legs apart.

She hadn't let go of him, hadn't pushed him away. Instead, she trailed her lips over his jaw and down his neck.

He stepped into her and tilted his hips so his straining erection rubbed against her very center. Leona gasped at the contact. She jolted upright, her eyes even wider as she stared at him.

This was it—the absolute last moment he could walk away from her tonight.

He thrust against her a second time without taking his eyes off hers. Her mouth dropped open into a perfect O and he couldn't help himself. He kissed her, unable to restrain the passion that was driving him forward over and over again.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him tight. "You," she whispered in his ear. "I want you."

That was all he needed. He lifted her off the counter and carried her down the short hallway to her bedroom. Each step drove him against her, harder and harder, so that by the time he managed to kick the door shut behind them, she was moaning in his ear. "Byron—oh, Byron."

He all but threw her onto the bed. "Babe," he groaned as he covered her body with his. A nagging thought in the back of his brain told him it'd be a good idea to take this seduction and bedding slowly—that he should do it right.

But then Leona dug the tips of her fingernails into his back and the sensation drove any lingering rational thought from his mind.

He sat back on his knees and pulled her up enough that he could strip off her shirt. Then he traced the pads of his fingers over her skin and around her nipples. The little pink buds stiffened at his touch and he grinned.

Leona lay back, her hands over her head. "It's not—You're not weirded out, are you?"

"Nope. Your breasts are amazing. Your body is *amazing*." He flicked his fingers over the hard tips.

"It's not the same," she said and he heard the concern in her tone. "Everything changed. I'm not the same girl you remember."

"I know." He snagged the waistband of her pants. "You're better. You're a woman now." With that, he pulled.

Her pants peeled right off her legs and then she was in nothing but a pair of white cotton panties. Keeping one hand on her breast, he moved down. He pushed her legs apart and lowered himself onto her. He pulled the panties aside and kissed her on her sex. "Not so different," he murmured. He

inhaled her scent deeply and everything he'd tried to forget for a year came crashing back on him. "Oh, babe," he said before he licked her.

Leona's body shook at his touch as she moaned. Her legs tried to close around him but he used his free hand to hold her open as he worked on her body. "Yeah, that's it," he whispered against her skin as her back arched. "You're so beautiful."

"Need...more," she ground out through clenched teeth.

"All you had to do was ask." He released his hold on her breast and trailed his hand over her stomach until he got both hands into the elastic waistband of her panties. He pulled them down and Leona kicked free.

She was completely open to him now. She held her hands over her stomach but he pried them away. There, permanently etched into her skin, were pale pink lines that hadn't been there before.

"Byron," she said in a trembling voice, as if she were waiting for pain to hit.

"Beautiful," he murmured as he kissed the stretch marks. She'd brought his son into this world with her body and he wanted to show her just how much he appreciated that.

So, even though he was about to bust out of his jeans, he took the time to kiss all of her stretch marks before moving lower a second time. He pressed his mouth against her again. This time, he didn't do tender or gentle. This time, he was hell-bent on bringing her right up to the edge and then pushing her over. He looped his arms around her legs and pulled her up so he had a better angle.

She tangled her fingers into his hair, pulling it loose from the low ponytail. "Oh, Byron," she gasped quietly.

"You still need more?"

"Please," she got out in a high voice filled with need. "*Please*, Byron."

He couldn't help but grin. "*This* is how much I missed you," he murmured as he slipped a finger inside of her. She moaned in pleasure as he stroked her and licked her and kissed her.

"Yes," she whispered. She let go of his hair and pulled his face up so she could look him in the eye. "More. Need *more*."

"This?" he asked, slipping a second finger into her. "Is this what you want?"

Her mouth dropped open again, but she shook her head no.

"Tell me what you want, Leona. I need to hear the words." He didn't know why, but he did. No misunderstandings this time—just the truth between them. The truth he'd never been able to deny.

"I want you—all of you," she whispered. "Make love to me, Byron. *Please*."

He hopped off the bed to shuck his jeans. He had a condom in his wallet. He dug around until he found it, which took a few minutes because Leona had leaned forward and pressed her lips to his tip. He groaned in the small space between the pleasure of her mouth on his erection and the pain of needing to hold back his climax. "Babe, please."

As she lifted her eyes to look at him, her other hand cupped him. Too much—she was too much. "Babe," he said in warning. He didn't want to lose it before he'd shown her how good it could still be between them and he didn't know how much time they had before the baby awoke or her sister came back. "Let me do this for you."

With his last bit of self-control, he pushed her away—at least, far enough away that he could roll the condom on. Then he climbed back onto the bed, back between her legs, and lowered himself to her. "You still like it like this?" he asked as he tucked her knees under his arms and pinned her to the bed.

"I think so. I'll let you know." Then she licked his lips and he couldn't hold back any longer.

He fit himself against her and plunged into her body. She was so wet and ready for him, as though she'd been waiting for just this moment, too. He buried himself in her and kissed her and thought, *I've finally come home*.

"Yes," she hissed as he drove into her again and again. "Still like that. Harder."

"Yes, ma'am," was all he could say. He had to focus on holding off his climax until she'd come. He had to show her how good he could be for her—to her.

So he thrust in harder and harder until the bed was squeaking and she was moaning and all he could see and feel and hear and taste was Leona. His Leona.

"Oh—oh!" she gasped as he gave her everything he had. Her body clenched down on his and her head came off the pillow and as the climax took her, he kissed her and kept thrusting while she rode it out.

Then she fell back onto the bed and his climax began to roar through his blood. Then—unexpectedly—something changed. The sensation surrounding his erection shifted. Deepened.

He tried to pull out but it was too late. He'd come—and the condom had broken.

Oh, hell.

"What?" Leona panted when Byron pulled away from her.

"I lost the condom," he said in a state of shock.

"Oh." Leona hopped out of bed and basically ran for the bathroom.

Byron sat down heavily on the edge of the bed and threw the remains of the useless condom into the trash. For the love of everything holy—he'd barely gotten used to the idea of being a father to one. Was he already on his way to being a father of two?

Stupid. He shouldn't have used an old condom, shouldn't have kept it in his wallet. He shouldn't have taken Leona to bed, not yet.

But this was how it always seemed to happen with her—he couldn't help himself. He'd wanted to show her how good they could be together and instead?

He'd set them both up for another pregnancy scare. What a freaking mess.

Maybe she was right. Maybe they shouldn't live together, shouldn't get married. Because this was how it was going to be. They'd always be walking the thin line between love and disaster.

The only difference was that, at least this time, he knew when they'd crossed that line.

Leona walked back into the bedroom, head down, arms crossed over her bare breasts. "Come here," he told her, pulling her onto his lap.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. "Might not be anything, after all."

"Might not," he agreed, trying to sound optimistic.

"This doesn't change the plans," she added. "Two-week trial."

"Are you sure?" He kissed her cheek. "Because, right up until the end there, I was... Well, I don't know if I'm going to be able to keep my hands off you." That got him a small smile. "I don't know if I'll *ever* be able to keep my hands off you, Leona," he said in all seriousness as he stroked her hair. "Not even for two weeks."

"I wish..."

"Yes?"

She leaned into him and sighed. "I wish I knew if that was a good thing or bad thing."

"Parts of it were very good. Great, even."

She giggled, but just then a small cry came from the other side of the wall. "Oh—the baby!" Leona said, shooting up and gathering her clothes. She was dressed in seconds and rushing out of the room.

Byron grabbed his shorts and his pants and pulled them on. He didn't know if he was staying here tonight or not. Not, he decided. He didn't have another condom and he couldn't risk the temptation of Leona again, not when there was still a chance that the condom failure might be nothing, after all.

He finished dressing and then peeked his head into Percy's room. The only light spilled into the room from the hallway. Leona sat in the dark, holding Percy to her breast. This time, he noted the things he'd need to get for his new place—the crib, the dresser, the glider.

But he also watched Leona and Percy. One of Percy's hands lazily waved around in the air, as if he wanted to grab on to something but was too sleepy to know what. Leona smiled down at him, her eyes full of love as she offered her finger for him to grip.

Byron had missed so much. The whole of her pregnancy, the delivery, Percy's first smile—all of it was gone into the past. But starting right now, he could make up for that. He could be here for the first time Percy rolled over, the first time he stood and took a step.

He wanted to be a better father than the one he'd had. That's all there was to it.

Behind him, the front door opened. May walked back into the apartment, already glaring at him. "You're still here?" She looked him up and down and sniffed in distaste.

Byron shrugged his shoulders at Leona and then walked over to where May was standing. He kept his voice low so he wouldn't wake Percy. "We're going to look at some real estate tomorrow. You're welcome to join us."

"I'm not going to uproot my life for you," she spat at him. "Not after what you did to Leona."

He kept his calm. Mostly because he didn't want to upset the baby. "I could find you a place of your own nearby if you wanted to stay close to Percy."

At this, May softened a little bit. "Why would you do that?"

"Because he loves you and your sister loves you," Byron replied. "And I want them to be happy."

Whatever small foothold he'd gained with May disappeared. "Then just stay away from them. From all of us," she hissed.

"I wish I could," he muttered as May sidestepped him and headed for her room. "I wish I could."

But he knew he couldn't.

Ten

They met outside the brewery. Leona was exhausted. Between the three times Percy had gotten her up in the middle of the night and the wild dreams she'd had about Byron, she'd gotten very little rest.

But here she was anyway, picking Byron up at the restaurant site instead of the Beaumont Mansion so his family wouldn't see him leaving in her car.

"How are you?" he asked as he climbed into the passenger seat. But before she could answer, he'd pulled her into a light kiss.

In the back, Percy shook his rattle.

"Sorry," Byron said, clearly not sorry at all.

And that, in a nutshell, was her problem. If she were to find herself pregnant again, she'd *have* to marry him.

An insidious voice in her head that sounded a lot like her father whispered, *Maybe that was his plan the entire time. Get you pregnant again to force your hand.*

She shook that thought out of her head. "Tired. He woke up a couple more times last night."

Byron frowned. "How long do those drops take to work?"

"A couple of days. Where are we going?"

Byron gave her the address and they headed out. "Do I take it May's still not interested in relocating to stay closer to you two?"

"No, not particularly." Which was the diplomatic way of saying it. At breakfast, May had been quite upset that Leona was spending the day with Byron—and was taking Percy with her.

They drove in silence. The weight of what had happened between them last night hung heavy in the air. She could always buy the plan B pill, just to make sure she didn't get pregnant—but she didn't want to do that without discussing it with Byron, and she had absolutely no idea how to begin that conversation.

So, instead, she would look at real estate with a man she still wasn't convinced she should live with. Because last night he'd told her in all seriousness that he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself.

She liked to think she was no fool. Oh, sure, she had made some foolish choices. But this?

Living together meant sleeping together, no matter what either of them said about separate rooms. If she agreed to this trial, they'd be together in every sense of the word.

Part of her thought that was a grand idea. It's what she'd wanted, after all, back before she got pregnant the first time and Byron abandoned her and it all blew up in her face. The other part of her couldn't get past the part where Byron had abandoned her.

Even though Byron had laid her out last night and made her orgasm like no time had passed between them, she wasn't sure what she wanted to happen next. She wanted Byron but...she had to put her son first.

Of course, Percy should know his father. That was nonnegotiable.

God, her head was such a mess. Maybe if she'd gotten more than four hours of nonconsecutive sleep she'd be able to think.

They arrived at the Realtor's office, and she came out to greet them. "Hi! I'm Sherry!" the woman said in a way-too-bright voice. Leona winced. It was still far too early for this level of enthusiasm. "I don't want you to have to unstrap that little cutie so we'll just head out, okay?"

"That's fine," Byron said. "We'll follow you?"

"Sure!" Sherry said with a blindingly white smile.

Leona turned to Byron. "What did you tell her?"

"Nothing." He gave her a sly grin. "Just that I was a Beaumont and I expected a high level of service. That's all."

"Oh, Lord," Leona muttered, following Sherry's car out of the parking lot. "Let the upselling begin."

Byron chuckled.

They drove into Littleton, which was not a town that Leona had spent a lot of time in. Her family lived in Cherry Hills in an old mansion behind a gated fence.

Although Littleton looked like a nicer place than the section of Aurora where she and May lived, it didn't come close to Cherry Hills. At least, not until the Realtor made a couple of turns and May found herself driving past a country club. "Byron?" she asked. "I thought you were just going to get us an apartment or something."

"Or something," he agreed as the Realtor pulled into the driveway of a truly stunning house. From the outside, it looked as if it was maybe half the size of her family's mansion—and easily five times the size of her current apartment, if not more.

Leona opened her car door and gaped. The house was built to look like a log cabin, but this was no primitive home. The red tile roof gleamed in the morning sunlight and the foundation plantings were lush—obviously well watered despite the lingering drought conditions.

"Here we are!" said Sherry with an even bigger smile.

"How much?" Leona demanded.

Sherry blinked and said, "It's $1.3 million, but it's been on the market for a few months so I think there's negotiating room."

"No."

Sherry's megawatt smile faltered. "I'm sorry?"

"No," Leona said, ignoring the Realtor and turning back to Byron, who had the nerve to look innocent. "This was supposed to be a temporary thing, a three-bedroom apartment—not a—" She turned back to Sherry. "How many square feet?"

"Nine thousand, if you account for the maid's room over the garage."

Nine thousand square feet of luxury. Not a cozy little apartment. This place had a maid's room, for God's sake. This felt wrong. Everything about it was off. She'd spent the past year scrimping and scraping. She didn't want this situation to even suggest that she could be bought—that her affection

was for sale. That's what her father would do if he admitted he'd screwed up. He'd throw an insanely expensive gift at her and expect that to make everything okay.

Well, this was not okay. Her affection could not be bought and that was final. Yes, she wanted stability for Percy but this was so far beyond stable that it wasn't funny. "*No*, Byron. This isn't what we agreed on."

She started to get back in the car, but Percy began to fuss and before she could do anything, Byron had the back door open and was unbuckling the baby. "You want out? This place has a swing set in the back," he told the boy. "And a big lawn where you can run around and we could even get a puppy! Would you like a puppy, Percy?"

Percy squealed in delight, although Leona was sure he didn't really grasp what *puppy* meant. She glared at Byron. What the hell was he trying to do here—bribe a six-month-old?

"Come on, little man," Byron said. He shut the back door and walked to the front of the car. "Let's wait for Mommy."

Leona had several choice things she wanted to say, but Percy squealed and clapped his hands and he looked...happy. She was stuck in a very real way. She couldn't drive off without her son—but she didn't like this bait and switch. It felt as though Byron was steamrollering her and she didn't like it. If she wanted to be steamrollered, she'd go home and her father would be happy to run roughshod all over her.

"We're only looking," Byron said. He turned to Sherry, who was not wearing any kind of smile at all. "We have other places to look at that are at other price points, correct?"

"Yes!" Sherry replied enthusiastically.

Byron leaned down and kissed the top of Percy's head while he kept his eyes fastened on hers.

"Fine. But I don't have to like it," Leona snapped as she got out of the car.

"Duly noted. I want to see the kitchen."

Sherry unlocked the house and led them inside. The place had a grand feeling to it, but it wasn't the same sort of cold, sterile feeling Leona's parents' mansion had given her—or, for that matter, that the Beaumont Mansion had given her, kitchen notwithstanding. Instead of severe colors and harsh lighting designed to make everything look as expensive as possible, this entryway was filled with the warmth of the early-morning sun.

"Oh," she couldn't help but whisper.

"Beautiful," Byron agreed. "Which way's the kitchen?"

Sherry went on and on about the specifications of the house—the number of bedrooms and bathrooms and the view and so on. All Leona could do was trail along behind them, trying to take in the magnitude of the place.

She hadn't allowed herself to be disappointed with her apartment because she'd been desperate and only had so much money. It was the best she could do on short notice and, for that, she was grateful for it.

But for the first time in a year, she allowed herself to think about living in a place that was above good-enough. Byron spent twenty minutes in the kitchen, examining the appliances and discussing a "work triangle" with the Realtor, who was back to full-on perkiness. While they talked, Leona held Percy and they walked through the living room again. Wide French doors opened onto a tree-lined yard. And, as Byron had promised, there was a swing set—although this was closer to the equipment one would find in a park.

They toured the four bedrooms, including a master suite that had a huge whirlpool tub, and then they looked at the office. "This would be yours," Byron said in a low voice as he opened the door for her.

Leona couldn't help but gasp. The room was mostly windows and looked out onto the green expanse of the golf course. Behind that, the mountains broke rank and raced up to the sky. The

morning light gleamed deep purple off the mountains' sides. There wasn't a parking lot or Dumpster in sight.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"I thought that, if you ever quit working for that Fish guy—"

"Lutefisk," she corrected, staring at the built-in bookcases and filing cabinets that made up the interior wall.

"Yeah, him. If you wanted to quit working for him, you'd need an office space for your business."

She'd always talked about opening her own design firm—how she'd design his restaurant and then build her clientele from there. She turned to face him. "You remembered."

"I never forgot. Not you," he replied, holding his gaze with hers. "I want to make it up to you."

She wanted to believe that—to believe him. But Percy squirmed in her arms and she thought of all the long months without Byron, of being completely on her own.

"By buying me an extravagant house?" She forced herself to walk back out into the hall, away from the beautiful office and the stunning views.

"I've got to live somewhere—somewhere that doesn't involve my extended family," he replied, following her out. "And you requested your own space, did you not?"

Sherry gave them a sideways glance. "Let's go check out that playground!" she said, leaning forward to speak directly to Percy.

"I requested separate bedrooms. Not a freaking nine-thousand-square-foot mansion, Byron. It feels like you're trying to buy my loyalty. Or at least my complicity. And I don't like it."

He stared at her. "What on God's green earth are you talking about?"

"It just feels like this is something my father would do. Throw a lot of money at a problem—"

"You are not a problem," he interrupted. "Percy is not a problem."

"No? Maybe not right now, but how long before you remember you're still mad at me? Or when Percy has a rough day, a rough night and won't stop screaming? Then it'll be a problem, all right. *Mine.* When the going gets tough, you'll get going."

Sherry poked her head back around the corner. "Everything all right?" she asked.

Byron fixed Leona with a hard glare. She fought the urge to step back, to agree with him—to go along to get along. Those days had passed. She had to stand firm—this was her life, too. So what if the house was beautiful? So what if it had everything she could ever want in a home?

It would still be bought and paid for by Byron. He'd control the money, the house—and her. She was only useful as long as Percy needed her. Oh, Byron could dress it up with a pretty office or whatever, but still—she'd be dependent on him. And after she'd left home, she'd vowed to never be dependent on another man for as long as she lived.

After all, if it was his house on his terms, what would happen to her if it didn't work out? Would he show her the door? He might not disappear into the night again—but there were other ways to be abandoned. Wasn't that what his father had always done? Hardwick had never gone anywhere, but as soon as he'd tired of his wife, out she went without a penny to her name. If that wasn't abandonment, she didn't know what was.

She couldn't handle the rejection, not a second time. So she stood firm. She didn't back down and she didn't apologize for having an opinion. She was in control of her destiny, damn it all. If only destiny would stop throwing her curveballs.

Byron turned to the Realtor, who waited with an expression that made Leona think of a golden retriever.

"We'll take it," he said decisively.

Another freaking curveball.

Destiny had a funny sense of humor.

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Eleven

The next thing Byron knew, Leona was stomping away from him. Why was she being so damn stubborn?

He had the entire buyout from the sale of the Beaumont Brewery sitting in a bank account, completely untouched. Seventeen million dollars—plus compounded interest—was waiting for him and if he wanted to buy himself a nice house, then damn it, he *would*.

He thought Leona was just going to cool off in a different room—but then he heard the front door slam.

"Leona!" he yelled, running after her. He got the front door open as she was belting Percy into his seat. "Leona, wait!"

She shot him an incredibly dirty look, but she did not wait. She got into the car and fired it up.

Before Byron could give chase, his phone rang with the tone he'd selected for Matthew. What the hell... He had to talk to Matthew. If anyone could fix this mess that Byron kept making worse, it was his older brother. So, with a groan of frustration, he let Leona go.

"Yeah," he said.

"For the love of God, tell me you're *not* backing out of the restaurant." Byron could almost see Matthew pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

The Realtor poked her head out. "Is everything okay?" she asked, as if the answer wasn't obvious. "Did your wife change her mind about the house?"

"Hang on," Byron said. Then, to Sherry, he said, "No, we'll still take the house. But I have an important—and private—call to take, if you don't mind."

The Realtor's eyes lit up with commissioned dollar signs. "Oh, of course! I'll be inside."

Byron waited until the door shut. "No, I'm not backing out of the restaurant. And hello to you, too. Where the hell have you been? I called you three days ago!"

"You didn't say it was an emergency and Chadwick didn't call in a panic, so I figured it could keep. I unplugged for a couple of days."

"Since when do you unplug in the middle of the damned week? I thought you were always working."

"Not always. Not anymore." Something in his voice changed. "I took a trip with Whitney. We got married."

Byron was almost too stunned to speak. "Seriously?"

"Yes," was the terse reply.

"Well, congratulations, man. I would have come out for it."

"I know. But we wanted to keep it quiet."

Byron snorted. Usually, Matthew was all about maintaining the family image—public relations was his thing. But he'd gone and fallen in love with former wild-child star Whitney Wildz who, in real life, was a very private woman named Whitney Maddox. Matthew would do anything to protect her from the paparazzi. Including, apparently, getting married in complete secrecy.

"Did you at least tell Mom? You know she'll be heartbroken if you got married without telling her."

There was a short pause before Matthew said, "I flew her out for it. She was our witness."

"Good." And it was. Their mother had had enough heartbreak in her life. Byron didn't want to add to it. Still, the fact that Matthew had seen fit to invite their mother but not Byron or Frances stung, if only a little.

"So, yes," Matthew went on, "I am capable of unplugging for a little honeymoon with my wife. She's working with a horse, and I've got an hour to deal with the priority issues. If you're not bailing on the restaurant, what's up?"

Okay, so even if Matthew had gotten married without telling Byron, at least he was still a priority. "I have a problem."

"I'm listening."

Was there any good way to say this? Probably not. "You remember how I wanted you to invite Leon Harper to Phillip's wedding reception?"

"And his family, if I recall correctly. A request that struck me as so odd that I looked into Harper a little more. Apparently he has two daughters." Matthew sounded as if this were no big deal.

"And you remember how I went to Europe for a year?"

"Paris and then Madrid, yes. Are you telling me these two facts are connected?"

Byron kicked at a pebble in the driveway. He just had to get this out. It was his mess, but he needed help cleaning it up. "Three days ago, I discovered that Leona Harper—Harper's oldest daughter—gave birth to my son about six months ago. His name is Percy."

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line—a silence that lasted more than a few moments.

Byron couldn't take it. He plunged ahead. "I've asked her to move in with me and—"

"Into the mansion?" Matthew spluttered. "Are you *insane*? A Harper living in the Beaumont Mansion?"

"As I was going to say before I was interrupted," Byron said, trying not to snap at his brother, "I'm buying a house for us. And I've asked her to marry me. For our son's sake."

Again, there was another painful silence. "Jesus, Byron," Matthew finally muttered. "I'd have thought, after our father left bastards scattered to the four winds, that you would have been a little more careful than that."

The condom failure from last night popped into his mind. "I was careful. But sometimes things don't work like they're supposed to. I need a prenup. We have to get married as soon as possible to make sure her father can't declare her incompetent and take my son away."

"No," Matthew replied flatly. "You absolutely *cannot* marry her. She's Harper's daughter for God's sake! Frances didn't tell me the details, but she made it pretty clear that someone had broken your heart and that's why you left."

"I am well aware of what happened. But I am not leaving any bastards to be scattered to the winds. He's my son and I'll do whatever it takes to keep it that way. Even marry a Harper."

"Are you into pain or something? You enjoy being Harper's punching bag? Because if you tie your horse to his wagon, that's all you're ever going to be," he groaned in exasperation again. "I don't think there's a prenup in this world strong enough to stand up to Harper's sharks. He could use you to take down the entire family. He already took our business from us, Byron."

"I know that," Byron snapped.

"Oh, for God's sake. Just take the boy. Legally, I mean. She didn't tell you about the baby, I take it?"

"No, but I'm not going to—"

"So we'll sue for full custody on the grounds that she's unfit to be a mother. And for the love of everything holy, do *not* sleep with her again."

Byron winced. He couldn't bring himself to deny it, but he couldn't confirm it, either.

"You already have, haven't you?"

"Yes."

Matthew let out a long, low growl of pure frustration. "Did you at least use protection?"

"We did. It failed. Again."

There was a noise in the background that could have been Matthew kicking or throwing something. "You have *got* to be freaking kidding me. Come on, Byron! Stop thinking with your dick for once!"

"I am not thinking with my dick, damn it. I am trying to make things right. I thought you'd appreciate that—isn't that what you do? I got her pregnant. I wasn't there when the baby was born. I missed the first six months of my son's life. I'm trying to make up for lost time. I don't care what

you think about her—Leona and Percy are already my family. I want to make it official. And if you won't help me, then I'll do it myself."

Another long silence. Byron would bet money that Matthew was now rubbing his temples and grimacing comically.

"Does Harper know you're back?"

"I don't think so. Leona took her sister and basically ran away from home after I left. They don't have any contact with their parents. But she was worried her father would try to take the boy."

"He wouldn't win," Matthew said decisively. "You're the boy's father." Then, a moment later, he added, "There's no doubt about that?"

"None. The boy looks like me. Red hair and everything."

Matthew sighed heavily. "There'd need to be blood tests to confirm, but you must realize Harper wouldn't win. You're the child's father. You don't have to marry her to protect the baby."

"But he'd try," Byron insisted. "Harper would sue anyway and that would be almost as bad. He'd drag Leona through court and smear her name in every patch of mud he could find. Not to mention how much it'd cost to defend against him." When Matthew didn't immediately respond, Byron added, "You know what Dad did to Mom."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'm not saying the situation is ideal," Byron went on. "But I can't let that happen."

"And—despite all the facts of the matter—you trust her not to turn you over to her father? Not to use this kid to bankrupt the entire Beaumont family?"

Byron hesitated. Deep down, he believed that she wouldn't turn back to her father again. But...did he really trust her not to rip his still-beating heart out of his chest and hold it up for him to see? Especially after the way she'd driven off and stranded him here with the Realtor, all because he wanted to buy a nice house?

"That's not a good silence over there," Matthew observed.

Byron started pacing. "We're still working through a few issues." There. That was something that Matthew would understand.

"A 'few issues,' huh? And you want to marry a 'few issues'? Man, you are nuts."

"It runs in the family," he shot back. "You're the one who wanted me to get arrested to distract the press so you could canoodle in private with an actress."

"That's not exactly what happened, but that's neither here nor there," Matthew replied calmly. "So what do you want me to do?"

"I want a prenup that protects the rest of the family from Leona's father and guarantees that she and I will always have joint custody of Percy."

"You always did act impulsively," Matthew said in an offhand way. "Running off to Europe, now getting married. What's the kid's full name?"

"Percy Harper Beaumont."

Matthew sighed heavily. "And her middle name? I assume she's still Leona Harper at this point."

Byron had to think about that. "Margaret. And before you ask, mine is still John."

"I hadn't forgotten. Okay, fine. I'll talk to the lawyers and get them working on something. But for the love of God, don't marry her until the prenup has been signed, sealed and delivered, okay? If I were you, I'd think long and hard about marrying her at all. Even if you think this is a short-term solution and even if you have a prenup, the divorce would be a huge mess." Byron swore he heard Matthew shudder. "The press would eat this for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We need to keep the whole thing as quiet as possible."

Byron looked back at the house, where no doubt the Realtor was on her phone. "Understood. But I'm buying the house anyway."

"Fine. Dare I ask how the restaurant is coming along?"

"Uh..."

"Byron," Matthew said in warning.

"No, it's coming along fine. I hired Leona to do the interior design."

There it was again, that noise that sounded like Matthew was breaking something. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"That's what she does," Byron quickly defended. "That's what she went to school for. She's got a lot of really good ideas—we're going to call it Caballo de Tiro, which is Spanish for draft horse. I've been testing out menu options and we've started lining up contractors. It's going to be great. Really."

"Caballo de Tiro?"

"It plays off the Percheron Drafts name but pulls in the European influences," Byron explained.

"Yes, I get it. So let me see if I have this straight—you hid in Europe for a year to get away from a woman, only to come back and hire her, move in with her, and marry her—all at once?"

"Don't forget the baby."

"Oh, no—who could forget the baby?" Matthew scoffed. "Got any other surprise children hidden anywhere? Didn't leave anyone knocked up in Spain, did you?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Didn't sleep with anyone, if you must know. So yes, I'm sure. No more surprises."

"Fine," Matthew huffed, making it plenty clear that it was anything but. "I'll deal with the lawyers. Stay out of the headlines, Byron."

"Thanks," Byron said, but Matthew had already hung up on him.

He stared at his phone. Well. That had probably gone as smoothly as possible.

Now he just had to convince Leona that this house and a wedding were all for the best. No matter what Matthew said, Byron knew that marrying her was not only the right thing to do, but the best for all parties involved. And he had to do it all without letting her break his heart again.

No problem, right?

Yeah, right.

* * *

If there was one valuable lesson that Byron had learned growing up as a Beaumont, it was that money talked. Loudly.

He told Sherry that he'd pay full price—and full commission—if everything was settled within two weeks and she kept quiet about both his new address and the people with whom he'd be living. Within a week, he was the proud owner of a fabulous family home. Now he just needed the one thing that money couldn't apparently buy—a family.

His life was a strange dichotomy right now, and he wasn't having much luck merging the two halves back into a recognizable whole.

During the daylight hours, he worked side by side with Leona. They met with contractors, finalized design plans and ate, of course. Byron kept tweaking the dishes or trying something that might work better—something that Leona might like better. They had long discussions about rotating menu items, which local sources to use for beef and herbs and exterior landscaping. She had no problem talking to him during the day.

But at night? At night she kept the distance between them. Even when he came over to the apartment to play with Percy, she made sure she was far more than an arm's length away.

"I can move into the house next week," he told her a week later. He was lying on the floor of her living room, rolling a ball to Percy and making happy noises when the baby got anywhere near it. He could hear music coming from May's room, where she'd basically locked herself every time Byron came over. "I've got some basic furniture, but I wanted you to pick out what you liked."

From where she sat at the kitchen table, staring at her computer she glared at him. "I am not moving into that ridiculous house."

"And you have yet to give me a good reason why not," he shot back at her. "I don't see what the big deal is. You already agreed to move in so that we could raise our son together. I provided an adequate living space."

She snorted and continued to scroll.

"And I'm basically giving you a blank check to decorate it any way you want. Explain to me again how this makes me the villain here." When she said nothing, he sighed.

She shut her computer with a bit more force than was necessary. "You want to know what the problem is? Aside from the fact that I already told you once and you didn't pay any attention?"

"I am not trying to buy your complicity," he replied, trying mightily to keep his voice calm. "I'm not trying to buy your loyalty. I'm trying to provide for my family. I thought that's what you wanted."

She dropped her head into her hands. "Byron..."

Percy squealed as the ball went rolling wide to the right. "Whoa, buddy—now what are we going to do?" Byron asked him.

Percy flopped over and tried to crawl toward the ball, but when it turned out to be only unproductive wiggling, he howled in frustration.

"You can do it!" Byron said encouragingly to the baby. Then he looked back at Leona. Her head was still in her hands. Was she crying? "Leona?"

He got up off the floor and gently kicked the ball closer to Percy. Then he went to her. She *was* crying. Damn.

"I just want to know that you're going to be here," she whispered, her voice muffled by her hands. "And I don't."

Oh, come on. He fought this sense of frustration. "Leona. We have a child together. I'm buying a house for us—not even a rental. And in case you've forgotten it, we're working on this restaurant that will keep me in the greater Denver area. Are these the actions of a man who's going to bail?"

"No," she sniffed. "But that's not what I asked for, none of it is."

"I asked you to marry me. What other reassurances do you want? Do I have to open a vein and sign my name in blood?"

As if on cue, May's music got louder. Leona's shoulders tightened in response. But she hadn't answered yet.

He found a knot in her muscles and began to rub it. "I don't mean to add to the stress. You know that, don't you?"

"I do." Her voice, however, wasn't terribly convincing. But then she tilted her head to the side, stretching her shoulders for him. He found another knot and began to rub that one. "Oh, that's good."

It'd be better if Byron could lay Leona out on a bed. Then he could give her a proper massage, one that would work out all the knots. Maybe that was what she needed—to know that he would take care of her in every respect, not just the material ones.

Her body started to relax under his touch and, as he focused on the base of her neck, she let out a low moan of relief. That moan took all of his noble intentions and did something less than noble to them. A full body massage was just what she needed, complete with candles and massage oil. Yeah, it'd be better if he could take his time and get her body nice and relaxed and then...

No, stop it. The last time he'd thought with his dick, he'd wound up using a compromised condom. Plus he'd sort of promised Matthew he would keep his damned zipper zipped until the prenup was signed.

Besides, there was that little issue of her making him guess what the hell was holding her up. What did she mean, she wanted to know he'd be there? How was he not showing her that? He didn't get it.

Percy fussed and she got up to get him. One thing was clear. Byron was going to have to figure it out—and fast.

Twelve

Leona tried to focus on choosing a font for the restaurant's name while Byron got Percy changed and read him a story, but it didn't work. Byron had figured out the bedtime routine in only a few short days, really. He could probably handle Percy on his own now, except for the nursing part. Which was great. Really, it was.

But whenever she thought that, it made her sad, too—and she wasn't sure why. All she knew was that the words on her computer screen kept blurring together.

Byron was involved. Byron was helping out. Byron was making all sorts of wonderful-sounding promises.

But did he really need her? Would he keep his word or would he disappear again? Could she trust him—or any Beaumont—not to take her son and leave her behind?

She kept thinking back to the way Frances had reacted to finding Leona in the kitchen. Was it a huge stretch of the imagination to think that, when Byron wasn't with Leona, his family was trying to convince him not to marry her—to just take the baby instead?

She didn't think so. And that made it hard to take Byron at his word. Once, he'd believed her father and his poisonous lies instead of trusting that Leona would come to him.

He could be perfect right now and she'd still be afraid that he'd kick her out of his life a second time.

Her head was such a wash of emotions that she couldn't form a single, rational thought. The house was huge and lovely, it was true. By any objective measure, it was perfect. So what bothered her about it?

She'd once dreamed of Byron asking her to marry him, of settling down with him and raising a family. A year after she'd given up on that dream, it was suddenly happening. She wouldn't have to worry about money or doctor's bills or making rent. Moving in with Byron would solve so many problems. She should be happy.

And yet, what price would she pay for stability? Or even just the illusion of stability?

She would have to give up her independence to a man who didn't want her—who only wanted a mother for his son.

It was a damned high price to pay.

She wiped her eyes again when she heard Byron finishing his story. This part of the nightly ritual—and the morning companion—was something that had always been hers and hers alone, and right now she needed the reassurance of the routine.

She walked into Percy's room and stood there, watching. Byron hummed something low as he rocked Percy back and forth. The whole thing—the baby boy with bright red hair in his father's arms, a look of peace on both of their faces—it was almost too much for her. Her eyes began to water again.

"Ready?" Byron asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes." She had to be, after all. This was for her son.

Byron stood and Leona took the glider. He carefully lowered Percy into her arms. "Good night, little man," he whispered. "I'll see you tomorrow." Then he looked at Leona. "I'll wait for you, if that's okay with you."

She nodded. He had never left while she was nursing Percy—usually he did something in the kitchen, even if it was just the dishes.

She lifted her shirt and Percy latched on. For the next few minutes, she didn't have to think about moving and marriages and work and Byron. This was her time with her son. He still needed her. She hoped Byron realized that, too.

She might have dozed off while Percy was nursing because the next time she looked down, he'd fallen asleep with a trickle of milk running down the side of his face. She wiped him up and carried him over to his crib.

Surprisingly, Byron was not in the kitchen. And he wasn't in the living room. He wasn't in the bedroom, either, and she highly doubted he'd gotten anywhere near May's room.

Then she realized that the door to the patio was open. He was outside? She grabbed a cardigan to fight off the evening chill and headed out.

Byron was in one of the two sad little deck chairs that May had found at a thrift store, staring out at the night sky. The apartment faced the east, so they could actually see some of the stars over the Great Plains. “What are you doing out here? I’d have thought you’d be elbow deep in a soufflé or something.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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