

DIRTY MARTINI

A FLAMBÉ PREQUEL

ELLE BERLIN

Dirty Martini
Flambé Series Prequel
By Elle Berlin
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FLAMBÉ SERIES READING ORDER

The Flambé series is comprised of interconnected standalone novels. The reading experience is best if the books are read in order, however, each book can be enjoyed individually (and can easily be read out of order).

READING ORDER:

- Prequel:** Dirty Martini
- Book One:** Flambé
- Book Two:** Whiskey Splash
- Book Three:** Café Diablo
- Book Four:** Champagne Fizz
- Book Five:** Gin and Lava
- Book Six:** Wild Flower
- Book Seven:** Dark and Stormy

ACCLAIM FOR THE FLAMBÉ SERIES

"The Flambé series is a true masterpiece." – B. J.

"This is the best series I've ever read in my life! The entire series is impeccable and a must read!" – A. V.

"It's hard to find a new series that's hard to put down." – P. P.

"A phenomenal romance series! I was hooked from page one. A must read if you love romance!" – W. W.

"EVERY one of these books kept me up until 4 AM. They're a danger to normal sleep patterns. I loved them." – D. C.

"Elle Berlin's Flambé series serves up a five course meal filled with spice and fire, but what you don't see coming is the dash of soul-healing for dessert that rounds out the experience perfectly." – K. R.

"I absolutely loved this series." – D. B.

ACCLAIM FOR FLAMBÉ

(A rivals-to-lovers, workplace romance)

"Fun and smart banter, I was hooked!" – A. C.

"Well written, entertaining, and steamy." – K. B.

"Laugh-out-loud funny. The dialogue is so good!" – C. M.

"Absolutely scorching! A real treat." – A. D. A.

"Berlin makes me laugh out loud in a quiet room." – K. T.

"Filled with heat. The characters jumped off the page." – A. K.

"Over here wishing Flambé was a real restaurant." – L. R.

ACCLAIM FOR WHISKEY SPLASH

(A celebrity romantic comedy)

"The perfect combo of sweet and sizzle." – J. J.

"You won't be able to put this book down." – J. A.

"The perfect amount of plot and spice." – A. K.

"Kept turning pages until I'd devoured the entire thing." – K. R.

"So flammable! Another hot, sexy story in the Flambé series. I love Elle's writing style. This story keeps you reading without putting it down." – K. B.

"I loved escaping into the fun, fresh world of Flambé." – K. R.

ACCLAIM FOR CAFÉ DIABLO

(A grumpy meets sunshine romantic comedy)

"I couldn't put it down." – D. B.

"Witty and great writing. Very talented writer!" – A. M.

"A great opposites attract rom com!" – L. L.

“Best banter ever. The spice level was 10/10. I read this book in 24 hours and I do not regret it.” – I. R. B.

“Such a fun book with great chemistry. I love living in this sexy, tropical world that Elle has built.” – A. D. A.

ACCLAIM FOR CHAMPAGNE FIZZ

(A first time, wedding romance)

“Creatively written with witty banter.” – K. B.

“The slow burn gets you kicking your feet and giggling like a schoolgirl.” – S. M.

“Steamy and fun. I love the Hawaiian setting!” – L. L.

“Enough flame to set your Kindle on fire!” – K. B.

“I love Simon and Kendall. Highly recommend.” – K. T.

ACCLAIM FOR GIN AND LAVA

(A fake dating romanic comedy)

“An entertaining and addictive page turner.” – W. L.

“A seat grabbing, toe curling, spicy read.” – S. S.

“So good! I read the book in one day.” – J. J.

“So enthralling, I kept wanting to read more.” – S. S.

“Amazing! The perfect balance of plot and spice.” – K. W.

“You have to read this book! It had me grinning and laughing the whole time.” – V. S.

“Fake dating and dirty puns, yes please. Sweet & filthy.” – C. C.

“Mason was a riot! This book was so much fun.” – T. T.

“The banter between Naomi and Mason is everything!” – J. E.

“I loved it. Spicy, sweet, funny and romantic.” – L. S.

ACCLAIM FOR WILD FLOWER

(A MFM ménage romantic comedy)

“The best book I’ve read all year.” – J. E.

“I absolutely devoured this book.” – B. J.

“Spicy is an understatement!” – A. K.

“Wild Flower took me right out of my reading funk.” – J. J.

“My favorite in the Flambé series! I read it in one night.” – E. M.

“Beautifully written with complex characters and plot.” – J. L.

“Layered and emotional with complex relationships.” – J. N.

“NEVER want it to end. Devoured it in one day.” – K. P.

ACCLAIM FOR DARK AND STORMY

(A love triangle, fake dating romantic comedy)

“A great conclusion to a delicious series.” – K. B.

“An absolutely perfect ending to an amazing series!” – J. E.

“Everything I needed it to be. Elle did not disappoint.” – C. O.

“This book made me ugly cry so much, but don’t worry, everyone gets their HEA.” – S. M.

“Elle has a great sense of humor and has written a funny, salacious, intense and at times heartbreaking book.” – K. B.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is a romantic comedy, but **please be advised that it is NOT a sweet, closed-door romance.** This book has mature content including open-door romance scenes, explicitly described sexual content, and use of swear words.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

- Open-door sex scenes
- Explicitly described sex scenes
- Use of swear words

Please do not read this book if you are uncomfortable with any of the items listed above.

CHAPTER ONE

“I quit!”

My boss, Chef Archibald Lee, scrunches up his face, twisting it into the shape of a disgruntled potato. A pan of buttered scallops is splattered all over the floor—yes, it’s my fault—and half a dozen martini glasses are shattered into the mess, making a tossed salad of buttery shards.

Not my finest moment.

In my defense, I’ve mentioned several times to Lee that the workflow in this kitchen is shit. I’ve warned him that one day, the battle of elbows and shellfish and over-filled pans will inevitably result in volcanic levels of mayhem. Well, Mount Vesuvius has exploded, and the disaster is under his feet.

Of course, the last thing Lee likes is criticism on *anything*. Especially from a woman.

Especially a young, good-looking woman—one who also happens to be a better chef than him. Sure, that’s *my* opinion, and yes, my opinion is biased. I know that. But I’m sick of being lectured by him that I’m short sighted, impulsive, and too young. I have good ideas—helpful ideas—that would’ve

prevented the seafood massacre currently sticking to my polka-dot heels.

Did he want to hear any of those ideas? Not one. Being thirty years my senior, he knows everything and expects everyone to fall in line. Heck, he's already implied half a dozen times that my tits are too big for me to have a single good idea about how to make his restaurant relevant, or have a good workflow, or I don't know, *taste good*.

Basically, my boss is a major over-inflated dick (and not the good sex-toy kind you buy online, if you know what I'm saying).

Everyone in Chef Lee's busy kitchen has turned to stare.

We're in the middle of the afternoon rush, and the dining room is packed. The *Taste of the Ocean* sits on the end of the Waikiki pier and is one-hundred-percent a tourist trap. Lee touts his establishment as one of Hawaii's best restaurants—high-end and decadent. But in reality, it's nothing more than a cheap view with prices you could buy a vital organ for. Only here, that cash buys you the world's most boring pan-seared fish, served in a lame butter sauce (with way too much garlic, if you want my opinion). More than once I've offered Lee suggestions to make the menu more exciting, but again, he's not interested in the ideas of a twenty five-year-old redhead.

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?" Lee hisses, clenching his teeth. His face is dark with contempt, and I know he's the kind of storm that will explode with little warning.

At this point, I really don't care.

I lift my chin and square off with him, letting my blood-red hair catch the afternoon sun as I fold my arms over those too-big tits that—in his opinion—would probably keep my brain from being full of anything but helium.

"I quit," I repeat.

I don't mince words.

I don't stutter.

I don't grovel for forgiveness—which is what he expects.

"Arie Noel," Lee spits out my name like a rotten plantain. "You will pick up that mop right now and clean up this mess."

Everyone in the kitchen sucks in a breath. God! He's got them all groveling beneath him like he's about to earn the *Taste of the Ocean* a Michelin star. (Which will never happen—because hello! the scallops taste like rubbery turnips.)

"Or what?" I challenge, pulling off my apron and tossing it into the buttery splotch. "You'll fire me? I think I already beat you to that punch."

"I'll make sure you never get another job in this town," he growls. "Not in any halfway decent kitchen at least."

"I'm not sure how you expect to do that," I bluff, pulling my hair out of its hairnet and bun, releasing wild, red locks over my shoulders. Everything about this restaurant is constricting: the uniform, the boring food, Lee's ancient chokehold on tradition.

"You're done in this town, Arie. Done!"

"Lee, do you actually think you still have sway in the restaurant scene?" I ask hotly, strutting toward the door and unbuttoning my *Taste of the Ocean* chef's coat as I go. "Your food is bland, your restaurant looks like a nursing home, and last time anyone wrote a review on this relic, my father was probably jacking off to porn, long before he shot himself up into my mother and I was born!"

"The mouth on you—!" Lee growls, pointing a crooked finger in my direction.

"Typical," I jeer. "It's just like you to suggest my mouth is the only thing that'll get me my next job. Sucking cocks and flaunting my hoo-ha?" A few of the sous-chefs gasp, but I notice several female employees averting their eyes. They know the shit he says, and the leers that go with it. I throw my chef's coat onto the floor and cross my arms, standing defiantly in his kitchen in a skimpy tank top like I'm about to go clubbing in the middle of the after-

noon. Everything Lee dislikes about me is on full display: my femininity, my brash attitude, my inability to see things his way.

“Get out of my kitchen!” Lee’s face is red, about to explode like a perfectly-cooked crustacean.

“Yes, chef!” I hiss back, flipping him the bird as I storm out of the kitchen and into the dining room. Lady-like? Not a chance in hell. But you better believe I’ll kick the door flaps to this kitchen open like a damn action hero. Several patrons turn toward the fiery display, watching me strut out of the kitchen like I’ve just set it on fire. What can I say, I’m the kind of girl who makes one hell of an entrance, and one hell of an exit too.

I snag a glass of champagne from one of the guest tables and pull out the brûlée torch still tucked in the back pocket of my jeans. I light the top of the drink on fire and revel in the beauty as it bursts into a shimmer of sparks and flame.

Lee’s eyes widen as he steps out of the kitchen. I’m standing in the middle of the afternoon rush, holding the flaming glass of champagne like it’s a damn grenade. Yup, I’ve a bit of a reputation for being a sore loser when things don’t go my way.

“To the best decision of my life!” I call out to him, raising the glass in a toast.

“Don’t you dare—!” Lee yells, thinking I’m going to throw it.

Only, I’m not *that* spiteful. Instead, I blow the flame out and down the champagne, the hot bubbling liquid searing across my lips with an absolutely exhilarating zing.

Now *that’s* an amazing drink!

I place the empty glass on the table, along with the brûlée torch. What did he think I was going to do? Burn his restaurant down? God! Men have no clue what to do with a woman who isn’t a demure little flower bending to their every whim. They

think a woman scorned is a woman about to turn into a hysterical demon—possessed by those ghastly female hormones we can't seem to control. Sure, stomping out of the kitchen and lighting a drink on fire isn't *calm*. But let's be real here—it's a far cry from revenge-torching his kingdom.

“Good riddance!” I toss back, strutting out the front door and slamming it. “Freedom, bitch!” I yell toward the crowd outside, raising my hands in the air before striding down the pier like I just won the Kentucky Derby. Actually, I have no clue how someone reacts after winning a horse race, but that's not going to steal the wind from my sails today. The hot Hawaiian sun blares down on me, matching the heat of my fiery exit. If you're going to quit your job, you may as well do it with swagger and flamboyance.

Am I hot headed? Yes.

Insubordinate? Yes.

Impulsive and everything Lee thinks that I am? Maybe.

Does that mean I'll bend over and take shit from the man? Not a fucking chance!

I'm worth so much more than that job. I'm worth so much more than the crappy barely-above-minimum-wage salary he paid. *And*, I'm a better chef than he is! I could have made that business more than a tourist trap. I had a thousand-and-one good ideas for how to bring it out of the stone age so it could be relevant again. Spoiler alert: it's not by being a traditional stick-up-your-ass relic!

Sure, I may not have any savings, or a back up plan, or any real clout in the chef community, but I'll figure something out. I always have before and I will again. I'm creative and cunning, and I always fall on my feet—or more accurately my three-inch polka-dot heels currently covered in sticky scallop gravy. The real challenge is that within twenty-four hours, Lee will have

called all his friends and done his best to brand me as That Redheaded Bitch.

She's "difficult." That's what they'll say. Of course, if I was a man, Lee would've given me respect for my ideas. I would've been seen as an asset. But that's the problem with being born female: if you don't use your tits and ass to let them fuck you, then you're a threat.

And threat, I definitely am!

Tomorrow, I'll probably regret this, but right now, nothing feels more satisfying than strutting down this boardwalk with the salty sea air blowing my hair into a tailspin. If I could capture this feeling—this anger, this exhilaration, this freedom—and whip it into a char-broiled dessert ... now *that* would be a million-dollar idea I could get investors to back. If only I could bottle female rage and desire, bottle taste and fire, and salt it with sage.

If only...

In the meantime, I'll take this brief adrenaline rush of sun and wind. I'll settle for the fact that being human means tomorrow I'll just be another girl who's unemployed.

It's fun to fly on this high, but the crash is going to kick me in the lady parts—and hard.

Some mistakes I'm destined to make over and over. It's just in my nature. Maybe it's a redhead thing. But I've found the best way to nurse an ego back to life again is by calling my twin sister and drinking.

Yes, please!

CHAPTER TWO

Tiki bars are not my first choice for nursing one's wounds —I know, shocker, considering I live in Hawaii.

It's my sister who loves the sweet drinks. When Esme suggested we meet at *The Bamboo Bar*, I was waaaaaay too grumpy about my new unemployed status to think logically about the suggestion. All I heard my sister say was *beach* and *alcohol* and I thought: *I volunteer as tribute, pour me a double.*

Which is how I'm now sitting in the most cliché of bars in all of Oahu. In fact, there's a very real possibility that if I was struck by lightning right now, my obituary would read: *Arie Noel was caught dead sitting at a weathered picnic table under a palm-thatched roof with a pina colada the color of cotton candy in her hand!* Classy with a capital K is *not* how I want to be remembered.

My polka dot heels are already full of sand and regretting the beach vibe. It only took one sip of my cotton candy monstrosity to realize the drink is pure corn syrup. The swirly straw and umbrellas are extravagances I can get behind, but

when something tastes like the love child of Pink Mountain Dew and a coconut, the chef in me—who also aced Advanced Mixology, by the way—wants to bitch out the manager.

Or maybe that's residual Archibald-Lee-ass-whooping anger from this afternoon talking. I take a deep breath and tell myself to pawn the drink off on Esme when she arrives and replace it with a real drink—a simple bottle of scotch will do. After all, anger can be managed with 80 proof.

Honestly, it wouldn't take much to class up this joint. Switch out the picnic tables for wicker couch lounges, string up some globe lights, put a few pillar candles in the sand, and this place would go from kitsch to class in one week flat, guaranteed. They could keep the island vibe, just add a little sexy to the world of surfer shorts and yard-long mai tais served inside plastic funnels.

I text my best friend Simon to join us as well, because if you're going to get piss-ass drunk you may as well do it with your two favorite people on the planet. Alas, drinking loves company. Or is it misery loves company? Drinking loves misery—?

My phone buzzes. I expect it to be Simon asking for the address, but the text that shoots across the screen makes my stomach flip.

Xander: Are we still on for this evening? Where should we meet?

Oh shit!

How is it possible that I completely forgot about Xander Carlisle? Especially when Xander Carlisle is the definition of unforgettable: hot, intense, wickedly sexy. But clearly, the hottest guy from culinary school becomes a footnote in my

drunken personal-life-crisis pity party. I completely forgot Xander was flying into town this week and wanted a tour of the best food in Waikiki.

In culinary school, Xander and I were like peas in a pod. You know, the kind of friend you had all your classes with, who helped you perfect your knife skills and who taught you to temper chocolate—but all the while you were fantasizing about how he should use his bread-kneading skills on your neglected college-aged muscles rather than on pounding butter and laminating dough.

Trust me, I'm not the kind of girl who'd normally let a sexy dollop like Xander Carlisle slip through her perfectly equipped fingers. Oh no, I'm a ninja with a whisk and if I want stiff peaks, trust me, I'll get them. When the Arie-dragon is hungry she seduces whomever she wants.

But at the time, Mr. I'll-melt-your-panties-with-my-crème-brûlée-smile was one-hundred-percent unavailable. The sexy Brit had a long-distance girlfriend back in London whom he was certainly going to marry. So, it was hands-off the hot man meat. Not that I didn't flirt. Not that I didn't offer to be his secret stress relief when exams got intense and the future Mrs. Carlisle was on the other side of the ocean. It didn't need to be serious. A one-night cherry tart would suffice—tasty, light, the perfect amount of spice. A forbidden night with Xander Carlisle would've been the kind of secret I'd easily take to the grave.

But Xander never took me up on the offer. And why? Because under that six-pack of bad-boy charm was a sensitive chef who happened to be one big fat romantic. Honestly, the whole idea of soulmates and fate is much too saccharine for me—like eating too much candy. My cynic's heart can't take it. Not that I fault him for wanting to believe in love; there are

worse things a girl can be rejected over than someone thinking they've found The One.

But the brutal truth is that when Xander moved back to London to open his own restaurant (yes, in addition to being lollipop lick-worthy, the man is also a culinary wizard, which is half of his sex appeal in my opinion), little Miss I'll-wait-for-you didn't wait. Turns out, the future Mrs. Carlisle had been enjoying an entire London buffet—cannoli after cannoli after cannoli. Ironically, one of Xander's baking specialties happen to be cannoli. Alas, stabbed in the back by love and pastries.

Xander and I kept in touch long after the engagement turned sour, mostly over social media, of course. But tonight is going to be the first time I've seen him in the flesh since graduation. And when I say *in the flesh*, I'm really hoping he might be open to *all* interpretations of that expression. This is Hawaii after all—paradise—and you don't call up your sexy college baking partner when you're one hundred percent single and on vacation unless you're expecting that culinary tour to include cherry tarts and oh ... so ... much ... more. Why thank you sir, I will have another!

That is, if I don't completely blow it by looking like a drunk mermaid who just blew into harbor with mismatched seashells and piña colada breath.

"Oh dang," comes a voice from over my shoulder. A voice that matches my own because we were made in the same womb and have the same DNA. "Tonight's the night Xander's in town?"

"Maybe," I hiss at my sister, flipping my phone upside down on the picnic table to hide the evidence.

Esme gives a pouty smile as she swings onto the bench opposite me, her lavender hair blowing across her shoulders like a supermodel. My sister is hot—hot in a boho-flirty my-hemp-

purse-just-made-out-with-a-beach-sarong sort of way. Everything she puts on that smokin' bod of hers is *really* not my style, but she somehow makes it ephemeral and sexy.

I realize complimenting my twin sister is basically the same as pointing out that I'm hot as hell—which is true, but it's not modest to say so. When you put us side by side, it's obvious I'm the rockabilly pin-up goddess who's ready to put chili peppers in her cocktail, and Esme is the innocent spoonful of honey you drizzle in your ice tea (covered in everything yoga-princess and hippie). We couldn't be more different, but I still freaking adore her.

"Are you going to tell Xander you lost your job?" Esme asks, picking up my foo-foo pink cocktail without asking permission. She knows anything that looks like sugar-spun unicorn blood has failed Arie inspection.

"No, I'm not going to tell him that I *quit*," I say, emphasizing the fact that this job-loss was my choice. "You can't lose something you didn't want!"

"Yes, but then you could play up the whole 'woe is me' angle," Esme says, putting a dramatic hand against her forehead. "Play the wounded damsel."

"You think Xander would buy that?" I toss back. "The man was around for all my advanced-level classes and final exams. He's well aware that my stressed-out-Arie M.O. was to hook-up my way back to happy any time disaster struck. Nothing gets me back into my groove like naked exercise and endorphins. He'll call bullshit if I pull that stunt."

"Or—" Esme spears me with her baby blues, batting her lashes over that drink's bloom of tiny umbrellas. "Or, he might offer naked exercise to—you know—be chivalrous, since he couldn't help you out in school when you were stressed. The man's a romantic, so play to his weaknesses."

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” I gawk at my sister, pulling the curly straw out of her drink and using it to point in her direction. “Did *you*—the woman who daydreams about living inside an epic Lord Byron poem—just mention hot hook-up sex as an act of chivalry? Did Hawaii freeze over and your dormant Arie genes just kick in?”

“Hey!” Esme snatches the straw back. “I didn’t say this was how *I* would deal with the situation, and that doesn’t change the fact that *your* version of chivalry comes with a revolving door and multiple orgasms.”

“Orgasms before the revolving door, preferably.”

“Point being,” Esme leans forward and snags my phone off the picnic table. “You could use the whole F-you Archibald Lee scenario to your advantage.” Esme’s fingers are suddenly typing in my phone.

“Whoa now, what are you doing?!” I try to snatch my phone back, but she’s too fast, tapping send on whatever message she’s just sent and tossing the phone back onto the picnic table like she’s completely virtuous.

I don’t touch the phone.

I glare at my sister and am about to turn ice queen, then demon, then—who knows!—in all the epic love stories she reads I’m sure there’s a trope where siblings murdering siblings.

“What the fuck did you just do?”

Esme shrugs and takes a sip of her drink, feigning innocence. Then she waves the bartender over before smiling lightly. “You’ll probably want to be half-drunk before you read that.”

“Because I’m about to commit murder?”

Esme rolls her eyes at my threat and orders me a martini from the bartender—dirty, of course. “Because that text is exactly what you want to say,” Esme explains, “but you don’t have the balls to say it because it’s Xander.”

I frown at her, about to go an Archibald-Lee-level of postal. “What’s that supposed to mean—*because it’s Xander?*”

“Hello? You two were practically on top of each other all through school.” Esme blinks at me like it’s obvious, before she leans in and whispers mockingly, “He’s the one who got away.”

“Um, no!” I fume. “He’s the one who was *engaged!*” I shake my head. “You don’t think I have the tits to say something naughty to Xander Carlisle?”

“Something naughty?” Esme makes a face. “Of course you do. Dirty talk is your version of *hello, how was your day.*”

“My, my! What’s all this about tits and dirty talk?” Another voice butts into our conversation from behind me.

Simon.

He comes into view wearing his classic gingham shirt and slacks, horn-rimmed glasses, and a leather over-the-shoulder bag strapped across his front. He’s two parts Clark Kent and one part accountant, only he’s the kind of Clark Kent who’s supposed to look nerdy but we can all see the Superman hotness thinly veiled behind that pair of designer glasses. My best friend actually *is* an accountant, and at some point the profession convinced him that there’s an enforceable-by-death Geeks-R-Us dress code he must abide by. Because seriously, the man would be far better suited in jeans and a leather jacket. But what do I know? I’m just a chef. I’m never going to sleep with Simon, so if he wants to be the poster boy for Pocket Protectors Anonymous, then he can.

Simon puts two drinks on the table—a dirty martini for me, and an old fashioned for himself—before taking a seat next to Esme and squinting at my current lack of inebriation.

“You look surprisingly sober for getting fired,” Simon comments.

“I quit!” I clarify, and almost on cue the bartender returns with the second dirty martini my sister ordered. I raise both

glasses at them as if I'm supposed to start double-fisting vodka drinks like my life depended on it.

Simon smirks. "There we go. Tits, drinks, and dirty talk—now that's the Arie I know." He raises his glass. "Catch me up. What were you two talking about a second ago?"

Esme taps my phone and gives me a sweet smile. "For the record, I didn't write anything dirty in that text."

I frown. That's probably worse. Xander would expect dirty talk from me. Whatever shmaltzy romantic gesture Esme wrote is what will actually get me into trouble.

"I don't even want to read it now," I snip, causing Simon to eye us both. Then, unable to keep his nose out of other people's business, he plucks up my phone. "That's private!" I growl.

"Nothing with you is private," Simon tosses back, moving out of arm's reach. "Did you say something dirty to Chef Lee? Is that why he fired you?"

"I *quit*," I snap. "Because Lee is a misogynist asshole who'd rather stare at my rack than cook a halfway decent crab cake."

"So, what you're saying is that Lee was *about* to fire you," Simon clarifies, clicking open my phone. "And you quit to keep him from firing you first?"

"Arie does have a pattern," Esme agrees, nodding to Simon.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I growl.

"Since you graduated college, what's the longest you've kept a job as a chef?" Esme asks pointedly. I frown. We all know the answer is less than a year, but I'm not going to humor her by saying it out loud.

"Aren't you two supposed to be on my side?" I grumble, and both Esme and Simon point to the two drinks sitting in front of me as evidence of their allegiance. "You two suck. And not good blow-job suck, but mammoth levels of shitty blow-job suck."

“But you still love us even though we give shitty blow jobs,” Esme spars, and I take a big gulp of my martini in response.

“Wow. Really?” Simon’s eyes light up, entranced by whatever Esme wrote on my phone. Then he looks at me with genuine surprise. “And to Xander Carlisle no less. Wow, Arie, that’s—”

“I have no idea what that says,” I snip, taking another gulp of dirty vodka and pointing at my back-stabbing twin.

“I wrote that text,” Esme clarifies, pulling her lavender hair off her shoulders. “Because Sulking-in-Her-Own-Misery over here doesn’t have the balls—or should I say tits?—when it comes to sexy Brits.”

Esme looks at me slant, and Simon nods. “Okay, that makes a lot more sense,” he says, as if whatever she’s written would absolutely come from the lavender princess. “Still,” Simon glances at me and shrugs, “it’s absolutely going to work.”

“Oh my God!” I hiss, picking up my martini and downing it. “Now I really don’t want to know what it says.”

“Maybe that’s for the better,” Simon agrees.

“Are you two ganging up on me?”

“When it comes to Xander Carlisle—” Simon looks at my twin conspiratorially. “Absolutely.”

“Without question,” Esme confirms.

“Xander’s like an emotional time bomb for you,” Simon continues. “Or Pandora’s box, or—”

“Your metaphors suck,” I interject.

“The one who got away,” Esme sing-songs, repeating what she said earlier.

“Exactly,” Simon nods. “And you haven’t even told me the real story about walking out on your job this afternoon.”

“Archibald Lee is a dick.”

“That’s not new knowledge.” Simon shakes his head.

“I basically told him to sit on my middle fingers like they’re two dicks he can spin on for the afternoon,” I say sharply.

“Yeah, what was the point I was making earlier about you and dirty talk?” Esme mocks.

“Look, Xander Carlisle is just a friend,” I insist, not needing this barrage from both of them. “A friend who—”

“—you want to fuck,” they say in unison.

“That doesn’t mean he’s *the one who got away!* He’s only in town for tonight. It’s not anything!”

“I’m also your friend from college,” Simon says, taking a sip from his old fashioned. “Do you want to sleep with me?”

“No!” I snap, annoyed at the comparison and the third degree.

“Exactly,” Simon points out. “Xander means something, because all those years ago the two of you never happened.”

“So?”

“Stop playing innocent,” Simon scolds. “The two of you are like the same person: determined, passionate about food, you want everything your way. The chemistry between you two has always been insane.”

“And you’re both single now and in the same town,” Esme says, crashing her fingers together and making an exploding motion as if Diamond Head is about to become active and eject lava all over paradise.

“Fine!” I admit, picking up a plastic menu and using it as a fan. “So Xander and I had a connection, or whatever, years ago. What’s your point? Having a hot one-night fling with an old friend is not a thing!”

Simon tilts his head to the side and gives me a knowing smirk. “You keep telling yourself that, Arie. Just like you tell yourself how every chef you work for is an incompetent ass. There’s a point where you have to realize you have to go out and make what *you* want happen.”

“You don’t think I know how to get what I want?” I snap. I have no issue seducing men, or getting jobs. It’s keeping them that’s been more of the problem.

“Honestly, Arie,” Simon says, raising his eyebrows from behind those damn glasses. “I don’t think you’ve even admitted to yourself what you actually want yet.”

My sister nods in agreement, and I find myself hiding behind one of the empty martini glasses and pulling the olive out. I crush the rubbery fruit between my teeth, filling my mouth with a sourness that matches Simon’s comment.

“Maybe read the text,” Simon offers, pushing my phone back toward me, “and what he said in response.”

My stomach flips and my skin goes clammy. It’s one thing to ignore the fact that my sister totally crossed a line and sent Xander a message posing as me. It’s another to know he’s read that text and responded.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m normally such a bull about these things. Hookups are fun and easy, like a great dessert. They might feel naughty and indulgent, but it’s oh so worth it when you’re devouring them. I’m not supposed to feel vulnerable and laid bare, especially when I don’t even know what my sister said to him!

Shit. What am I afraid she said?

“Trust me.” Simon taps the back of the phone. “Maybe you’ll have a better idea of what you want after you put everything on the table.”

My eyes jet between my sister and Simon. Both are way too calm for the tsunami of emotion flooding my system.

“Remember, you’re Arie Noel,” my sister says kindly. “You’re not afraid of anything.”

“Amen,” Simon echoes.

Ha! Don’t I have both of them fooled.

“Oh, and you probably should get out of here,” Simon

motions for me to pick up the phone and skedaddle. “You’ve got about an hour before you and Mr. Carlisle meet up. And if I know you—which I do—you’re going to want to change out of the crab shack uniform.”

I look down at my tank top and pants. Xander’s seen me wear something like this a thousand times, plus half of them I was covered in some kitchen disaster. Despite the past, I’m definitely not making my first impression in years wearing Kitchen Couture: Asshole Archibald Lee Edition. That’ll be a cold day in hell!

“I really don’t want to read that,” I say, nodding to the phone again, the knots in my stomach twisting like tangled ramen.

“Then don’t,” my sister suggests, picking up the phone and skimming Xander’s reply. “He says to meet him in the lobby bar of his hotel at the Atlantis Resort in an hour.”

“An hour, okay, I can do that.” I toss back half of the second martini to cut the edge, when Esme starts typing on my phone again. “Oh, no no! What are you—?!”

“Calm down,” Esme scolds. “I’m just telling him that you’ll meet him at the Atlantis. That way you don’t have to look at your phone if you don’t want to.”

I give her daggers.

“I promise! I wouldn’t send him anything that wasn’t in your best interest.”

“Swear on your life?” I ask.

“Cross my heart and wish to die,” Esme affirms, clicking the off button so I have to actively turn my cell back on if I want to see the damage she’s done. “Just be yourself. You two naturally knew how to be around each other, so don’t worry about it. Have fun.”

My eyes are wide. “Oh?” I mock. “Says the girl who never wants to be herself on a date, much less let loose and have fun.”

Esme lets that slide, knowing my nerves are getting the best of me.

“Be woman and roar, and all that shit,” Simon says, pretending to rally my confidence. “But in all seriousness, when you figure out what you want, let me know. Because I have a business idea I want to talk to you about.”

“A business idea?” I scoff. “And what does that have to do with going on a date with Xander Carlisle?”

“Maybe nothing,” he admits. “Or maybe everything.” Simon smiles that mischievous Clark Kent smile like he knows how to break out the Superman when it’s time for secrets to be revealed.

“Simon?” I pry, giving him a curious eye. But he stands up and walks around the picnic table.

“Have fun and call me later.” He kisses me on the head and starts walking down the boardwalk like he didn’t just drop hints that something is amiss. I whip my head around to glare at my sister, completely thrown off.

“What the hell was that?” I ask, pointing at Simon, but Esme is just as coy and tight-lipped, as if the two of them have been secretly plotting.

“You’ve only got fifty minutes, gorgeous. The clock is ticking.” Esme pushes the phone back to me and takes one more sip of that pink umbrella drink. “Say hi to Xander for me.”

She throws money on the table for the cocktail and then she too is strutting down the beach, her lavender hair swaying like nothing big has happened today. No, I didn’t just quit my job, nor am I about to have a date with—oh damn! I really don’t want to call him *The One Who Got Away*, but my sister’s sing-song voice is echoing on repeat in my brain.

I have fifty minutes to get ready for this date. A date that according to my two excuses for best friends seem to think will change everything. But will it? Will it really?

I think fate is lame, but if fate wants to me to roll around naked with Xander in his fancy Hawaiian suite, well, I'm not the kind of girl to say no to that invitation. Hawaii is about getting lei'd, after all.

I stuff the phone in my back pocket and head for my apartment. I'm definitely NOT reading that text if I can help it. Twin sister be damned.

CHAPTER THREE

I decide to go classic pinup for tonight and squeeze into a kelly green wiggle dress with a low, sweetheart neckline. It's called a wiggle dress because it hugs every curve and you have to literally wiggle yourself into it. But once it's on, it's pure 1950s sex appeal: tiny belt at the waist, tiny ruffle at the knee, my not-so-tiny girls showing off ample amounts of skin. The key to a delicious meal is first to tease—an amuse-bouche on the palate—and give them something that looks and tastes like the upcoming feast (so you always keep them salivating). This dress is more than a taste of what Xander has been missing.

There isn't time to do my hair, so during the cab ride to the Atlantis Resort I brush my ruby locks into long waves and let them be wild. I top off the whole look with bright red lipstick and tap the sand out of my polka dot heels. If I need to do any ass kicking (like I did earlier today), these shoes will make me feel like the goddess of Kung-Fu. I stash my phone in a clutch—and no, I have not looked at my sister's text. I'm just going to pretend that whatever Esme said to Xander doesn't exist.

This is my night.

My rules. My life.

I tip my driver before stepping out of the cab and look up at the glittering façade of the Atlantis. The resort has multiple towers of shimmering silver shooting up into the sky like a glamorous ribbon. Xander has always had good taste, but damn, his restaurant in London must be doing phenomenal to afford this level of luxury.

I walk into the lobby and a dazzling chandelier of tiny lights hangs like a universe of constellations in the center of the vestibule. The galaxy of illuminated globes is modern and chic, making me muss up my hair and revel in its beauty. I like things that are bold and extravagant, like art that pushes the boundaries of what is expected. And as tempting as it might be to make some cheeseball comment about how Xander and I are coming together like long-lost stars finally finding alignment—I know better. I'm not my sister. That chandelier is just good design and nothing more. I can appreciate well-crafted art without getting woo-woo and nostalgic.

I head for the lounge and my stomach tenses when I see him.

Xander leans against the bar, nursing a small glass of what looks like Crown Royal. It's a good knot that tightens my intestines; it feels like all my senses are sharpening. Other people, like my sister, get that butterfly feeling in the presence of hot men. But not me. I turn into a hunter prowling.

Xander looks exactly the way he did in school: a well-groomed European debutant who is slumming it in America. He wears his signature white button-up shirt and low charcoal waistcoat. He likes the slim cut, low vests because they allow him to keep those top three buttons of his shirt open, tempting my eyes to play peekaboo with the naughty hint of chest hair those buttons expose.

I slow my roll, giving myself a second to savor him like the

sweet drink of Crown he's sipping. Xander is almost poetic—his beauty, I mean—with the sunset reflecting off the ocean behind him. Gold shoots through the window, illuminating him in a auric halo—which is the kind of romantic crap that would make Esme turn into a sappy puddle. I'm drawn more to his rugged five-o'clock shadow, or to how his clothes have been tailored to the perfect fit. He's the kind of man I imagine sitting in a London café, reading Faust and drinking espresso out of cups that are too small, dainty even, but somehow that just make his hands seem more manly and big. Hands that I'd be happy to have dancing over my—

I shake myself at this corny fantasizing. Esme has obviously rubbed off on me big time (the gorgeous witch). I roll my shoulders back and center myself. This is Xander, my friend, a man I've spent hours with. Just be myself, easy, like Esme said.

I pull a lighter from my clutch and start walking, strutting across the lobby with my polka dot heels clacking loudly against the tiles. Xander's gorgeous brown eyes flick up in my direction and I don't smile, letting my hips and tits do all the peacocking for me.

There's an expression that men get when they're entranced by a beautiful woman. It's almost like shock, where you've completely disarmed them and take them by surprise. It's subtle, the look, if they know how to hide it. After all, most men don't like surrendering their power and dominance. And Xander's on point, masterfully downplaying the ripple of heat that shoots through his eyes.

I bite my lip softly as he covers his astonishment with a delicious smile, then he lifts an eyebrow and makes a show of running his gaze over me from head to toe. Remarkably he turns his expression into a bit of a joke *and* a compliment, his eyes saying, *Arie Noel, you look bloody incredible.*

Yes, kelly green wiggle dress, you *are* the perfect attire.

I sashay up and snatch his glass of Crown Royal from the bar, then click open my lighter and ignite the top of his drink on fire. He flinches as I let the blue flame spread across the golden surface, tilting the glass so the alcohol sizzles.

“I’ve recently decided that all cocktails should be lit on fire before consuming,” I say hotly, letting the tiny blaze kindle in the glass between us. Our eyes catch. The flames dance. Before he can say anything, I blow the fire out dramatically and douse him in a smoke bath, tossing the rest of his drink back in one hot gulp.

Caramel.

Whiskey.

My heart racing.

God, that tastes good!

I smack the empty glass onto the countertop and flick my red hair over my shoulder, turning to him with the sharp tang of whiskey still burning my throat.

“Xander Carlisle,” I say softly. “It’s been a minute,”

His eyes drop to my mouth, and his expression moves past shock to something far more primal. My skin tightens as heat flushes across my chest. Suddenly, that whole show feels like the equivalent of tearing off my clothes and asking Xander to take me to his bed.

“Well,” Xander says, nodding his head in a soft bow, “you always knew how to make an entrance, didn’t you?”

It’s a joke—and it’s not—because the heat in his tone doesn’t quite pull it off. The sexy British accent makes my skin tingle, and I tell myself he’s just being flirty, which we’ve been a thousand times before. For the record, I’ve said (and done) far raunchier things in his presence and it’s been completely uncharged. But this feels ... different, somehow. Dangerous. There isn’t *someone else* on the other side of the ocean for us to

hide behind. There's no agreed-upon excuse to dismiss the innuendo as innocent.

"I cook with fire. I drink with fire. I *am* the fire," I say, leaning in to the charge between us and not backing away. "Same old Arie."

"Same old nothing," Xander says, shaking his head like he can't really believe I'm standing in front of him. "Damn, I missed you."

Suddenly, Xander's arms wrap around my body—a hug—and I know this is nothing more than a we-haven't-seen-each-other-in-years greeting, but those big hands pressing into my back make my knees turn to gelatin. And *flambé-my-heart*, if he doesn't smell like the perfect cocktail of man: leather, musk, dried ginger, and that smoke I blew over him a second ago. His cheek brushes against mine and my face heats, my hands sliding over his wide shoulders like they have a hundred times as I hug him back. We've shared countless embraces like this, and they've all been friendly, guiltless. But this one feels loaded.

Being crushed against him—

Being held and remembered—

They say an eight-second hug builds a true connection, and he holds me long enough that I start to hold my breath, my body becoming wickedly aware of just how big he is. How perfectly we fit. How his skin would taste like sex and sin.

When Xander pulls away, he kisses me on each cheek like a true European, the brush of his mouth a sensation I'd forgotten could upend me. I'd forgotten how many times I used to wonder what would happen if I tilted my head at the perfect moment and his mouth landed on mine? An accident that wasn't. An accident that we could play off as one. An accident that might begin something we both wanted.

Xander almost blushes when he lets go of me, and our eyes

meet as if he also knows that hug was charged with something neither of us knows how to speak of. He looks away quickly—a gesture I know well—one he uses to cut the connection and return us to normalcy.

“So, I know I asked you for a banging Waikiki food tour,” he begins. “But I’ve been thinking about it and—” he hesitates, tilting his head to the side and squinting, trying to gauge my reaction. “—and I think it would be a bollocks-good idea if we cooked something instead.”

Now it’s my turn to raise my eyebrows in astonishment.

“*We* should cook something instead?” I echo, my chest filling with a fluttery buzz at the suggestion. Oh my God, is that butterflies I’m feeling?

“You know, for old time’s sake,” he replies, shrugging like it’s nothing.

Only it’s *not* nothing. Cooking is a sacred space. It’s where we *both* feel the most passionate—and powerful.

And in control—something this night is starting to feel like it might be wickedly lacking if I’m not careful.

“Cook something?” I repeat. “And do you have a *kitchen* in that big fancy room, or suite, or whatever you paid ten-thousand quid of British cash to secure in this place?” I ask pointedly.

“Well, for ten-thousand quid it better have a kitchen,” he replies.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Yes.” He smiles casually. “My room has a kitchen.”

My stomach flips.

Man, those butterflies are a bitch!

My room has a kitchen is an absolutely normal English phrase. I’d even say boring—or stodgy if I’m going to use something Xander would say. It’s not something that should turn my stomach into a cauldron of lightning.

“Yes, but—” I stall. “Is it an industrial kitchen? Fully equipped?”

“You’re right, this does look like a pretty rubbish hotel,” Xander tosses back, looking around at the expensive decor.

“Hey, I’m used to certain standards,” I press, pretending it matters if I cook in the presence of stainless steel countertops and industrial mixers. The truth is, my brain is only trying to make space for the fact that Xander Carlisle just invited me up to his room.

To cook.

Friends do that all the time, right? Especially friends from culinary school.

Cook means cook. It doesn’t mean bend me over this burner while we have hot I’ve-wanted-you-for-years sex.

“We’ll *improvise*,” Xander says, speaking of the lack of industrial kitchens and not the fact that I’m thinking of him gobsmacking me in a horizontal position. “A real chef can work with what she’s given.”

“Can she?” I shoot back as he gives me a knowing smile.

Xander stands up and pays for the drink I finished for him, and I’m not going to lie: I’m buzzed. The sun hasn’t even completely set, so I’m clearly a little off my rocker if I think Xander is making veiled passes before the sky has even started to darken. I look out the bar window at the Waikiki bay. It glitters with the sun starting to hit the horizon, reminding me of a cherry sliding off the top of a melting sundae.

“Plus,” Xander says, putting his wallet away. “Getting fired is complete shit. Cooking is the perfect way to cheer you up.”

My eyes cut to him something fierce. How did he know about—?

Oh right, Esme.

She must’ve mentioned my unemployed status in that text. Brilliant. As much as my pride wants to correct Xander—

because, hello, I quit!—I also don't want to fess up that my sister was the one texting him.

"Okay fine. We cook," I agree, not sure this is a smart decision, but let's be real, grabbing life by the lady parts is my preferred mode of operation. "You better not cry when I show you up," I threaten. "You may have a fancy restaurant in London, but I don't pull any punches."

"Oh, this I know," he agrees, smiling.

"No, no!" I shake my head at him. "Don't you flash that cocky smile at me like you're the king of Britain. Don't forget, I know all your weaknesses in the kitchen."

"Well—" He tilts his head to the side. "You *used* to know them." He gives me a hot glare like I don't know anything anymore.

"Is that a challenge?" I volley, throwing my hands on my hips.

"Always." His smile hitches.

"Oh, it's on! Prepare to be burnt to the ground."

Xander winks like that's all he's looking for anyway, and I have to school my features and pretend that didn't just make my legs thrum like it's payday.

"Fine," I agree, puffing out my chest. "I'll take you to the night market for ingredients, and while we're there you're going to tell me every pan, spice, and utensil that suite of yours comes equipped with. Got it? There's no way I'm giving you an advantage."

"Deal," Xander agrees, walking me out of the bar and into the lobby.

"Okay, but before we leave, we have to make a small pit stop," I say, turning us toward the elevator. "Give me your room key."

Xander's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "Excuse me?"

Clearly he thinks I want to skip cooking and go straight to his bed.

He's such a man.

I roll my eyes. "Get your head out of the gutter, Carlisle," I jab, playfully smacking him. "I need your key to operate the elevator! Hello? Fancy places like this have security so hooligans like me don't have access."

"Access to go *where* exactly?" His tone still thinks I'm taking him somewhere to jump his bones.

"Xander Carlisle," I chastise, "I've seen you for a whopping ten minutes. I'm not going to jump on your cock that quickly, despite how hot I burn."

I press the up button on the elevator console and put my hand out for him to give me his room key.

"Hey," he defends, pulling his wallet out again and handing me the plastic card. "It wasn't out of the realm of possibility. I've seen you nick men in less time."

I pull him into the elevator and hold the card against the magnetic ID pad. "And you don't think anything about me has changed since college?" I chide, pushing the button to our destination. But when he doesn't respond, I turn around to find that sexy predatory look has darkened his features again.

Damn!

Butterflies are a thing—like, a very real and disarming thing.

"Actually," Xander says smoothly, stepping toward me as the elevator doors close with a ding. "I think everything since college has changed."

CHAPTER FOUR

The elevator zips upward and my stomach jumps into my throat. My mouth goes dry as Xander squeezes the air out from between us. His head tilts down and those dark brown eyes sear into mine.

I may have been the predator in college, but the tables have turned.

A possessive hand slides around my lower back. It's the only place where we connect—like a perfect dancer's frame where nothing else touches: not our lips, not our chests, not our ankles.

I close my eyes and wait, because everything in this moment screams he's going to kiss me. And yet, all I can feel is the motion of the elevator barreling us upward and my heart zinging. The wild silence between us is loud and unraveling.

When my eyes flutter back open, Xander is still staring down at me like he might take me at any second. But he doesn't—oh the tease—and it makes me smile something vicious.

"Is this a dare?" I ask softly, my eyes moving to his mouth.

“We played this game in college, several dozen times as I recall. Never making a move. Never taking what you—” His eyes dilate and I tilt my face up to him, my red lips taunting. “Tell me, what exactly has changed since then?”

His hand digs into my spine, but he doesn’t move, despite the brand of emotion fleeting through his expression. Xander may be looking at me, but right now, he’s thinking about *her*.

Charlotte who broke his heart.

The pain in his eyes is one I know too well. She’s what stopped him all the other times before. Only now, the pain is different. It isn’t an ‘if only’ testament. It’s him looking at me and wondering why she cheated. I know they aren’t together anymore, but looking at me—wanting me—that’s like muscle memory. My face is a shadow between us that will always remind him of her.

“Arie, I—I—” Xander drops his hand from my back and I feel weightless as the elevator comes to a stop. My stomach lurches with that momentary feeling of being un-tethered—his touch lost. “I, uh—”

He searches for words. For that familiar apology. The one that says *we* can’t. But the elevator speaks for him, ringing out in a loud ding, followed by a whoosh of air behind me. Warm air fills in for all the places we’ve always left unspoken. The almosts and the apologies.

Humid, Hawaiian air caresses my neck. I took us to the rooftop and now the outdoors is spilling in, excavating emotional time bombs and history that we thought we could pretend didn’t exist. Xander opens his mouth to apologize or explain, but I lift my finger to his lips, stopping him. His mouth is so soft and this fragile touch feels like a thousand *I want yous* shattering between us. Maybe that’s the problem—we don’t know how to be only lust, and that something more isn’t

supposed to happen with us. Maybe I'm bad with hearts. Maybe he is also.

Maybe some friends you're just supposed to love—at a distance.

"Whether she's across the ocean or in the past," I say softly, "she's always right here between us, isn't she?"

"We aren't—" he says against my trembling hand. "Charlotte and I aren't—we—"

"I know," I say, stepping backward and blocking the elevator doors so they don't close. "I know it's been over between the two of you for a long time. You don't have to explain it to me. I just wish—"

A lump lodges in my throat that I don't want to give breath.

"I get it," I insist. "Really, I do." I nod and look away from him. "Just come look at the sunset, okay?"

I step onto the rooftop and hold the door open so he can follow me. Xander's eyes are sad and full of apologies, and there's something lovely about the fact that we both want this to happen but somehow we can't follow through. It's tragically poetic, which my sister would say is the legacy of a true love story. I shake myself at such platitudes. There's nothing poetic about being on the edge of something real, only to be controlled by ghosts and broken hearts and muscle memory.

Maybe he'll never be over Charlotte.

"Come," I encourage. "You've never seen Waikiki like this." I nod to the roof and the dazzle of water sparkling out beyond the terrace. I turn my gaze to the sun, giving him the space to walk out of the elevator and not have my eyes on him.

"Have you been up here before?" he asks.

"Not this hotel," I admit, letting go of the doors and following him. "It's a wicked habit I developed a few years ago. I like to steal into hotels and see if I can get to the roof. Some-

times on my day off, all alone. Other times with friends, strangers, acquaintances. Waikiki always looks beautiful from the top of the world. It makes everything else seem small in comparison—your troubles, your heart.”

I walk across the wooden floor and out toward the railing, not looking at Xander after saying that. Maybe it’s too sentimental for the vibrant foul-mouth chef he’s used to hanging out with. Maybe my sister has made me soft.

This rooftop is different than most. Usually they’re full of ventilation pipes and debris and the ground is made out of some thermoplastic membrane. Instead, there’s a patio with stacked chairs and tables and a closed restaurant on top of the Atlantis, making me wonder how long it’s been dormant. The building is all boarded up with windows and doors that remind me of Xander’s heart—abandoned and betrayed despite all that beauty, a gem in a forgotten sky. There isn’t even an old sign that I can look up later to see what used to have this incredible view.

I walk to the railing on my own, letting Xander find his own edge to peek down. Some things you have to look at on your own. Fear is a different mirror for everyone. Just like regret.

I look to the beach below, where the ocean is just loud enough to be heard crashing upon the shore. I can’t stop thinking about all the promises Xander made Charlotte, and how perfect their life was supposed to be. It has me wondering: what was I too naive in college to see? Not about love per se, but about growing up, about life. The things I had romantic notions about.

Of course, the most obvious one sits like a stone in my gut. I thought becoming a chef would be easier and that I’d already be rich, or famous, or significant.

Work hard.

Be brilliant.

Get rewarded.

That's the American dream.

A dream, my sister would say, is nothing but mythology. I really ought to learn to listen to her.

But I believed it, full-hearted, like Xander gave Charlotte his heart. If I loved cooking, if I fell into the craft with all of my soul, then creativity was supposed to be my ticket to being fulfilled. It turns out the real world is a bitch, and there's a lot more politics and luck in the chef game than I expected.

No one actually wants to hear what I imagine their restaurant could be. Not Chef Lee, and not all the chefs who kicked me to the curb before him. Simon's right; I do have a pattern. I want more. I want it all. I want to create food that makes people cry, and swoon, fall in love.

Oh. My. God. When did my sister's romantic brain take over? When did I get so damn sentimental about—of all things—food?

I turn around and look at the deserted structure on the top of this resort. A resort named after a lost city—the Atlantis—hiding treasures in what it has left abandoned. The orange glaze of the sun colors the building's dark siding, and I can't help but wonder what this used to be. What it could become. It sits on top of one of Waikiki's tallest skyscrapers like a dormant mountain that has forgotten it could be a volcano.

Why doesn't anyone trust my ideas? Why doesn't anyone respect the fact that I could help make their restaurant relevant? When did creativity become my curse?

I can feel Xander beside me, a few feet away, looking out at the disappearing light. When did the past start defining what we both believe we can be?

I turn to the blaze of sun inching down the horizon. This view is absolutely breathtaking. And I don't know why, but it

feels right to be sharing this with him. Even if we found a way past the ghost in the room, his life is still in London. Maybe some friends you're supposed to love from far away.

We stand in this quiet, watching the orange disc dissolve into the ocean. The salty wind plays, dancing the red hair around my face as the water turns over upon itself and drifts toward the horizon.

Maybe love can be two friends cooking and remembering.

We don't talk the whole time the sun sets. We just watch one more day end, and then the night rise with its indigo breath.

"Whatever you're thinking right now," I say to Xander, finally breaking the silence, "that's what you're cooking tonight." I walk over to him and hold his hand. "I'm going to take you to the night market and then you're going to show me all the storms and spices in your head." Xander looks at me weakly, like he's not sure he knows how to do that. "We're going to put all this silence and emotion into whatever we make, okay?" I explain. "You did this every day when we were in school—filled what you cook up with love, and hope, and nervousness."

Xander shakes his head, like he doesn't quite remember that exuberant kid.

"And I'll put all my anger and frustration into mine," I continue, leading him back to the elevator platform. "And it's gonna be intense, cause you know me ... I lost my job. If I don't cook away my emotions, the only logical alternative is murdering Chef Lee." Xander breaks a smile at that. "And you—" I lift his hand and squeeze, kissing his knuckles softly. "You can put in whatever you need. Sadness. Heartbreak. Fear. Everything."

He smiles weakly.

"Oh no," I chide. "I'm going to kick your ass if that's all

you've got, Chef Carslile!" I drop his hand and point at him. "I expect to be wowed by whatever London fanciness you've been cooking for the last few years in your restaurant. There's no way you could afford the Atlantis Resort without cooking with your heart."

"You give me too much credit."

"No, I give you exactly what you deserve," I respond. "And I know exactly how much love you have for cooking. Plus, you promised to get me out of my funk."

"Yeah, about that," Xander asks, giving me an inquisitive look. "Did you actually just admit to wanting to *murder* a man for firing you?"

"I burn hot," I shrug. "Would you expect anything less?"

Xander presses the elevator button and waves the magnetic side of his hotel key across the security strip. "Remind me to *never* give you a job at my restaurant. Ever. Not even if you're begging me."

"You wouldn't last half an hour with me in your kitchen," I agree.

Xander shakes his head. "No, it's the other way around Arie. *You're* the one who can't stand sharing. You need your *own* kitchen. In fact, I'm surprised you haven't opened your own restaurant."

"Um, I'm not a trust-fund baby," I toss at him as we step into the elevator and hit the down button.

"There are things called investors," Xander explains. "You don't have to be independently wealthy to start something."

"I'm shit with money."

"So get a partner."

"How about we start with seeing if I can still cook," I admonish, looking out the elevator doors at the darkening horizon. "Then you can give me a lesson in entrepreneurship."

“Arie Noel,” Xander says, shaking his head, “I’m one-hundred-percent certain cooking is not the problem.”

“Oh yeah?” I turn to him with my hands on my hips. “Then what is, smart guy?”

Xander smiles, that cocky smolder returning as the elevator doors close. “That one’s easy, Arie. You don’t trust yourself.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The night market sizzles with life. Strung lights hang between vendor kiosks and steam hisses from grills, misting the boardwalk and scenting the air with saffron and barbecue. Xander and I stroll through the crowd, taste-testing food and gawking at jeweled vegetables in the colors of ruby and emerald and pineapple.

I don't trust myself?

What could Xander possibly mean when he said that? I'm not faint of heart. I'm not shy and innocent. I grab life by the tits—and by golly, do I revel in it. What could I possibly not have the tits to believe in?

I watch Xander in the market like a child in Wonka's chocolate factory. He's in love with everything he sees—plantains, yucca, edamame, snap peas. There are places that bring us to life and there are those that leave us hollow, and it's surprising to think that people in our lives have just as much power.

He's danced around the topic of Charlotte, and it's evident she is the ghost he carries with him, even though he swears he's had other relationships since. But when he talks about his

restaurant I can tell he's put all his energy and passion into cooking. A love or a distraction? I'm not sure. Maybe it's both. He's told me all about how well the place is doing, and how much he loves managing a kitchen, and inventing new recipes. And this place—this market—oh the true joy it inspires! He bounces from booth to booth, tasting fruit, smelling herbs, marveling at the texture of garden vegetables. It brings back his smile, a truly genuine one; maybe cooking is a distraction for him, but at least it's one filled with so much effortlessness and beauty that it can't be a problem.

Xander's arms are full. His bags are filled with everything I pick up, dream about, or smell: chives, bok choy, peaches. He indulges me in the escapism of food as well. Anything I'm interested in gets added to the loot, as if we're going to feed an army when we get back to the hotel. I tell him I'm not going to use all of these ingredients, but he smiles and still purchases them.

"It must be nice to have money to burn," I sass, but he holds a carton of fresh strawberries under my nose and shakes his head.

"Is there really anything better to be throwing away money on?" he responds as I breathe in the sun-ripe scent of the berries. "Try one."

I open my mouth as he feeds me the fruit, which is tart on the tongue, then juicy, filling my mouth in a second wave of sweetness.

"Oh man," I moan. "Those are incredible!"

Xander points at me like he doesn't need any more convincing. "If that's the noise you make when you taste fresh ingredients," he notes. "Then I'm in trouble when you actually cook something with them."

"What if I make a similar noise when testing out the purple aubergine?" I tease.

"Eggplant jokes?" he tosses back, and I like that we're

flirting again and going for the stupid laugh. It keeps things light and manageable, reminding me of how easy we can be together—just friends who are comfortable.

Xander reaches over me dramatically to pull out a particularly phallic specimen from the vegetable patch.

“Don’t test me, Arie,” he teases. “I know the second your food starts making *you* horny ... well, that’ll be when I’m about to have my mind blown.”

“I don’t think blowing your *mind* is exactly what the eggplant is suggesting,” I say running my finger down the fruit’s glossy purple skin.

“Oh no?” Xander feigns innocence. “Should I bore you with its history and science instead? Does its scientific name *Solanum melongena* titillate? How about the fact that it’s part of the deadly nightshade family?” He lowers the eggplant so that it’s perfectly positioned to look like his own phallus.

I shake my head at him. “What are you, fifteen?”

“The eggplant may be closely related to the tomato and the chili pepper,” Xander continues, not missing a beat. “But it’s best known for its spongy, meaty texture, which is smashingly good for absorbing oils and flavor when cooking.” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “Tell me, is your brain hotting up yet?”

“Spongy, meaty texture?” I smirk at him. He hooks a pinky around the tiny belt of my 1950s dress and pulls me toward his bulging eggplant.

“You can have a taste test,” he offers. “Pop your mouth on it and let me know.”

“Did you really just say that? Pop my mouth on your *eggplant*?”

“What? Was that too obscene for you? *You*—the goddess of all things innuendo?” He rolls his eyes, before letting go of my belt and turning to the market attendant to pay for the fruit.

“You’re not usually this coy when it comes to tasting my aubergine.”

“*Your* aubergine?”

Xander shrugs nonchalantly. “I distinctly remember making a roasted lamb and eggplant dish that made you moan like a dirty whore.”

“Oh, are we talking about *food* again?”

“When it comes to you, Arie, I’m pretty sure sex and food are the same thing.” Xander puts the phallic object in his bag and tosses me a wink. “I call dibs on the eggplant. Later you can beg me to feed you it.”

“And I thought *I* had the naughty mouth,” I sass, but he just gives me a sly smile and continues walking down the crowded path.

“That just spurs you on, now doesn’t it?” Xander teases, walking to the next booth, which is full of herbs and exotic mushrooms. “Someone else playing your game?”

“Honestly?” I say, starting to collect chanterelles by the handful. “You’re the only one who could actually keep up.”

Xander raises an eyebrow at me. “Are we talking in the cooking department, or the clever innuendo scene?” But then he leans in seductively and practically growls, “Or do you mean ...?”

He doesn’t say it out loud, but he means sex.

He leaves the word unspoken and zipping around us, conjuring up the undeniable fact that I was the Olympic gold medalist of hook-ups in college, and he was sleeping alone and pretending to be satisfied with over-the-phone fake orgasms.

I drop the mushrooms I’ve been collecting and turn around hotly. As expected, Xander is wearing a wicked smirk like he knows all my games. Cocky bastard. Only the market is crowded, and we’re so close that my spin ends up dragging the whole front of my dress across him.

He catches my hip, and the connection is immediate. Heat tingles across my breasts, and the pressure of his chest zips downward, shooting between my legs. It's one thing to banter and tease; it's something else entirely to feel how tight this dress is and how hard his chest is and ...

I bite back a moan, not wanting him to hear. Heat builds in me like a wildfire sparking—the thrum between my legs aching for so much more than this small connection. I turn my features into a playful smile, allowing my fingers to dally and find his collar, testing out the fabric of his shirt where those three top buttons stand open. I poke my fingers through the button holes, pretending I might thread his buttons back together and close off the immodest show of skin. An immodesty that I revel in, my fingers not so innocent, hotly grazing that hint of flesh.

“Tell me, Xander,” I ask, tilting my head and allowing my red hair to cascade down the side of my dress. “Was there a third option you were about to offer? Were you trying to imply that you’ve become a man-whore since I last saw you? ‘Cause, I’m pretty sure true love and romance had you all tied up and gagged back in college.”

His smile hitches. “What if I have?”

“Xander Carlisle?” I raise a skeptical eyebrow. “A man-whore?”

“You don’t think that’s possible?”

“Oh no,” I shake my head, but not in disagreement. “I’m sure it’s *more* than possible. I may not have had the pleasure of seeing you naked, Xander, but *you* have. And I’m pretty sure you’ve realized the fit, sexy, British man is pretty much American-girl catnip. So if you want to whore-it-up, it wouldn’t be a problem. I’m just surprised you’d actually tell me about it.”

“Why? Would that upset you?” he asks, pressing the subject. “You don’t want to think about me, I dunno—single? Carefree? Chin-deep in pussy?”

I laugh out loud, tossing my head back at that comment. “Oh damn! I plead the fifth,” I declare, looking back at him with my cheeks flushed. “I don’t want to incriminate myself with a question like that. Though, I have to admit—” I pull him in close by his neck. “It’s super-hot when you talk smut.”

“Yeah? You find my smutty mouth a bit fiddly? Does it turn you on?”

His head tilts with a rakish smile and once again his lips are only a breath from mine. Once again we’re close enough—but that last inch feels like a mile. Xander’s eyes darken and I clutch his shirt, and five dozen strangers bustle past—all nudging and rushing and bumping into us, making it easy to cause something accidentally deliberate.

Lean forward.

Take.

If he was anyone else, we’d already be locked in a wicked embrace.

But I hesitate.

“I always talked dirty,” Xander says in a low tone, not closing this distance. “Only, I was usually talking about cooking. Eggplant. Honey. Perfectly seared peaches that have been pitted—that soft flesh waiting for me to sink my teeth in.”

“God, you’re a tease,” I growl.

“Oh, I’ll cook you everything you want, Arie. When it comes to food I always put out.” He steps away, breaking this lash of tension, a rush of people churning past us and leaving me lightheaded.

Xander turns to the person behind the kiosk and starts speaking in another language, bartering for the bag of mushrooms. But now, all I want is fruit—ripe, soft peaches, and strawberries, and papayas halved and peeled open. All I want is to poach pears and watch them soak, stir them in a wine broth and feed Xander their soft flesh, taste the honey as it drips

down his neck. Just thinking about his mouth, his tongue, wrapping over the swollen fruit—eating my hot dessert—makes my thighs ache and dampen. I won't even need Xander to touch me. I could just watch him eat food and say dirty things and that alone could have me—

I grab Xander's shirt and pull him into the crowd.

"I need to cook," I growl, leading us toward the taxi stand.
"I need to cook right now."

CHAPTER SIX

Fruit. Caramel. Saffron.

My wine bath is broiling as I flambé the peaches and strawberries. Their delicate skin searing against the pan to a perfect char. I don't have pears, but I'll work with the succulent gems of velvet sweetness that the island has given us.

I take a sip of my martini—dirty, of course—and look through Xander's suite. It's modern and sexy, and oddly masculine. Not that *he* isn't masculine. Xander is one-hundred-percent man. But I'd be lying if he doesn't always come with a flair of poetry to him—maybe it's a British thing. For example, he thinks unbuttoned shirts are always in fashion. He reminds me of a rich Duke wearing seventeenth-century tights and lounging around on tufted, velvet cushions. For a man I imagine surrounded in European decadence—wainscoting, poster beds, giant paintings of kings with powdered faces—this suite is all things stainless steel and chic. Honestly, all these modern surfaces and angles are worse than his room being a cottagecore wet dream, because modern means lots of creatively-designed large, flat spaces upon which he could—

I bite my lip and start humming.

Too many potentially naughty surfaces, that's for sure.

The second that Xander mentioned sweet, hot peaches in his mouth was the second I realized I had to cook everything I've been feeling. Get it out. Get it on the stove. Get it on the plate. Let food be my therapy. Let it hold all this need.

Xander is right—food and sex are two sides of the same coin to me. Both are sexy, creative, and inspired. I get turned on when I'm behind the stove and close to the fire—when I'm making what *I* want to make, when I'm creating for me and not someone else. Is that what Xander meant when he said I need to trust myself? Trust my instincts and my cooking?

My pan sizzles and it feels like everything between Xander and me has been leading up to this night: one hot night together, letting loose for a wild hookup in Hawaii before he goes back to London. But part of me knows that isn't true. If all I wanted was a hot fuck, trust me, I'd be riding him on those pieces of stainless steel furniture already.

When it comes to sex, I take what I want. I don't hesitate like I did at the market. I'm the girl who says screw you to Archibald Lee without a second thought. I'm the girl who reaches out and grabs cock.

So why does Xander feel different? He's single. I'm single. What's the problem?

I look at him slaving over the stove next to me, steam clouding him and tangling into his hair. He's always looked beautiful when he cooks—potent and inventive. He gives me a wink as he stirs his medley of root vegetables and eggplant, and all I can think is that maybe this is a line we aren't sure we want to cross. Our entire friendship has been colored with tension and desire, but we've mastered the art of never giving in to it, never falling prey to our baser instincts.

Somehow, I know food is what will connect us. Even if I

don't sleep with Xander tonight, I want him to taste me—taste me through my food. I want him to revel in the sexy, unafraid, and wicked way I see the world. He knows that cooking is an art, and good cooking requires perspective, attitude—heart. I'm going to make Xander something so decadent that it makes him feel like he's been between my legs.

That's my perspective on cooking: come hither and let me burn you to ashes.

"That smells amazing," Xander groans, leaning over my boiling sugar and wine and wafting the cloud of spices under his nose.

"Far more interesting than the spongy, meaty flesh of your aubergine?" I tease, echoing his words from the market and nudging him with my hip. This may be a gorgeous high-end suite, but there's still only one stove—which we're sharing.

"When it's in your mouth, you can give me your final verdict," he sasses back, his eyes dancing over my body for a second, like he's imagining what it would be like for me to be in this tight green dress and on my knees taking him.

Shit. Clearly *I'm* the one who is imagining such things.

I take all that unrequited heat and stir it into the pot, slipping the charred fruit into the syrupy bath. Maybe it's appropriate that Xander is cooking an eggplant entrée and I'm cooking a dessert peach. I'm starting to think I could teach any man the proper way to taste and devour a woman's soaked fruit with this flambéed gorgeousness between his teeth.

I moan at my own wicked inklings, the unmistakable heat of Xander's eyes tracing down my throat as the sound escapes. The stove sizzles and steams—and clean chefs we are not. There is food and spice everywhere, from chopped ingredients to spilled sugar to abandoned piles of dusted cardamom. We are hurricanes blowing across this stove together, our fencing arms reaching for ingredients, slabs of butter slipping from our

hands, laughter and jokes and flirting, and it all makes me feel youthful and alive. It makes me almost naive again like the world is meant for our taking.

Xander walks his plated food to the large dining table near the window and I follow him with my poached fruits topped with honey glaze and sprinkled cinnamon. We sit at each end of a marble slab of stone that glitters like an altar at the center of the room. The wide expanse of the table separates us like we're formal debutantes on opposite sides of a feast. Honestly, I'll need this much space between us to eat his food. I know he's gone out of his way to prepare something beautiful and to make sure I also properly taste him.

"Tell me," I ask, sipping from my martini and looking over the beautiful bouquet of roasted aubergine on my plate. "Is this what you cook in London at your restaurant? Am I getting the Carlisle special? Or is it new? Something invented just for me?"

"I put my heart into everything I cook, Arie—in London or in Hawaii," he smiles playfully, but then his expression drops. "Truth is, that restaurant is all of me—my grit, my heart, my hard work, my dreams." He looks up at me plainly, like he's sharing something important.

"That sounds terrifying," I admit.

He tilts his head to the side with a knowing sadness and nods. "The things you love usually are."

I look away, stabbing my fork into the bloom of vegetables on my plate. His dish is exquisite. I take a bite and revel in how he's blended the oils and spices perfectly. The man is a god in the kitchen. Only Xander could make the rubbery texture of eggplant melt like a sin.

"And...?" Xander pries. "The verdict is?"

I bat my lashes at him as I take several more bites of his dish, chewing and swallowing. He smirks, knowing what I'm

doing and trying to wait me out—I'm finally eating his eggplant after all. Give a girl a little space.

"You want to know how this—" I run the buttery oil of the vegetable against my lip. "*—feels* in my mouth? Is that it?"

"You're killing me, Arie!" he grumbles.

"That so?" I tease. "I didn't know my opinion meant so much to you."

"You're everyone's biggest critic," Xander admits. "You were at school. You were with my food. I'm sure that's half the reason that chef fired you today. Everyone you've ever worked for probably knows exactly what you think. Trust me, Arie. You're hard to impress."

"I just know what's good," I defend.

"I wasn't saying your criticism wasn't warranted." His eyes darken. "So—?"

Xander's hand dances nervously against the edge of his dessert, and I don't know if he does it intentionally, but one of his fingers dips into the pink flesh of the peach, teasing the fruit's delicateness.

"Let's just say," I begin, my voice hoarse at the sight of what he's doing, forcing me to cough and clear my throat. "Let's just say, when it comes to your food ..." My eyes flick from his fingers to his eager look. "I understand how you can afford this fancy hotel." I gesture to the room around us. "Your food *should* buy you nice things like this."

Xander's lip hitches at the compliment, but his eyes steel over me and I know he's waiting to hear me add something hot and naughty. It's my nature to compare food to sex, but the whole eggplant gag seems a little obvious.

I point at him with my empty fork. "I'd tell you to enjoy your entrée first Xander, but—" I nod to his wicked hand. "It seems you're already eager for dessert."

His fingers pause.

He's too far across the table to catch the subtlety of his expression and determine if he just realized what his fingers were doing, or if that gesture was deliberate. Xander's eyes snap to mine, holding me wildly and not looking down, leaving his sinful fingers to dangle in the peach's honey.

"Did you actually think I wouldn't eat this first?" Xander asks in a smooth, dark voice. "Did you think I could sit here and ignore what you put in front of me?" He lifts his fingers up to his lips and slowly draws the tips of his fingers between them, the honey glaze dripping down his wrist.

Hot damn.

This is what I was talking about. I could just watch him eat—all innuendo, all tease—and be close to orgasm. In fact, if this wiggle dress wasn't so tight, he could open my knees and see exactly how excited I am.

"Tease," I shoot across the table, and he smiles something wicked.

"Me?" He drops his fingers into the dessert again, teasing the peach folds. "I'm not the one who cooked this." He plunges his fingers deep into the bowl, submerging his knuckles into the syrup as he plucks out the poached fruit. He lifts the orange half-moon to his mouth as glaze runs down the back of his hand. It's messy and hot and everything I am. It makes me want to crawl across this table and beg to suck on those fingers.

Xander closes his eyes as he puts the peach against his lips, opening his mouth slowly to allow his tongue out to taste it. I squeeze my legs together, my lady parts throbbing at the sight of his obscene feeding.

"Xander," I whisper sharply, chastising him, and his lip hooks up to the right, pleased by the admission in my tone. But he ignores the warning, slowly, softly, opening his mouth to devour the dripping fruit.

Oh God! What was I thinking? That dessert was meant to

tease *him*, and give him a taste of all my desire and wanting. Not the other way around. Because now, all I want is that mouth on my—

Xander moans hotly!

Oh, wow.

It's the kind of guttural moan that comes deep from his throat, the kind my pussy knows would have me sinfully close.

"Fuck, Arie!" Xander growls, the punch of his tone making my pussy quiver. "Your food tastes like sex. Why the fuck don't you have a restaurant?" He swears again. "You realize if you cooked things like this that every man in the bloody world would come to have a taste."

"My peaches aren't that good," I protest hoarsely, but his eyes flick up to me like I'm insane.

"If you served food like this, trust me, every man in the restaurant will want to fuck you."

I bite my lip.

There's only one man I want to do that.

"I can get laid when I want," I fire back, my voice thin. "I don't need a restaurant to get that kind of thing."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Xander's eyes darken into black pools.

My mouth dries, and I'm not sure I want to ask this next question. "Then ... what *are* you talking about?"

"It's not about getting *you* laid," Xander says sharply. "It's about turning your customers on with your food. Arousing them. Making them hot."

"You really think food can do that?" I challenge, but it's a weak argument. Just look at him. Just look at me.

"*Your* food can," he grunts out, holding up his sticky hand as evidence.

"And why would I want to do that?" I ask hotly. Yes, I love that my dessert has the ability to get him so flustered, but this is

just the two of us! Not strangers. Not patrons. This is something personal between us.

“Because owning a restaurant is—” he pauses, his brow knitting with a powerful determination. “Yes, owning a restaurant is about the food, of course it’s about the food, but it’s *also* about the ambiance, the *experience* you deliver.” His eyes glitter, looking up seriously to catch mine. “And Arie, your food is—God! You have no idea. You’d make a bloody killing.”

“Selling sex?” I say pointedly, lifting an eyebrow. “That’s what you think my food sells? You realize that makes me sound like a—”

“Your *food* is the seductress,” he growls. “Not you! You—”

Our eyes catch and that thrum of heat sparks between us. The desire building is out in the open now.

Sex. He can’t look at me without thinking about it; he’s said as much. Yet, something in his expression is vulnerable, like he’s seeing me for the first time as the woman he knew I was but could never admit he wanted.

“Xander—”

“Promise me right now that you’ll create your own restaurant,” Xander says boldly, cutting me off. “You realize the most important thing in the world is that you cook things like this.” He points at the dessert. “You getting fired today is a sign.”

“I quit, actually.”

“Even better,” his voice becomes loud and insistent. “It means you already know you have a different destiny.”

“Destiny, Xander? Come on.” I shake my head. “Esme’s the one you can use platitudes like that—”

“Cause you don’t believe in something like love?” he cuts me off.

“It’s not that I don’t believe in love, I just—”

“Don’t think that’s how you feel about cooking? Like it’s

inevitable. That having a restaurant is something you *have* to do?”

“I—”

He spears me with a look, because if there’s anything I love—truly, unconditionally love—of course it’s cooking. I shake my head at him, overwhelmed with this whole proposition.

“Where would I even open a restaurant?” I ask. “Huh? Waikiki is overrun with them.”

“What about the rooftop?”

My eyes flick up. “Here?” I point to the ceiling of his suite. “The Atlantis rooftop?”

“You saw that abandoned building up there just like I did. It’s waiting for someone like you to revive it.”

“I couldn’t imagine anything more ridiculous.” I push my plate away from me, my hands shaking. This is crazy talk. I can fantasize about running my own place, but actually doing it? That’s too much. Especially one designed around—

“Flaming drinks,” Xander says, referencing the shot I lit on fire when I made my first entrance. “Wicked desserts. You could call the place *Fire* or *Seduction* or something short and sexy. Trust me, you’d be packed every night.”

My insides feel like knots and a million butterflies bursting. All of those things sound amazing. I’d kill to work at a restaurant like that.

“You’re telling me,” Xander continues, “that you can’t imagine seducing someone on top of the world—on top of Waikiki—with *your* food?” He scolds me with a frown. “I call bullshit, Arie. You’ve done crazier things in your life that took half the balls.”

“Okay maybe,” I admit, knowing my past is anything but tame. “But that’s because none of those things took any sort of risk! Not really. Hooking up with a stranger is easy. It’s inconsequential. You’re talking about—”

“Following your dreams? Building what you actually want?” The seriousness in his face is intense. “You want a restaurant of your own, don’t you?”

“I—I—” I hesitate. I don’t want to give those words space. I don’t want to hope for them and then have them crushed into dust.

“You want a restaurant of your own—don’t you?” Xander repeats, pushing back his seat from the table.

“Xander, I—” I shake my head, a lump of fear lodging into my throat. He knows my cooking better than most people—obviously—he knows I take risks with food all the time. But making food for me, or for him—that isn’t scary. It’s when you get other people involved, people who might not accept what you cook, or who you are. America is a judgmental bitch when it comes to sex, food, and seduction.

Having my own restaurant is too big.

“Wow,” Xander stands up. “Is it possible that you—*you* of all people—are scared to admit you want a restaurant?”

A bubble of everything I’m too scared to look at overflows.

“Well, you said it yourself,” I snap at him, angry now. I stand up myself, kicking back my own chair. My chest is buzzing and ready to lash out. “I don’t trust myself! Okay? I don’t trust that I can pull it off.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want it too much!”

“Which is the exact reason why you shouldn’t be doing anything else,” Xander insists. “Call me a romantic all you want, Arie, and go ahead and imply it’s a dirty word. But I’m the one who should know better. I’m the one who had romance cut his heart out. But that doesn’t mean I can’t see when love’s still the right choice. And you and cooking—that’s the greatest love affair there is.”

“Yeah, that’s easy for you to say,” I snip. “You have a

successful restaurant. You had investors lined up. You had a plan. You don't have any skin in this game."

"You don't think I have anything invested in you?" Xander is angry now, storming around the side of the marble table like a furious bull.

"Well, you don't!" I fire back, rounding the table to meet him halfway. "You're going to get back on a plane in however many hours and go back to your life in London. It doesn't matter to you, or your business, if I succeed or fail!"

"Jesus, Arie!" Xander hisses, in my face now. "What the hell do you think I'm doing in Hawaii?"

"I don't know!" I shoot back, not sure why it's relevant. "Business trip? Expansion? Vacation?"

"Are you playing dumb now?" Xander frowns, turning to trap me against the marble, my backside hitting the table's sharp edge. His eyes sear over me, up and down, implying—

"You wouldn't—" I shake my head. That's ridiculous. "You wouldn't fly halfway across the globe just to see me," I ask, weakly.

"Wouldn't I?"

My insides go cold. Didn't he have business meeting or—or—something? Wasn't it just convenience that he happened to be in town?

"W—wait? What are you saying?" I brave, and Xander leans forward dominantly, putting each of his hands on either side of me, pressing them into the table, and caging me in between his arms.

"Trust me," he growls, his words purring down the sweetheart neckline of this dress, making my chest heave in response. "Getting on that plane was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Because I also don't trust myself."

"Wait? You mean with me?"

"Yes."

One of Xander's hands snakes around my back and he steps forward, pressing his large body against my front. The smell of him is intoxicating, and like in the market, our sudden connection is a fire blasting off. My mouth falls open at his wicked position—both shameless and aggressive—because he's positioned his hips to press against my abdomen, and he's unmistakably turned on.

My food made Xander Carlisle hard.

"The reason you're afraid pull the trigger on a restaurant," Xander clips out. "Is the same exact reason I'm afraid to fuck you."

My eyes snap to his and my whole body turns to lava.

What does that mean? I shake my head, not sure I understand. Not sure I'm even in the right mindset to think clearly. All I want right now is to wiggle this skirt up and open my legs, grab his ass and press that devious bulge against my panties.

"What do you mean, you're afraid to—?"

"I don't trust myself," he repeats, his hands clasping around my waist and pushing me harder against him. "I want you too much. I always have. And if I have you—really *have* you—then I'll have to admit to all the years in college I wanted you and didn't—"

"Xander, I—" My hands clutch the open collar of his shirt, that V of skin a wicked invitation, itching for me to tear the shirt completely open.

"If I fuck you, Arie—" His mouth hovers over mine. So close. "Then I'll have to admit I knew things were over with Charlotte long before they ended. Not giving into my lust for you has always been this crazy way that I prove to myself that I was the good one in that relationship. When I wasn't. The truth is, I wanted you the whole time."

My hand connects with his neck and slides up to his face,

the rough stubble and the heat of his skin broiling me with hot electricity. I cup his face.

“Xander, are you saying—?”

“You’re the reason I came to Hawaii,” he gruffs out. “It wasn’t some BS business deal I was working on. I came to see you. I *had* to see you. I had to know.”

“To know—?”

“If I trust myself enough to take what I want.”

My mouth is dry and my pussy throbs.

Is this really happening? Did he really fly here to—?

I bite my lip because what *I* really want right now is to be naked and on this table. What I want is his cock out, ready to show me every position he’s imagined fucking me in all these years.

“Do you?” I pant. “Trust yourself?”

“Promise me you’ll open a restaurant,” he says against my mouth, the electric brush of his lips making me ache. I moan for a real kiss, for the real pressure of him, for Xander unleashed. “Promise me you’ll make a restaurant with food that’s as hot and dirty and wicked as the rest of you,” he barter. “Promise me that and I’ll show you exactly what I came here to do.”

“Xander—”

“*Promise!*” he growls.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I promise.”

The words fall from my lips without hesitation. I say them without considering the deal I’m making and the man in front of me who might actually hold me to it. No, I *know* he will. He doesn’t mince words when it comes to food and careers. If I promise, then there’s skin in the game. My skin.

I want a restaurant *and* I want him. I want everything.

When did I stop thinking I could have it all? When did I put my dreams on pause?

“I promise,” I mumble again.

Two words and our mouths crush.

Two words and he lifts me up onto the table so I’m sitting on the cold marble.

Two words and my hands are in his hair and his lips are bruising my own and my whole body shivers as his tongue slips inside my mouth and takes control.

“Xan—” I gasp as our mouths lash, and the poetic man I always imagine him to be becomes wildfire and monsoons—pure nature—both electric and terrifying. He tastes like

peaches and cinnamon, our heads tilting to fit together—perfect—like they always should have been like this. I moan into his assault, because nothing about Xander is tentative anymore. His hands are ravenous, pawing over my hips, across my back, grasping my tits like he'll never get enough.

His sticky fingers move upward to cup my face and it's naughty and delicious to feel my dessert against my own skin, to feel him slow down and hold me delicately, stroking my neck, kissing me like this is a torture he's finally allowed to indulge in.

This is what my restaurant will be.

This release.

And this burning.

I snake my hands between us and unbutton his waistcoat, peeling back the vest before starting on his shirt. I pull up the fabric—untucking him, unbuttoning—my shameless fingers parting his clothes and fanning out over his velvet stomach.

“God, you're beautiful,” I praise, tracing his hard, hot skin. His muscles chiseled; his mouth spurring me on. The sensation of finally touching him—the skim of his six-pack under my fingertips—it's so intimately wicked. I could spend hours right here, imagining food that could be as soft and firm and delicious as his body—*crème brûlée*, perhaps, or a decadent triple mousse. “Touching you makes me think of food,” I confess, breathing into his embrace. “Your skin makes want to create desserts as wicked and lickable.”

My fingers fan out over his chest, the soft swirls of hair reminding me of spun sugar and naughtiness. Xander growls against my lips as if what I've said about him and food is the best compliment I could've given. He rocks his hips against my body and fists both of his hands in my hair, kissing me so hard I'm gasping. Then he snarls, sucking my tongue into his mouth like it's a thick Popsicle he wants to devour.

“Oooooooh!” I shiver, unable to make words as tingles of heat rush over my skin at the power of his attention. My fingers dig into his chest—bare flesh that I can’t get enough of. He’s half naked, but I want more. I want his belt unbuckled and his pants on the floor. I want to pull down his shorts and taste his cock—his eggplant, his thick mushroom—all the naughty obscene things ... yes, I want.

“Xander, you’re wearing too much clothing,” I complain, but he snarls, his hands turning wild and his mouth searing down my neck, heading straight for my heaving cleavage.

“Me? *I’m* wearing too much clothing?” he gripes, his hands cupping my tits through the dress, and making me moan shamelessly as he fondles me over the fabric. The dress is too tight for his hands to slip inside, so he drags his mouth across the sweetheart neckline—left, right—his lips tasting what this dress constrains.

“Xan, that’s so—Mmmm!” I swoon, my nipples aching, wanting him to pop them free for his rakish mouth to be sucking on and biting. In my mind, I imagine new desserts. I see my nipples as a buffet of chocolates, as wicked cherry cordials waiting to be crushed, his lips popping them into his mouth one by one—sticky liquor running down my bosom.

Oh man, I need to be out of this dress!

“Wait, Xan. Hold on,” I pant, using his shoulder to push his face away from my neckline. He glares at me in a ravenous daze, his eyes declaring: how dare you tell me to wait? “Oh wow,” I shudder at that look. “I was wet before, Xan, but fuuuuu—!”

“And you want me to stop?”

“No no no.” I raise my hands trying to explain. “Just *pause*. I need you to back up.”

He growls, squeezing my tits before releasing me and doing

what I ask. When there's enough room, I shimmy forward and off the table, turning around quickly to show him my backside. A wicked sound comes from his throat and my pussy creams at the idea of what he wants now. Will he grind his cock against my ass? Will he shove this skirt up to my hips and kick my legs open?

"Zipper," I bark, my voice hoarse, pulling my sticky hair away from my nape and pointing to where the zipper starts.

"Arie," he hisses my name, realizing I'm asking him to remove my dress.

"Yes, I agree." I look over my shoulder at him. "This dress is hot. But trust me, what's under it is—"

He doesn't wait for me to finish my sentence. His hands shoot to the clasp, undoing the tiny pearl at the top which reveals where the zipper is hidden—bloody fifties fashion, it always has to be so damn clever and ridiculous. Xander is surprisingly deft with my clothes, at least in comparison to the ravenous way I practically tore off his shirt.

The zipper parts down my back like a tight skin that's suddenly peeling away and releasing. I almost gasp at how sinful it feels, his big hands on my shoulders pulling the fabric open. I unhook my arms from the sleeves and his hands slide all over my skin, over my stomach, my ribs, over the silk of my bra to my tits.

"Devil," I praise, buzzing with heat as his hands release a song of sinful moaning from me. All of my desserts need to conjure up such ambrosial delights: Devil's food cake and lust, scarlet syrup and mousse.

Xander tries to push the dress down over my hips, but even with the zipper undone the fabric is still tight around my midsection. It's a wiggle dress for a reason.

"How the hell did you get this on?" he criticizes, his mouth hitting my back, followed by his teeth scraping between my

shoulder blades. I feel each scratch down my vertebrae as he pinches and wriggles with the fabric.

“Trade secret,” I tease. “I couldn’t make it too easy for you, Carlisle. Plus, when you first saw me in this dress you looked like you were ready to throw me over your shoulder and play caveman.”

“Is that what you think? That you turn me into a brute?”

“God, I hope so,” I fire back, helping him push the fabric over my legs.

When the dress hits the floor I bite my lip, because I can’t deny the fact that I’m standing almost naked with Xander hunched over my skin. My body erupts into goose flesh. I’m wearing nothing but my bra and panties—and I want nothing more than for him to tear them off.

Preferably with his mouth.

The change in Xander’s breath is unmistakable. We’re crossing a line now. It’s one thing to kiss and paw at one another with our clothes on. It’s absolutely another to strip each other down.

I turn around to face him, and his pupils flare. My bra is made of a sheer black fabric, which does nothing to hide my taut nipples. That sound comes from his throat again, and I love that I keep tearing it from him.

“You *would* wear undergarments like that,” he chides, his voice thick.

“I’d do a lot of things you probably wouldn’t believe,” I say arrantly, hooking my thumbs under the sides of my panties and pushing them down to my ankles.

“Jesus,” he hisses, his eyes flashing with lust, which only makes me more excited about what I’m about to do next.

I kick the panties to the side, then lift my ass back up onto the marble table top. My bare pussy slides against the cold stone as I push myself to the center of the table. A chilling zip

wicks across my heated flesh and shoots excitement straight to my clit. Oh yum! I'll have to make a dessert out of *that* wicked sensation—something made from hot apples and cold ice cream melting.

“D’you like a girl’s heels on or off?” I ask, lifting one of my legs and dangling a polka dot shoe in front of Xander’s face.

Xander snatches my ankle and pulls me back toward him, dragging my ass across the marble. He unhooks each of my heels and tosses them carelessly on the floor, all the while keeping his eyes trained on my body. God! I want to swim in those dark brown eyes! If Xander’s gaze could make me come then I’d be writhing in heat as his eyes roam.

Xander licks his lips, dropping his hands to my knees and my mouth falls open.

Oh hot damn!

He tilts his head in surprise at how that one motion turned me to melting ice—he’s about to open my legs—and I’m so insanely turned on, I can’t help but burn him for it.

“Are you sure you can handle that?” I rasp out, and he smiles at my challenge, running a finger over the ball of my kneecap like he’ll happily take his time. He leans forward and runs his wide hands down the outside of my thighs, digging his fingers callously into my muscles.

“Can I handle it?” he asks, running the brands of his fingers back up to my knees. “I’m sorry, but did you miss the show earlier? The one where I ate your dessert peach?”

Oh, I’m in trouble.

He tucks his fingers between my knees and starts opening me.

“That’s right—” he coos as my thighs start to quake. “I’m pretty sure you almost came when you saw how my mouth tasted—”

“Xan!” I chastise.

“—your forbidden fruit ... its delicious flesh.”

My delicious—?

Okay, I’m about to combust.

Warm air slides between my legs as the night kisses my bareness. He spreads me open, exposing all of me, my peach aching and glistening.

“Well, would you look at that,” he taunts sweetly. “It seems I get to have this dessert twice.”

I fall back against the table and cover my face. I can’t even look at him if he’s going to say something like that!

“Xander!” I bark out at the ceiling. “I know I made that dessert to tease you, but—”

“Don’t play a game you can’t finish, Arie,” he shoots back, his hands searing down the insides of my legs.

Oh my God. Oh my God!

The pressure of his hands spreads me further open.

“Xander, you’d better slow down or I’m going to come,” I gasp for breath. “Amazing desserts be damned, you haven’t even touched my—”

Hot air slides over my swollen pussy—*his* hot breath—blowing and torturing.

“Oh fuck! Oh fuck!” I chant, covering my face. I can’t believe I’m this sensitive. I mean he’s Xander, who is forbidden fruit incarnate, and I knew he’d be good in the sack, but I didn’t think he’d have me clenching and pulsing before he’s even touched my—

God, this is about to happen.

Hot damn.

Xander is about to eat my pussy.

“Arie,” he sing-songs my name, his voice thick, the brush of his wicked breath keeping my flesh trembling. “I’m not going to make you come at all—” he warns. “If you don’t watch me do it.”

“What?” I lift my head, which is spinning. I manage to rise onto my elbows and look down at him. Xander’s beautiful face is between my legs, his lips only an inch from my throbbing sex. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. “Holy shit,” I swear, and he smiles like a demon.

“Arie Noel, you *will* watch me eat my dessert, do you understand?”

I gasp. His command making me nod and whimper and relinquish.

“Good,” he praises, slipping both of his hands under my ass. Oh dear sweet nectar of the gods, his big hands feel way too decadent. “You will *not* look away! Do you hear me, Arie?”

I think I nod. Maybe. Who can be sure.

“And when you come, Arie,” his voice heats, “you will watch me eat you raw. You will not close your eyes or look away, you will watch how I tear pleasure from your body.”

I whimper and bite my lip. How the hell am I supposed to do that? Watching him make me come is way too intimate.

What if he looks back?

The second I imagine his eyes flashing up to mine is the second I know that’s exactly what he’ll do. Xander wants my trust, and he’ll take it by making me look into his eyes when I orgasm, forcing me to be my most vulnerable.

And it’ll fucking work.

“You’re an ass!” I growl, which makes him smile, knowing this is pushing me far beyond my comfort zone. “Yes. Okay. I agree,” I say, sitting up abruptly.

I twist to the left and grab my uneaten dessert from where we abandoned our dinners. I fish the soaked peach out of the dish and move it over my exposed abdomen. I drag the sticky fruit over my wet cunt, lathering honey glaze over where I’m swollen. But I don’t stop there, I drag the fruit over my mound and stomach, leaving a slippery trail from my navel to my clit. I

drop the peach back in the dish and smear my fingers over Xander's hot lips.

"I hope you're hungry," I admonish.

The look he gives me is pure wickedness. "If forbidden fruit isn't on the menu when you open your restaurant," he growls. "I'm going to be insulted."

"Let's see if you can make me come first, assho—oh!"

Xander's whole mouth French kisses my pussy. I have to brace myself against the table to keep from breaking eye contact. Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Xander's eyes are locked on me as he opens and devours and plunges his tongue deep inside my trembling slit.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" he asks, pulling his lips from my pounding sex. He gives me a smug look. "You think I can't make you come?"

He takes my clit between his lips and starts sucking—he's absolutely vicious, laving and circling until I see stars and diamonds.

"What the hell are you—" I gasp, my eyes watering as I watch him devour and eat. It's vile and repugnant and one-hundred-percent the hottest thing I've ever fucking seen. "Xan—you're—oh my God! Oh my God!"

His mouth climbs up my mound to my navel, lapping up the sticky trail of honey glaze I left for him. It gives my pussy a second to recover from his assault, but a moment later his tongue is once again fucking me.

This man loves food. He loves all of it, every flavor, style, and technique. He wants to know the zest of the world, and leave no taste undiscovered. And me—against his mouth—even I didn't know I could taste so transcendent.

My body aches to lean back against the marble top—to arch my spine and lift my hips, pump my heat against his lips. But he made a rule, and I must watch him eat his dessert, and

somehow that makes everything even more arousing. It forces me to stay in the moment with him—to stay present.

Xander's eyes flick up to me, checking to see that I'm still watching. And every time he does, I feel a jolt of lightning zap through my core. This is so much hotter and intense than I imagined, more personal, the years of both of us wanting finally colliding like exploding stars.

"When I get my hands on your cock," I warn. "When you're done, I'm going to—" He thrusts two of his fingers inside me and I see black. My entire vision goes gold with pleasure.

"Won't it feel amazing when it's my cock?"

"Oh please!" I grovel as his fingers pump. "Oh—please don't stop!"

His mouth ravages and my body ignites, pleasure throttling through my thighs.

"I want your cock!" I howl, looking him in the eyes. "I want you inside me right now!"

He shakes his head. "Fuck, you're hot when you beg."

I gasp, and heat floods to my cheeks and my mouth drops. Xander's fingers hook and my muscles clench, and Xander's eyes look straight into me as I start to come.

I sob as my pussy drags against his mouth, my eyes watering as I watch him taste my orgasm. Pleasure shatters, and his gaze is so powerful I'm lost in it as waves of ecstasy pound through my legs.

I've come hot and hard before, but never with someone looking straight into my soul like Xander is, as if food and sex could be the center of the universe. I've never completely given in, never surrendered to the hedonistic intimacy of it—of *us*.

"Who the fuck are—? How did—? How could you possibly —?" I'm swearing and delirious as he slows his feast, allowing me to come down gradually. When he finally pulls his mouth from my flesh there are a thousand new flavors under my

breath, a thousand new things I can taste, as if endorphins can heighten the senses. He's flambéed me with his tongue, covered me with lust and set me on fire.

I lay back and break our connection, finding room in my lungs to breath as I stare up at the dark ceiling above. Through the dozens of floors and concrete, through fear and trust and determination, all the way to the top of this building is my future.

I'm going to revive that restaurant.

I'm going to make it taste like what he just did.

I don't know how I'm going to do it, other than through sheer willpower and love and determination, but it has to happen. It *will* happen. My destiny sits on top of the world with the stars, and up there I'll feed people sin wrapped in chocolate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I stand on the balcony of Xander's suite, staring out at the horizon and breathing in the ocean's salt. The sun is rising in the east. It's far away behind us, but it still lights up all that I can see with pink sky and possibility.

This will be the view from my restaurant—yes, from several more stories above, but still, it's bloody beautiful.

I've never felt this sure about anything.

Xander kisses my neck, moving my wet hair to the side to give him better access. We just took a shower and washed off all the sticky delicious things we did last night, and he tugs at my robe to expose my shoulder as if my skin might taste different this morning.

Maybe it does.

"My plane leaves in an hour," he says, and I nod, knowing this. The bellman came and took away his luggage half an hour ago, and both of us have been avoiding this moment.

Xander lives in London.

He literally lives on the other side of the world.

And though he owns a piece of my heart (as important

people do) I'm not sentimental enough, or romantic enough, to uproot my own dreams to follow him there. And honestly, nor is he. Not anymore. Not after Charlotte. I just figured out what I really want to do with my life and it's right here in Waikiki on top of this resort. I've just begun to let my dreams grow. I'm not about to hike off to London. What are we supposed to do? Have competing restaurants? He already has his own life. No amount of true-love-and-destiny BS is going to convince me otherwise, despite how amazing our chemistry might be in bed.

And Xander's not about to start something long distance. That's already a lost cause. He's made it clear that he has a strict policy of all relationships existing within the same postal code.

We both know this was one night, and something about that makes it even more special. One perfect night of closure, where one door closes and opens another. It might seem crazy to fly across the globe for that, but we both know the value of being crazy and impulsive. It was the perfect evening spent naked in his bed—talking and kissing and remembering and fucking—something we both needed.

And dreaming.

Dreaming about everything ahead. Dreaming about food and restaurants, and the unexplored feasts that no one has yet had: *experiences* I could give my patrons. Our conversation wasn't charged or competitive, but a storm of creative ideas, with him walking me through how to take my dreams and make them logical and real. It was a rare night of true inspiration—which also happened to include naked breaks and orgasms.

Everyone has their own creative “process.”

But last night was also important—for us—finding closure for all those years of desire that went unspoken.

“It was the perfect night,” Xander says, kissing my shoulder again as we look out at the sunrise. “You were worth the trip in

the same way people will fly across the globe for just one night in your restaurant.”

I nudge him for being so sappy and sentimental.

“Trust me on this,” he insists. “You’re the hot night every man dreams about having.”

“Ha!” I turn around and face him. “You’re only saying that because I’m naked under this robe.”

“You are?” he teases, plucking the tie open and dragging me against him, his hands playing wildly over my breasts and stomach. “Oh the waiting list you are going to have ... just to get one taste of your restaurant at the top of paradise.”

“You really ought to save the poetics for someone they’ll actually work on,” I chide, languishing in how his hands warm my body. “Like my sister!”

“Mmmm,” he growls. “Are you suggesting a threesome with your twin?”

“Oh my god! You bloody wish,” I pinch him, and bat his hands away, wrapping the robe around me again and tying it.

“You will promise to invite me back when your restaurant is open, right?” Xander prods.

“I don’t know,” I sass. “There could be a long waiting list and I might not be able to squeeze you in.”

“Really?” His hands paw at my hips. “Not even for VIP guests who inspire your first dessert list?”

“*First* inspiration,” I say deliberately. “Not my last.”

“Ooooh, touché!” he sulks, pretending to be wounded. “God, those lucky wankers you’re going to scandalize when I’m not around,” he growls, pulling me into a kiss. “I’m almost hard thinking about it. Do you like me jealous?”

“Well, you can move to Hawaii,” I say dryly, nodding to the spectacular view. “But we don’t drink tea here or say ridiculous things like *Toddy-byes, Gov’ner*.”

“I don’t say things like that,” he defends.

“Actually, you say all sorts of naughty British things when you’re between my legs and—”

He kisses me. Hard this time. It’s a goodbye kiss, one that’s filled with all the lust and gratitude and grace he can manage, with the perfect dollop of sugar on top.

“Your lowly first-dessert-only muse has a plane to catch,” he teases. “You can stay in the suite til’ noon if you want. In the meantime, text me hot pictures of what you’ve been creating.”

“Is that code for you want the female equivalent of a dick pic?” I sass.

“If that’s how you want to pay for all the entrepreneurial tips and business plans you’re going to be asking me for in the next several months, then bring it on.”

“I didn’t pay it forward last night?” I ask, pretending to be appalled. “Not even when we—?” I twist my body into several mock, sexual positions we tried (on the bed, by the stove; yes we used all the modern furniture this high-end suite holds). “Or what about the one where—” I turn around and put my ass in the air.

“Do you ever tire out?” he vents, slapping my wiggling ass.

“Not usually,” I joke, pretending his spank turned me on.

“Yes well, we will see where your energy level is after you’ve got that brutal first year of owning a restaurant under your belt,” he says, stepping off the balcony and blowing me a kiss.

“Wrong sister,” I chide, to which he gives me a wicked smile instead. “Much better.”

“I can only imagine that my next night at the Atlantis will be—” He pauses trying to think of the right word as he suggests he’ll be back for more.

“Exhausting?” I offer. “Delightful? Dirty?”

He smiles, grabbing his coat and shrugging like all of those would fit the bill. “Don’t get stodgy on me, Arie.”

“Never,” I sass as he heads for the door. “Be sure to text me some pictures of Spotted Dick when you reach Her Majesty’s sacred shore.”

“That’s actually the name of a pastry,” he fires back.

“Of course it is,” I say, waving my phone at him. “What did you think I was suggesting?”

Xander gives me one last hot look before slipping out the door, and I know the world of rom-coms and fairy tales would tell me to feel sad or longing. Didn’t I just let the perfect man walk away?

But I don’t feel any of those things.

I feel alive and free and invigorated. I don’t need Xander to be the woman that I am, and geography is definitely against us.

I turn on my phone. I wouldn’t hurt to send him one last tasty nude from this balcony. Just a little something for him to enjoy on the long plane ride back home. But before I have a chance to take the picture, our text message thread from yesterday comes up, and I realize I never actually read what Esme sent to him.

My eyes flick to the message and I almost tear up.

My sister is such a schmaltzy romantic—hard core, and this is no exception—but for the first time, I don’t want to mock her about it. For the first time, sentimental seems absolutely perfect.

Arie: I lost my job. But maybe it's a sign you're in town. You were always my bright spot on the other side of the world.

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Turn the page to read a sample!

FLAMBÉ

SPECIAL SNEAK PEEK

PROLOGUE: ARIE

I love the fire.

I love the way it burns close to the skin.

I love the way the flames dance and heat into a blue iridescence. I love the smell of the fire: of sulfur and smoked wood and sugar burning.

The perfect cocktail is lit with diabolos kiss. The perfect pastry is brûléed golden with three layers of molten glaze. The perfect dessert is a hot fuck that licks you dirty with its surprise sweetness, with its creamy center that makes you gasp and sit up straight, makes your toes curl, makes your thighs quake.

That's what my restaurant will be when it opens—a seduction—the hottest one-night stand you didn't know you wanted to indulge in and now you don't want to end.

So, put on that tight skirt, that little lacy number, that dress that seems a little too daring. Bring your taste buds, and your sweet dreams, and your skin that's just a hint too eager.

In three weeks, I open the sexiest late-night restaurant in all of Hawaii, and trust me, if licking chocolate off a jalapeño

ELLE BERLIN

pepper makes you blush, then *Flambé* is going to burn you up.
You're welcome.

CHAPTER ONE: ARIE

C*rash!* The second I walk out the swinging doors of the kitchen I smash right into my business partner Simon and a hundred grand-opening invitations go flying. Black envelopes explode in a confetti of 100-pound fancy-paper, each hand-swooped in gold calligraphy.

“Simon!” I yelp as the most beautiful—and expensive—invitations I’ve ever seen in my life toss themselves across the dining room floor. “Damn, I’m—”

“Running around like a murderess with her head chopped off!” Simon snaps, doing his best to avoid stepping on the invitations, but still bending several in the process.

“You’re ruining them, Simon,” I screech. “Watch your step!”

“Me?! Watch *my* step! You just—” Simon grabs his black-rimmed glasses and turns away from me, taking several long and deliberate breaths, as his shoulders heave and he contemplates going Mount Vesuvius on me.

It’s been a stressful month—for both of us.

It's been one disaster after the next: the menus aren't back from the printer yet, the patio furniture hasn't been delivered, the website isn't up, hiring people that meet my impeccable standards is a nightmare, not to mention training the half-way decent ones. Add to that, Simon insisting we go through the chore of hiring a local calligrapher for our invitations, because nothing says hot-new-restaurant to Waikiki's influencers and elite than swirly gold letters spelling out *Flambé!* Which is a constant reminder of why I do the food and Simon does the marketing—it works. Of course, that is until the floor ends up littered with your handiwork.

Simon swirls around to glare at me, pulling his tussled brown hair out of his eyes and resetting his dark-rimmed glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. He's perfected the “boy-next-door-turned-hot-entrepreneur” vibe. Remember that geeky guy from high school, now imagine he comes home from college exploding out of that plaid shirt with hard muscles and broad shoulders. That's Simon. You never knew boyish charm could fill out a pair of jeans so well and set all your lady parts to tingle. Simon could make any girl go wild, except for me, because he's my business partner and my best friend, and combining work and play is a disaster scenario.

“Arie,” Simon snaps, trying to reign in his frustration. “I love you, but someone needs a night off!”

“You can't take a night off!” I shoot back at him, my mind whirring with everything that's not finished yet. “There's a stack of resumes to go through and we still need to finish the proposal for our investor meeting tomorrow night.”

“Yes, I know all that! I didn't mean me,” he clarifies. “I meant *you*.” He puts the stack of envelopes that didn't hit the dust onto the bar. “*You* need a night off!”

“I don't need—!”

Simon grabs my shoulders and squares off with me. “Arie!

You're going to turn into the Mother of Dragons in a second and burn this place to the ground if you don't relax—and not in the hot sexy way.”

“I'll relax when we're open!” I snap, which only causes him to raise his eyebrows like I'm proving his point.

“We're both owners here and I'm pulling the Veto card. I'm forcing you to take the night off!” He gives me a hard stare, before dropping to the floor to collect the invitations at our feet. “I don't need a night off.”

“Correction,” Simon sasses. “You need to get laid!”

I frown. He's right, which I don't want to admit, but Simon's the kind of best friend who's watched me spend every breathing moment of the last eight months making sure this restaurant becomes a reality. He's well aware that my dating record has been like the Sahara Desert—a long, hard, abandoned sand dune of nothing—completely deadly.

“We've been busy,” I toss back at him. “Planning a restaurant. Living the dream. Making sure that—”

“Everyone who works for us thinks you're an insane tyrant,” he cuts me off, standing up and laying more invitations on the bar. “The fun Arie I knew in college got laid all the time. She knew how to work hard *and* play hard.”

“Well, that was before—”

“Oh no!” He wags a finger at me. “What I think you were about to say is, and I quote, “The best way to be successful in business is to fuck your way to the top—” I shake my head as he quotes me. “—and I *like* being *on top*.” He trusts his pelvis for emphasis.

“You're playing dirty,” I grumble, knowing all through college my go-to for grades and tests and stress was to find a hot cowboy who could handle an untamable mustang. It was a prescription I'd doled out to Simon monthly, and here he was

tossing it right back at me. “We are meeting with our investors—”

“Tomorrow!” he interrupts again. “This is non-negotiable, Arie. I don’t want you setting foot in this restaurant for the next eighteen hours!”

“But the proposal—”

“Is on *my* to-do list.” He starts pushing me toward the door. “And I will do it. Heck, you know you won’t write a word of it anyway.”

That’s true. I cook. I design. He’s the mastermind with the calculator and a pen.

“I won’t take no for an answer. You need a night off. Go dancing. Relax in a bubble bath. Sleep for more than three hours.”

“Get laid?”

“Preferably, yes!” He hands me my purse. “We both know that you think better, and work better, after a good night of working out your frustrations.”

“I did come up with that great twist on flaming Spanish Coffee after seducing the singer of that rock band from Barcelona last year,” I concede.

“Exactly!” Simon nods. “Seriously, check out The Orchid down the street, hook up with some hot tourist and work out all of this pent-up frustration.”

“Yes, but the vendors haven’t delivered the—”

“Nobody wants to hear it!” Simon grabs my shoulders and spins me, pushing me out the side door of our rooftop restaurant and forcing me to stare out at the glittering bay of Waikiki. “I know it’s hard to turn off that brain of yours, but find a way! I’m not a doctor, but I’m pretty sure multiple orgasms will probably do it.”

“You have far too much faith in the men in this city,” I grumble. “Not very many have—”

“Your standards are too high.” Simon walks me to the elevator and hits the button. “So find yourself some young apprentice to teach the magical ways of the female form. That used to be your favorite game in college.”

“I’d rather fix the issues with my Baked Alaska recipe.”

The elevator doors open and he pushes me inside. “That’s your problem, you’d rather flambé meringue than get laid.”

“The menu has to be perfect for the opening!”

“The whole point of *Flambé* is to turn up the heat. Those are your words.” He points at me as the elevator doors start to close. “Maybe you haven’t cracked the Baked Alaska recipe yet because you’ve forgot the main ingredient—”

I frown at him. He doesn’t have to say what that elusive main ingredient is. The doors shut and I can already feel it in my skin—the slight mist of sweat, the ache of hard work in my bones, the tight coil of frustration in my shoulders—I’ve been too focused on this restaurant for too long. It’s got me high-strung.

The elevator descends the thirty-two floors of the Atlantis Resort that *Flambé* sits atop of, my mind racing with excuses for why I should hit the stop button and reverse directions. Only, I *have* been a terror all day. I yelled at my sous chefs this morning and bitched out the furniture distributor over the phone. Hell, I’ve been a running show of expletives all week. The truth is, I’ve never wanted anything as badly as this restaurant in my whole life. Is that so wrong? The stakes are different when you put all your savings on the line and are about to grasp the one thing you’ve dreamed of your whole life. Getting laid in college, before a test, was more of a game than a real tactic for success, except ... it worked.

It worked really well.

Simon’s right. I need to give myself one hot night.

CHAPTER TWO: CONNOR

The music at The Orchid blasts with an angry beat that thrums from my toes to my teeth. It's an electricity that obliterates everything and I become pure rhythm. The crowd is alive tonight, all of us dancing, the lights swirling as we're pressed in like sardines. I grind against the woman in front of me, my hand on her hip, her ass gyrating. Someone else is behind me, their hands tracing over my back as we become the music and the hot taste of sweat.

A third woman in a tight, pink dress intentionally squeezes herself between me and the lady I was dancing with, slipping her fingers under my shirt. She flashes me a seductive gaze as her fingers explore my abs, her fluttering lashes asking if her advance is okay. I half smile and wait to see where this is going.

"I know you," she says, pulling herself closer so her tits dance against my chest. She's perky and cute, but young, probably barely the drinking age. She says something about the bar that I work at and how I made her a cocktail, mentioning how it was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. Only, she didn't say it that sweetly. She definitely said something a whole lot

dirtier, like she won't be able to taste gin again without her panties getting wet and thinking of me. It's an occupational hazard for a bartender, patrons wanting to mix alcohol and sex. I smile and let her fingers dance over my muscles at the top of my low-slung jeans. It feels good to let her tease that V of skin and look up at me with wicked intentions. After all, she's only a few inches away from where she really wants to be.

Only, she's not the first woman to recognize me from the bar tonight and she won't be the last. And, I have a rule. If a patron is willing to return to the bar in hopes of snagging me, then I'll let her dream. I'd rather keep her panties wet and hot for my drinks, coming back into the bar weekly, than actually satisfy her. Part of my appeal is the ability to string her along with the hope that I might invite her behind the bar after hours to taste just how eager she is. Coming to The Orchid is good for business—not my intention—but it doesn't hurt my tips or the bar's bottom line.

I twist, turning my back to her, but still letting her keep her hands under my shirt. This is a fantasy for her, nothing real. I let her trace every muscle and ridge of my abdomen, let her hand ghost over the front of my jeans to get a hint of how big I am. Whatever she needs to help her get off later when she's home with her vibrator, imagining I'm the one she's riding.

I let the music take me. I let the stress from the day ease off of my limbs. Honestly, I'm not here for any of them. I just want to be part of the scene. To get lost in the mayhem. Nothing blows off a long week of hard work like dancing, letting the music inside you, letting it beat you like a good massage that leaves you satisfied and tender. When, a flash of red catches my eye.

It's a woman across the room, her red hair catching the light. I tell myself I'm not interested, not tonight. Not most nights. I'm here for the music. But, I've always had a thing for

redheads and my gaze keeps tracing back to where she's sitting. *This* red head is more like a demon. Only, she's the delicious kind, shinning like a glowing ember. She's a spark in the darkness, a flint dragged across stone. Her ruby mouth throws back a shot of alcohol and a hint of flirtation tinges her smile like the dragon's teasing its prey. Her skin is pale and framed by waves of scarlet hair that trail down her bare shoulders and arms. I see beautiful women all the time, but this one is pure arsenic, begging you to take a drink. A cool confidence radiates from her Amazonian frame, looking sexy as hell in a tight black tank top and jeans. No jewelry, no extra flair. She knows she doesn't need anything extra to impress. Her red hair and mouth do all the work to turn a man's head, and my head is definitely turned, especially with the way that tank top stretches over her perfect tits. She's definitely never been to the bar, I would have remembered. Heck, she's the one I *would* have invited back after hours for a special show on how to clean my pipes. In fact, it's better that she doesn't know who I am or where I work. It makes this simple.

I watch her put her glass down and work her way into the crowd, her arms lifting with the sway of the music. The flames of her hair whip around her, lashing wildly with the music, the roll of her body a seduction. Other's notice, but she pays no mind to the thumping crowd, dancing for her own pleasure. Little Pink-Dress with her hands on my abs is forgotten. I can't resist this woman's gravitational pull, moving me straight toward her blazing orbit. If you reach for fire, you're bound to get burned. I'm hoping she's hot enough to devour us both.

I slide up behind the red-haired Amazon and place a hand on her hip. Her body roils like a snake, smooth and undulating and responding. She steps back against me, almost instinctual, as if all that matters is the pulse of the music and how I meet her motion. We fold together like flames entangled, her ass

swaying against my crotch and turning up the heat. I grip both her hips and grind her harder against me, causing me to lengthen in my jeans. If she notices, she doesn't stop. In fact, I swear she pumps harder, completely aware of her effect on me.

Damn, now *I'm* the one fantasizing. I'm the one memorizing the roll of her hips and imagining her reverse cowgirl riding me, her ass hypnotizing as her back arches and that long red hair trails down her spine.

"Tell me," I growl, sliding my hand around the front of her stomach and pulling her back against me with more force. If she couldn't tell how hard I was before, she definitely knows now. "Are you the kind of girl who's going to spend the night teasing me, or should I invest in the whole show?"

I hold her clamped against me, greedier than normal, waiting to see how she reacts. She tilts her head toward me and I catch a hint of that dragon's smile. She's got me right where she wants me. Then, without missing a beat, she adjusts the angle so I'm practically dry humping her from behind. I hear a breathy moan escape her mouth and I curl forward so my mouth is at her ear.

"You just took me from zero to a thousand and I don't even know your name." She shakes her head like that's off limits and I drag my lips down the side of her throat, below the earlobe. "Okay," I concede. "Then where are you from?" If she's a tourist it makes this fun. "Did you come to Hawaii with your girlfriends? Work vacation? Business or—" I grind my hips against her ass. "—pleasure?"

She moans hotly, tilting her head to the side to grant my mouth more access to her neck. One of her arms reaches back and her fingers thread through my hair, delicate and searching, as we move to the music. I like to think I'm part of the paradise she came to Hawaii searching for, that she's some Mid-west girl from Wisconsin who needed to fly to a tropical island so she

could forget herself and get lost in my arms. Her hand balls into a fist and she tugs my hair with a firm grip, her body tightens beneath my arms as the new leverage allows her ass to slide against my cock with increased friction.

“Fuck,” I growl, raking my teeth across her neck as she pistons against me, awaking every inch of my skin. Normally, I’m the one leading the charge, calling the shots, and leaving her with quaking thighs in the morning when I drop her off for her flight. There isn’t anything as sweet as an eight-hour flight home to Wisconsin remembering every long, hard inch of me. “If you don’t tell me where you’re from,” I threaten. “I’m going to call you Wisconsin as a default.”

She untangles her hot body from mine and turns around to face me. Her wet mouth is still wearing that ruby smirk, daring me to keep mixing her up with whatever Wisconsin nobody I’ve already forgotten. Her arms wrap around my neck and her piercing blue eyes cut right into me.

“Delaware?” I play, throwing out states. “Alabama? Washington?” She shakes her head, amused, but not giving an inch. “International girl? Paris? Holland?” She bites her lip and I know I’m in trouble. “How about I tell you my name? It’s—” She puts two fingers to my lips before I let my name slip out and I smile at her persistence. “Oh but, Wisconsin,” I tease. “If you don’t know my name, how are you going to know what name to call out when—”

“I’m coming on your cock?” She lifts a suspicious eyebrow, but the words came out of her mouth so hot and matter-of-fact, it feels like an inevitability. “First, you assume you know how to make a woman *like me* come,” she says coolly. “And second, you assume when I do, I’m loud.”

“Oh?” I play back. “A silent screamer, huh? Tell me more, Wisconsin.” I allow my hands to fall down her hips till my palms are firmly covering her ass.

“You call me Wisconsin one more time and I’ll—”

I don’t give her time to finish. I press my knee between her legs and yank her up my thigh, pressing her core wickedly against the width of my leg. She gasps—audibly—and grabs my shoulders for balance.

“I’m going to guess that silent orgasm comment was a ruse,” I say hotly, building a rhythm as I drag her up and down my leg to the pulse of the music. Her mouth drops open as she lets the friction build. Her head tilts forward and her forehead falls against mine, a curtain of red hiding our faces from the rest of the room as her hot breath pants against my mouth. “Call me crazy,” I say softly. “But, I think I’ve already got you pretty close to that elusive orgasm and I don’t even have you naked yet.”

She lifts her head to glare at me, her eyes glazed with heat. “You really need to learn when to shut up,” she curses, but then her head moves quickly and her mouth is on me—wet and hungry. She tugs on my bottom lip with her teeth and the music envelopes us.

We’re one, tongues and need, thrumming with heat. I drop her ass and plunge both my hands into her hair. She whimpers for a moment as her body falls flat against me, but I’m not letting her go anywhere. Our lips are on fire and I’ve never kissed anyone with such primal greed. I want her. I want her now—in this club, in a back room, against a stall. My cock is so hard it’s painful and if there’s one thing I know it’s that I need to get off this dance floor and find somewhere private. Arsenic indeed.

“Tell me, Wisconsin,” I rasp out, when there’s a second to breathe. “How adventurous are you?” She smiles wickedly, making me crazy for this firecracker. “I could take you to a back room? A dark corner? D’you like the idea of being somewhere semi-public and risking that someone might walk in on us?”

“Do you trash talk like this to every stranger you’ve just met?” She shoots back, and I shake my head, but her smirk shows she’s not convinced. “What about your harem of ladies from a few minutes ago, huh? All hot and eager, pressing their tits up against you? Did you make them the same offer you just made me?”

I laugh at her insistence, looking down at *her* tits—swollen and rocking against me—*her* tits and incredible body that’s got me wound tightly. I grip her hair and pull her head back with a sharp tug. It makes her pupils dilate and—*Damn!*—I can tell she’s busting my balls for pure amusement.

I laugh, taking the hit. “The real question is, do you really think I’d put *you* in the same league as them?” I pull back and survey her gyrating body. Her mouth twitches, even though she keeps those ruby lips pressed tight, trying not to show how much she likes me stroking her ego. Hey, dragons like flattery. “Or—” I tug her head again, exposing her neck to me, showing her how easily I can put her right where I want her. “Are you avoiding the question so you don’t seem too needy?”

Her tongue licks the bottom of her lip, just the tip, as the glitter in her eyes makes my blood boil. She’s teetering in that space between admitting her primal desire and playing it cool, trying to decide which to be. Her breath makes her chest heave, and frankly, I don’t want her to play it cool. I want her to grind her way right up my cock and admit how badly she wants it. Hell, maybe I’m the one who needs an ego stroking.

Her mouth covers mine again, dressed in another hot moan and I’m pretty sure that’s her entire game—tease, take, tease, take. Only, I’m much better at that game than she’ll ever be. I kiss her back, roughly, fisting my hand in her hair, while the other snakes down her back to clamp her against me. She moans at the way I envelope her, shivers rippling down her spine. I smile against her mouth, determined to make sure she

understands this will be a conquest, and that quiver ricocheting through her body is just the beginning.

She lets out a surrendering breath, the heat against my mouth laced with sudden vulnerability. A minute ago, she wanted to play the game of dominating me and putting me in my place: the usual alpha female showing me exactly who's boss. Only now, I'm certain she wants the exact opposite, panting with the eagerness of a tiny animal. She's probably the type of woman who's *used* to being in charge and calling the shots, who'd normally use the heel of her stiletto to take control and fuck me exactly the way she wants. But, that small tang of breath tells a whole different story. She's begging for someone to notice—she's tired, she's sick of the act— she just wants someone to swoop in and own her pleasure. She wants to be fucked—properly.

I kiss her back, swallowing her desperate breath. She can make all the quips she wants about being the strong, silent type, but if there's one thing I can guarantee, it's that I'm going to fuck this fiery goddess hard and perfectly. Oh sweet, Wisconsin ... am I going to make you scream.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Berlin is the author of steamy contemporary romance novels that will make you laugh out loud.

Elle has a background in screenwriting and design, and is an amateur baker. She's a sucker for romantic comedies—especially ones with lots of kissing and witty banter. A true foodie, Elle will seek out exotic off-menu delicacies and walk the extra block to the bar that has star anise in its cocktails. Inspired by exotic locations, delicious food, and contemporary art, Elle hopes to make the world a little more decadent one sexy book at a time.

When she isn't writing spicy stories, you can find Elle oil painting, reading in her hammock, sipping wine, baking macarons, or rose gardening (even though she has a black thumb and half of her plants end up dead).

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