

## Chapter 1

Maya Brooks rolled her eyes as the woman on the phone went on and on. “Yes, Mrs. Harper. I know I told you the shop would be closed the last three weeks in December, but my plans have changed and I’ll be able to provide the desserts for your party if you haven’t found someone else.”

“That would be lovely,” Mrs. Harper gushed. “I’ve searched high and low for a suitable replacement but couldn’t find anything close to your spectacular chocolate torte.”

“I appreciate the endorsement. Let me make sure I’ve got everything you asked for.” Maya finalized the menu details and date. “I can deliver your order two hours before the party. Will that work?”

“That’s perfect, dear. I’m sorry your vacation plans were canceled.”

“So am I,” she murmured. “Thank you, again, and I’ll call you a few days before to confirm your order.” She ended the call and dropped her head in her hands.

December had always been Maya’s favorite month and she typically had her shop, Maya’s Sweet Spot, decorated for Christmas the weekend following Thanksgiving. This year, instead of pulling out her decorations and shopping for more as soon as the calendar changed to November, she would be spending the time returning the few remaining wedding gifts from people who obviously missed the memo that her Christmas wedding had been called off.

“Hey, Maya.”

Her head came up at the sound of her best friend and business partner Rhonda Davis’s voice. With Rhonda’s five-ten height, slender curves and a face that could stop traffic, Maya often teased her, saying Rhonda would be better suited as a high-fashion model instead of managing a bakery. “Hey, girl. How was your vacation?”

“It was great to spend time with my family, especially my grandmother, since I haven’t seen her in a year. She’s going to spend the entire month with my parents and go back home after

Thanksgiving.” She claimed the chair across from Maya’s desk. “How did it go with your family?”

Maya shrugged. “Fine, I guess...if you don’t count all the ‘poor baby’ and ‘you’ll find someone else’ comments.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Why? You weren’t the one who decided two months before our wedding that you changed your mind and wanted to take your life in a different direction.” Maya’s ex-fiancé, Stephen Jacobs, had been a no-show at their engagement party—one that had been postponed twice because of his busy schedule. When she finally caught up with him the next day, his only words were “You should be glad I changed my mind before the wedding.” No apology and no offer to pay half of the many cancellation costs. Nothing. She got angry all over again thinking about it.

“Ouch!”

She was instantly contrite. “I’m sorry for snapping at you, Rhonda. It’s not your fault Stephen was a jerk. And, before you say anything,” Maya said, raising her palms in mock surrender, “I know, I know, you tried to warn me that something wasn’t right. Too bad I didn’t listen.”

Rhonda chuckled. “Next time.”

“Please. There isn’t going to be a next time.”

“Hmph. What you need is to indulge in a little holiday cheer with a fine, sexy man to get over Stephen. You know, giving thanks for some good toe-curling sex...a little mistletoe action... Trust me, there’s no better way to jump-start the holiday season. It’ll work wonders,” she added with a smug smile.

Maya groaned. “I don’t even want to know. Thanks, but no, thanks. I’ll pass.”

“Okay, but I’m telling you... Anyway, what happened to the decorations? You usually have everything up pulled out by now. Didn’t we just flip the calendar to November? I expected to see twenty sales papers on your desk. I even brought my walking shoes because I knew you were going to drag me shopping.”

“I’m not really feeling the holiday spirit this year.”

Rhonda stood, rounded the desk and pulled Maya out of her chair. “Come on, girl. You can’t let that idiot ruin your favorite time of year. When we’re done, Maya’s Sweet Spot is going to be the best-decorated shop *anywhere*.”

She smiled, unable to resist her friend's enthusiasm. "Oh, all right. But now that I'm going to stay open, I have twice the orders to take care of. It's a good thing, too. With the way all these stores are closing, I need to do everything I can to stay above water." Ever since the grocery store on the lot adjacent to her shop closed a year ago, the other businesses in the strip mall had shut down, one at a time, until only a handful of small shops remained, including hers.

"Speaking of that, I just saw the owner of the clothing boutique next door and she told me she received a letter from some real estate developer offering to buy her out. Apparently, they want to re-zone this block for residential use."

"*What?* No, no, no. They can't do that."

"Wanna bet?" Rhonda wagged a finger. "See, I told you something was up. There's no way four stores are going to be closing at the same time. And then there was that guy."

"What guy?"

"Remember the guy in the suit I saw snooping around last month?"

"Yeah," Maya answered absently, still trying wrap her mind around what Rhonda said. She had chosen this LA location because of its high visibility and constant foot traffic from several office buildings and a nearby residential area. After two years, she was finally turning a decent profit and had just paid her parents back the money they had lent her to start her business. Now someone was trying to steal her dream. Rhonda's voice pulled her back into the conversation.

"I knew he was up to no good—taking measurements and snapping pictures. Did you get a letter?"

She frowned. "No. I went through all the mail on my desk this morning and I didn't see anything."

"Maybe it's on my desk." Rhonda crossed the room and sat at the desk facing Maya's. She riffled through a stack of envelopes and held up one. "This may be it. The return address says EJJ Developers."

Maya came to stand behind Rhonda and read the letter. Dread settled in her belly. She didn't care how much money they offered, she wasn't selling.

"What are you going to do?" Rhonda asked.

"Nothing. I'm not selling."

"It says here that he'll meet with you at your convenience to discuss the offer, and there's a phone number."

“Fine. I’ll call and tell him not to waste his time.”

“You think it’s going to be that easy?”

Maya released a deep sigh. “No, but my answer won’t change. You know how long we searched for the perfect location. I’m not about to just hand over the keys.”

“I hear you, Maya, but this is big business. They make a living running over the little guy.”

“Well, they need to prepare for the fight of their lives, because this ‘little guy’ refuses to be run over.” She hadn’t gotten this far in her thirty years of life by rolling over and didn’t plan to start now.

Rhonda stood and embraced her. “Girl, we’ve been fighting together a long time. You know I’ve got your back.”

“I know.” Maya and Rhonda had been best friends since ninth grade and had been there for each other through thick and thin. “If we’re going to decorate, we need to get going. I have a lot to do this week and I have to prepare for Mr. Capshaw’s party on Saturday.”

“Saturday? He usually has his annual company holiday party the second week of December. Why is he having it a month early?”

“Apparently, he’s combining it with some business venture he’s celebrating. He’s having cocktails, appetizers and desserts.” She hesitated. “This year it’s at the Bonaventure.”

“Are you going to be okay delivering? I can do it for you.”

Maya nodded. “I can’t avoid going places just because they remind me of Stephen.”

“True, but you were planning to have your wedding reception there. Really, I can take care of it. I may not set the table as elegantly as you do, but I promise it’ll be nice,” Rhonda added wryly.

Maya chuckled. “Thanks. I can handle it.” She had to. Her business depended on it.

“Okay, if you’re sure. I just thought of something. Doesn’t the hotel have their own catering staff?”

“They do, and I asked about that. Mr. Capshaw said he’d taken care of it.”

“I guess it pays to have some clout.”

“It does and I’m glad. He’s one of my best customers. Let’s get started. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long week.”

Three months ago, Maya’s world was perfect. Now not only had her heart been broken, but she also stood to lose her business. She could *not* let that happen.

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Ian Jeffries sat alone at a corner table in the ballroom nursing a drink. He would rather be spending his Saturday evening at home watching college football, but his father asked if he and his brother, Chris, could represent their family's real estate development company at David Capshaw's holiday party. As the man was one of the investors in their latest development project, Ian couldn't very well say no. He scanned the ballroom again in search of his brother, who, so far, hadn't made an appearance. Ian planned to only stay an hour, but it was now going on two hours and he felt his frustration mounting. Lifting the glass, he took a small sip and set it on the table before pulling out his phone to check the game scores again.

"What's up, little brother?"

Ian set the phone on the table. "About damn time you showed up."

Chris laughed and lowered his body in the chair next to Ian. "It can't be that bad."

He snorted. "I hate these things. You could've just come alone, since you enjoy all this *socializing*."

"If you had spent more time talking to people instead of being holed up in your room drawing when we were growing up, your people skills would be better."

"Ha-ha, funny. My people skills are just fine. And if I hadn't been doing all that drawing, we wouldn't be here now." Ian's architectural skills and keen business sense had helped to move their family company from a small real estate business to a full-service firm—owning their own equipment, taking care of all construction from breaking ground to the final walk-through and having dependable contractors. He had done some of the smaller jobs alone but up to now had worked with one of the more experienced architects on bigger projects. It had taken close to a year to convince his father to let him design this latest project solo—one of the company's largest undertakings to date. This would be his first major project and he had no intention of messing it up, hence the reason he was sitting in this hotel ballroom.

"True, that," Chris said. "I don't know how you do it, but you can get the devil to buy air-conditioning."

"It's those *people skills*," Ian said sarcastically.

"Damn, somebody's in a foul mood. Lighten up. It's the holiday season. You know...being thankful...the season to be jolly."

“I’m not in a foul mood,” he grumbled, glancing down at his watch again. “I’d just rather be somewhere else.”

“Hot date?”

“No.”

“Maybe that’s your problem. When was the last time you had a little release? You know how you get when you haven’t gotten any in a while.”

“None of your business. And I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We’re in a room full of beautiful women. I’m sure at least one of them wouldn’t mind putting you out of your misery.”

Ian frowned and tried to remember his last liaison. He mentally counted and realized it had been almost six months. He had been so busy working to get this latest project off the ground that he’d put his social life on hold. And he needed some distance from women. His scowl deepened as he recalled how the woman he thought loved him only wanted to use him. He shook off the memories. Maybe he did need a little female company to take the edge off. He surveyed the room. As his brother pointed out, the ballroom was full of beautiful women, a few of whom were staring his way with sultry smiles. Yet none of them held his attention.

“It is the start of the holiday season—a perfect time to wind down. Or...you can always settle down with one woman. There’s nothing better than going home to the love of my life.”

“No, thanks. I like a little variety.” Marriage wasn’t on his radar for the foreseeable future. He was only thirty-two, so what was the big rush? Besides, he had already tried the relationship thing and it had almost ruined his family’s company and him in the process. Ian had promised himself that it wouldn’t happen again.

“That’s only because you haven’t found that one special woman.”

“Because she doesn’t exist,” Ian countered. He smiled at a woman staring at him as she moved her body on the dance floor.

“How do you know? You’re not looking.”

“You’re right,” he answered, still checking out the women in the room. “Anyway, what took you so long to get here?”

Chris leaned back in his chair and smiled. “My beautiful wife and I have decided to start a family. I’m doing my part to make it happen and...let’s just say I lost track of time.”

“Congratulations. Shellie is going to make a terrific mom.”

“Yes, she is. And because this will be our first Christmas together since we got married, I’m leaving her a little gift every day for the month of December. I’m going to get a kick out of watching her open each one.”

“I’m sure she’ll love that.” Ian continued to scan the room until his gaze landed on a woman standing at a dessert table. Unlike other women in the room who were decked out in gowns and jewels, she wore a simple white long-sleeved blouse and black skirt that caressed the sweet curve of her hips and ended just below the knee, robbing him of a complete view of her shapely legs. Her hair was piled on top of her head in some kind of bun.

“Now, that’s one gift I wouldn’t mind opening,” he murmured. Ian couldn’t take his eyes off her. She leaned forward to reach for something, and her skirt pulled tighter across her apple-round bottom. His breath caught and his groin tightened. Yeah, he’d been on lockdown way too long. After several minutes, she hadn’t moved. He stared curiously. Was she having that much difficulty choosing a dessert? Another minute passed and he stood. “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?” Chris asked.

“I think I’ll check out the desserts.”

Chris followed Ian’s gaze to the table and chuckled. “The desserts *on* the table or the one standing in *front* of the table? I guess the drought will be over soon.” He lifted his glass in a mock toast. “Here’s to hoping she’ll improve your disposition. Can’t have you ruining the holidays, Scrooge.”

“Shut up, Chris,” Ian said as he walked away. When he got closer to the table, he finally caught a glimpse of her face. The woman had an understated beauty—a girl-next-door kind of look—that piqued his interest. His gaze was drawn to her mouth as she bit on her gloss-slicked lips and he imagined nibbling on their lush fullness.

Ian stood next to her for a full minute, inhaling her intoxicating fragrance, and she never noticed him. “Is it that hard to decide on a dessert?”

She startled slightly and whipped her head in his direction. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?” Her dark eyes mirrored confusion.

He smiled. “I asked if you were having a difficult time choosing a dessert. You’ve been standing here for a while.” He surveyed the vast assortment covering the table—individually proportioned cheesecakes, tortes, truffles, mousses and more. “Although I can see why you’d be having a hard time. Everything looks exquisite.” Ian had had a sweet tooth for as long as he

could remember, and chocolate was his favorite...food and women. And the brown sugar beauty standing next to him topped his favorites list at the moment.

“No. I was just making sure everything was laid out the way I want.”

His brow lifted. “You’re working? You made these?”

“Yes. What do you think?”

“It looks amazing. What do you suggest?”

“Depends on what you like.”

A slow grin spread across his lips. “Chocolate. Rich, decadent, sinful...” His gaze traveled slowly down her body and back up to her face. He leaned close to her ear and whispered, “Chocolate.” He heard her sharp intake of breath.

“Um...I...you can try the chocolate raspberry truffle bars, chocolate torte with a ganache, triple chocolate mocha truffles or the black-and-white pudding parfait.” She pointed to each one with a trembling finger.

“What’s the black-and-white pudding parfait?”

“It’s chocolate pudding topped with white chocolate whipped cream.”

“Hmm, I may have to try that one later.” He could think of a few ways to eat that pudding and none of them involved using a spoon.

“And there’s always the chocolate fountain for dipping.”

“Yes, there is.” Another image flashed in his mind. “I think for now I’ll take one of these triple chocolate mocha truffles and a dance.”

“Dance?”

He nodded slowly and bit into the truffle. “This is amazing.”

“I can’t dance with you.”

“Why not?”

“I’m supposed to be working.”

He grasped her hand and gently led her out to the dance floor. “Everything on that table is perfect. I’m sure one dance won’t get you into trouble.” Ian pulled her into his arms and started moving to the slow tune playing. Feeling her soft curves pressed against his and engulfed in her scent robbed him of all rational thought. The only thing on his mind was finding out how that chocolate would taste on her skin.