



Oh, thank goodness. I wasn't sure you'd actually get here in time. Bring them this way."

Micah stood rooted to the front step as the woman with fiery red hair disappeared into the house. Questions zipped through his mind, but there was no point asking them. She was gone. Hefting the two paper shopping bags full of cookies, muffins, and bread, he tentatively stepped into the foyer and followed down the hall in her wake.

That hair. Where did red like that come from? It was like liquid flame spilling down to her shoulders.

He gave himself a firm mental shake and stepped into a large, two-story living area. The two outside walls were floor to ceiling windows and sunlight spilled over the space, highlighting the gleaming mission-style furniture and brightly colored ceramic pots scattered around the room.

“In here. Look, I’m running behind. Can you put them on these platters?”

Micah spun. An enormous kitchen sprawled across the back of the room, separated from where he stood by an island with six stools lined up under the overhang.

He cleared his throat. “Ms. Johnson?”

“That’s me. Serena’s fine. Here are the platters, I really need to hurry. My guests are going to be here in fifteen minutes.”

“We don’t really...” Micah stopped and sighed. She’d disappeared again. Fine. He could throw cookies onto trays. But Malachi was getting a piece of his mind when he got back to the bakery. Not only was her place so far north of town it was practically another country, but he wasn’t a caterer.

Micah lifted the bags to the counter and turned to the sink. He flipped the handle on the faucet and thrust his hands under the water. Soap. Was there... he spotted a ceramic bottle with a pump on the top. Worth a shot. A girly and floral aroma permeated the

air as he scrubbed up a thick lather. Micah wrinkled his nose. Hopefully the scent of the cookies would get rid of that. The last thing he needed was to get back to the bakery smelling like a summer meadow. His brothers would never let him hear the end of it.

Hands clean, he pulled the boxes of cookies and muffins from the larger bags and made a circle of muffins in the center surrounded with cookies. If the woman — Serena — wanted them separated, she should've stuck around. Or done it herself. Delivery didn't mean set up.

She clipped back into the room on mile high heels. "That looks great. Thanks. Ever made cucumber sandwiches?"

"Do I look like an eighty year-old British woman?" He heard the testiness in his voice but honestly, he'd fulfilled his duties when he brought her the order. He had work he should be getting back to. And fine, there weren't many customers on a Saturday, but he'd just started reading a new space opera.

Serena's grin flashed and her gaze flicked from his head to his toes. Something glinted in her eyes. Appreciation? Couldn't be. Women didn't ogle that obviously. Did they?

"Not really. Then again, cucumber sandwiches aren't that limited in audience." She checked the slim

gold watch on her wrist. “Look. I could use a hand. All you have to do is spread cream cheese. Okay?”

Micah lifted a shoulder. “Why not?”

“That’s the spirit.” She smacked a kiss to his cheek, pointed to a long, oval platter, and gestured vaguely toward the fridge before floating out of the room. “Be right back. Stuff’s in the fridge.”

Micah shook his head. He ought to leave. Just walk back out the front door, get in his car, and head back to the book that was waiting for him by the cash register. Except... he could hear Jonah’s chiding voice in his head. A big order like this one — without even a flinch at the extra charge they’d added for last-minute prep and delivery? Serena Johnson was the kind of customer they needed to keep happy so she’d think of them again when she had... whatever kind of party this was.

A well-stocked knife block sat beside the stove. Micah slid each knife out, one by one, until he found something serrated. It wasn’t technically a bread knife, but it looked like it would fit the bill. Cucumber sandwiches. His Nana had been big on tea parties with his big sister, Ruth, and interested or not, he and his brothers had been forced to endure more of them than was strictly necessary. Particularly when they’d all rather have been swinging from the ropes Pops

had tied high in the branches of their backyard trees. At least the torture was paying off now.

Micah cut thin slices of bread. Not quite transparent, but certainly daintier than any slice he normally prepared. A quick trip to the fridge revealed the cream cheese and a container of sliced cucumbers. At least she hadn't been wrong about being able to find the ingredients. With another sigh, he began the process of assembling sandwiches.

Serena breezed back into the room, the same floral scent as the soap seemed to hover around her. "I really appreciate this." She frowned. "I didn't catch your name."

He snorted. "There wasn't time for introductions, apparently."

She grinned. "Kiln openings always make me nuts. It's why I only do maybe two a year. Couldn't get out of this one, though. And I still don't know your name."

He set the knife down on the lip of the cream cheese container and held out his hand. "Micah Baxter. It's a pleasure to meet you."

She clasped his hand and laughed. "No, it isn't. I've driven you crazy. But I appreciate you being a good sport. I don't suppose..."

Whatever she would have said was cut off by the doorbell. She rolled her eyes and strode down the hallway.

Whatever. Micah rubbed his hand on his jeans, trying to erase the tingles. The air in here had to be dry. What other reason could there be for that little frisson of electricity when she shook his hand?

Laughter echoed from the entryway to the kitchen. Micah shoved down his curiosity, washed his hands a second time, and focused on the sandwiches. She hadn't said if they should be open-faced or closed. So he'd make some of each. And if guests were already arriving, why hadn't she planned ahead better? Not that he could have gotten there all that much sooner than he had with a last-minute order this large.

Micah began arranging the sandwiches on a platter. The patterns on the thing were interesting — as if fern leaves had been dipped in ink and pressed to the plate. He ran his finger over the design. Definitely unique. And the bold teal accents were almost too nice to cover with food. Although that would give people the pleasure of revealing it when they took something to eat. Maybe that was part of her plan.

A kiln opening. Did that mean she'd made these? If so, the woman had talent.

Footsteps announced Serena's return with her guests in tow. "Oh. Open-faced. What a good idea. I hadn't even thought of that. Micah Baxter, I'd like you to meet my parents, Carl and Laura Johnson."

Micah brushed his hand off again before taking each of theirs in turn. "Nice to meet you."

"Have you known Serena long?" Laura cast an appraising eye over him before arching a brow at her daughter.

"About twenty minutes. My brothers and I own a bakery in town. I brought her order up."

Laura laughed.

Carl grinned. "And she roped you into helping. Sounds like my girl."

Serena shrugged. "I needed a hand. Speaking of which, could you each grab one of those and take them out to the studio? You'll see where they go once you get there. I should double-check that the signs in the driveway are clear so people don't come to the house."

"They're fine. We didn't figure you'd mind if we came here first." Carl hefted the large plate of cookies and muffins.

"Plus, we're early." Laura picked up the second, smaller plate. "Grab those sandwiches, would you, Micah?"

Serena's eyes sparkled with quiet laughter. "I'll meet you in the back in just a minute."

Well. At least he knew where Serena got it. He picked up the platter and followed after the Johnsons. Maybe after this he could make his escape.

French doors opened from the living room onto a deck that ran the entire width of the house. He followed Serena's parents across and down a set of steps to a wide paved area in front of a smaller building made of wood and glass. Micah could hear the gurgle of Clover Creek. He'd known it was close, but Serena's property must end at the bank. The sound lightened his heart. He'd always been a sucker for flowing water.

Stepping into the studio was like entering a high-end ceramics gallery. Natural light flooded the space. Shelves and tables displayed pots of every imaginable shape and size — from some-thing that could be used to hold pencils at a desk to a container that sat on the floor and reached the middle of his thigh. What did you use something that size for?

The designs and colors were dazzling.

"Bring that over here." Laura's voice held a smile.

Micah tore his gaze away from Serena's art and crossed the room to a long table where the platters of cookies had already been set. He put the

sandwiches in the center and looked at the back half of the building.

The contrast was stark. The rug stopped on the other side of the food table, revealing a plain concrete floor. Tables were pushed against the wall, some with strange utensils stacked on them. A potter's wheel took up the center of the room, though there appeared to be a second one on the back wall. Then there were the shelves. Many were empty, but others held bowls of varying sizes. They weren't colorful, though. Were they unfinished?

"Never seen a potter's studio before?" Carl ambled over to stand beside him, his hands in his pockets. "Serena's is a little fancier than most, I think."

"Does she — what's it called? — cook them in here too?"

Carl chuckled. "She has her own kilns, but they're through that closed door on the back wall. That's a separate room with better ventilation. The clay lets off gasses when it's being fired. You don't want that spewed out into where you're working if you can help it."

Micah nodded and turned back to the more-finished area that was clearly her showroom. "Impressive."

“Thanks.” Serena grinned and came to the table. She shifted everything a little before snagging a macaron and biting into it. “These are good. I appreciate your help. I know it wasn’t your job. If you’d like to stay for the party, you’re more than welcome.”

“I... thanks. But I should get back. It was nice to meet you.” Micah turned and waved at Carl and Laura. “All of you. I hope your party goes well.”

Maybe one of his lamer statements. Micah stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed for the door. What else was he supposed to say? Was she hoping to sell a lot? Presumably. But he didn’t want to say something about that and have it end up being, oh who knew, some kind of weird look-but-don’t-buy kind of thing. Why was he even still thinking about it? He reached for the handle of his car door.

“Micah?”

He turned and his lips eased into a smile as his eyes landed on the dark-haired policewoman who was a frequent visitor at the bakery. “Gloria. What are you doing here?”

She gave a dismissive wave. “Serena and I have been friends since she moved out here. I could ask you the same.”

“She needed food for whatever this is. I brought it up.”

“I thought Malachi did all the deliveries?”

Micah shrugged. That was the plan, but with Ruth slammed at the bed and breakfast and her new husband, Corban, in the thick of harvest, Malachi was helping out where he could, leaving Jonah and Micah to juggle the bakery. “Jonah and I flipped a coin. I lost.”

Gloria snickered. “Was it that bad?”

“Not really. Just... answer me this. Would you ask someone you’ve never met before to make cucumber sandwiches for you?”

Gloria’s face split into a grin. “Nope. But Serena totally would. Go back to the bakery, Micah. I imagine you’re desperate to get back to your book. What is it today?”

“A new epic sci-fi novel by an author I’d never heard of, but the write up sounded interesting.”

“And is it?”

“Don’t know. I made it through two sentences of the prologue before she called with a huge order that she should’ve placed last week. And a need for delivery.”

“Sounds like Serena.” Gloria shook her head. “But at least I know the food’ll be good this time. Last one of these she did, she served sandwich cookies from the grocery store. The generic kind. See ya.”

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Micah frowned and watched Gloria stride toward the studio. He didn't know Serena, but he couldn't shake the idea that she and Gloria were an odd pair to be friends. Gloria embodied routine — as a police woman she probably had to. Serena, on the other hand, appeared to be about as flighty as they came.

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