



# *Not the Marrying Kind*

JAE



# Chapter 1

SASHA PUSHED THROUGH THE SWINGING door connecting the kitchen to the front of the bakery and placed the tray of heart-shaped cupcakes into the glass display case. “That’s the last tray. Who knew my heart would be such a hot commodity?”

Aunt Mae grinned. “Oh, I knew it all along. There’d be plenty of people interested in capturing your heart if only you’d let them.”

“Nah.” Sasha wrapped one arm around her aunt. She had to lean down to do so. “Who needs romance when they can have cupcakes?”

Aunt Mae gave her *the* look over the rim of her green-tinted glasses—the one that had gotten Sasha to spill the beans about whatever mischief she’d gotten into as a kid. “Who says you can’t have both? Find a good-looking hunk or a pretty gal and eat cupcakes with them.” She winked and added, “Or eat other, more interesting things.”

Sasha burst out laughing. “No, thanks. There’s no one in this town that I want to eat cupcakes with, much less anything else.”

The bell above the door jingled a welcome, and Ashley Gaines stepped into A Slice of Heaven.

Sasha never wore a watch when she was working, but she didn’t need one to know it was three o’clock. Ashley came in every day at three on the dot, when the afternoon lull hit or, during busy times like today, when she needed a break. She was as regular as clockwork, and she always ordered the same thing. Ashley Gaines was nothing if not predictable.

“Hi, Ash,” Kimberly called from where she sat having coffee with her boyfriend.

The other customers sitting at the small tables echoed the greeting, and Ashley returned it with waves and warm smiles, stopping here and there to exchange a few words.

That was the same as every day too. It reminded Sasha of high school, when Ashley, two years ahead of Sasha, had been part of the popular crowd. Back then, she had been class president, head cheerleader—and the quarterback’s girlfriend.

Everyone had thought they’d get married right out of high school, but for some reason, that hadn’t happened. Maybe Ashley wasn’t that predictable after all.

Sasha watched as Ashley finally tore herself away from her fan club and made her way over to the counter. She walked like a dancer, carrying herself with an inherent grace Sasha had envied back in high school. Ashley had skipped that awkward, gangly teenager phase, while Sasha had been the tallest person in her class and had felt about as elegant as a lumberjack.

Even now, at thirty-three, Ashley looked like the nice girl next door in her formfitting, purple sweater and a pair of jeans with a couple of green stains. Sasha couldn’t help noticing how nicely they hugged Ashley’s curvy hips and showcased her long legs.

Okay, she admitted to herself, maybe what she had felt back in high school hadn’t been just envy. Maybe a smidgen of teenage lust had been mixed in too. But now she would rather eat nothing but gas station donuts for a month than get involved with Ashley Gaines, even if Ash weren’t the straightest woman in Missouri. If Sasha ever started a relationship, she wanted it to be with a person who was fun and spontaneous, and Ashley was far too focused on her nice-girl image and doing what people expected of her.

“Hi, Ashley,” Sasha said. “What can I do to make your taste buds happy today?”

Ashley gave her the same friendly smile she had directed at everyone else. Her strikingly white teeth shone against her face that was still slightly tanned from helping out on her father’s farm all summer. “The usual, please.”

“Oh, come on. It’s Valentine’s Day. Aren’t you feeling even a little adventurous?”

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Ashley hesitated and studied the confections on the other side of the glass.

Sasha couldn't resist teasing her. Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes was always such easy bait. "How about a Sweet Kiss?"

Ashley blinked. "Um..."

"Or would you prefer something hotter?"

"Pardon me?"

Sasha gave her an innocent smile and gestured at the heart-shaped cupcakes as if she had been talking about them all along. "The Sweet Kiss ones are chocolate with salted caramel frosting. Or if you're not in the mood for something sweet, how about a spicy cheddar muffin?"

Ashley brushed back a blonde strand that had escaped her ponytail, but the gesture couldn't hide the blush coloring her cheeks.

*Kind of cute.* Sasha bit back a groan at the thought. That lingering attraction to Ashley was really annoying.

"Um, no, thanks," Ashley said. "I think I'll go with my usual vanilla cupcake."

Yeah, that was Ashley. Totally vanilla. Sasha suppressed a chuckle.

"Plus two espresso chocolate chip cookies for Brooke and a Beagle Bite for Casper, of course," Ashley added.

"Of course." Ashley never forgot to buy treats for her employee or her dog. Sasha took a paper box with the bakery's logo and reached for one of the vanilla cupcakes with strawberry buttercream frosting.

"You know what?" Ashley said.

Sasha looked up. Would Ashley surprise her after all? "What?"

"Make that two vanilla cupcakes. I think I need the extra sugar today."

Sasha gave her a questioning look, but Ashley didn't elaborate. Not that Sasha had expected her to. They had never exchanged confidences. She placed a second cupcake in the box and put the cookies and the doggie treat for Ashley's golden retriever into two separate bags. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Jeez, why had that come out sounding so flirty?

Ashley didn't seem to notice. "No, thanks." She put the exact change on the counter without having to ask how much she owed Sasha. "See you tomorrow for my cupcake break."

“See ya.” Sasha took the money without looking at it, her gaze following Ashley as she walked away.

At the door, Ashley nearly ran into Leo and Holly, who had been about to enter.

“Oh, hi, Ash,” Holly said. “How are you doing?”

“Um, great. Keeping busy. You know how it is—Valentine’s Day is always crazy.”

“Is it okay if we add to the craziness? Could you make up a bouquet of gerbera daisies for Leo’s mom and some tulips for mine?” Holly asked. “We’ll be by to collect them right after we get ourselves a snack.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll get right on that. See you later.” Without waiting for a reply, Ashley hurried down the street toward her flower shop.

Sasha stared after her. For someone who had been close friends with both Leo and Holly at one point, Ashley never seemed completely at ease chatting with them, making Sasha wonder if she was uncomfortable with their sexual orientation.

“Hey, guys,” Sasha said as Holly and Leo walked up to the counter. “Are you having a great Valentine’s Day?”

“The best ever,” they answered in unison.

Sasha playfully rolled her eyes at them. “God, you two are so stinking cute together. You sound like an old, married couple.”

They traded a long gaze.

“Um, about that...” Holly sent Leo a questioning look. “What do you think? Should we tell her our news now or wait until later, when she’s not so busy?”

“News? There’s news in this town, and I haven’t heard about it yet?” Sasha opened her eyes comically wide. “Wow. The Fair Oaks rumor mill really isn’t what it used to be.” She took an apricot-orange cream scone and put it in a bag without asking what Holly and Leo wanted. They, too, always ordered the same. “So, what’s the news?”

Holly leaned forward as if about to share a secret. The ear-to-ear grin on her face made Sasha think it had to be something good. “We’re getting married.”

A second scone and Sasha’s pair of silver tongs landed on the counter with a clatter, making several customers look over. Sasha didn’t care. She wiped her hands on her baker’s apron, rushed around the counter, and

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engulfed first Holly, then Leo in a warm hug. “That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you guys!”

As soon as she let go, Aunt Mae hurried over and hugged them too. “Did you propose today?” She looked from Holly to Leo and back.

“I wanted to.” Holly laughed. “I had it all planned out. A romantic stroll along the creek before heading to Tasty Barn for a candlelit dinner, and when we got to the bridge, I wanted to drop down on one knee and ask her to marry me. But Leo beat me to it last night.” She held out her hand, showing off her engagement ring with a single, beautiful diamond.

“I wanted to do it on Valentine’s Day too, but then I thought that might be a little too cheesy, even for someone who writes sappy love songs for a living.” The corners of Leo’s mouth curved up into an embarrassed smile. A ring that looked nearly identical to Holly’s sparkled on her finger. “Plus I just couldn’t wait any longer.”

“Wow. You both planned to propose without the other knowing? Great minds think alike.” Sasha had never really believed in all that happily-ever-after stuff, but seeing the obvious love radiating off her friends, she was almost considering changing her mind. “So when’s the happy day?”

“We were thinking the first Saturday in May. It’s my parents’ wedding date, and my mom loved the idea when we told her over breakfast,” Holly said. “Plus it’s not too hot in May.”

Sasha nodded her approval. Elaborate wedding cakes and summer heat didn’t mix well.

“We want something small and low-key, not a big, fancy production, so we’re not going to have an official maid of honor or bridesmaids with identical dresses or anything like that, but...” Holly traded a look with Leo, who gave her a tiny nod. “We’d like you to be part of our wedding party.”

Warmth spread through Sasha, as if she had just taken a bite of a cinnamon roll fresh out of the oven. “I’d be honored.”

“And we’d love for you to make our wedding cake,” Leo added.

“Of course,” Sasha said without even consulting her order book first. “Any idea what kind of cake you want?”

Holly and Leo again exchanged gazes before Holly said, “Not yet. But my mom thinks it’s a good idea for the baker and the florist to collaborate closely so the cake and the flowers match both in color and design. Maybe

we could all get together at our place in a week or two and talk about the details.”

“Yeah, sure. Who’ll do the flowers? Blossoms from Kansas City?”

“Um, no,” Holly answered. “We want Ash to do it. We haven’t asked her yet, but I hope she’ll agree.”

*Ash...* It shouldn’t have thrown her for a loop. Not only was The Flower Girl the only floral shop in town, but Ashley had also been friends with both brides-to-be in the past. Still, the prospect of having to work with Ashley was more unsettling than Sasha cared to admit, and she couldn’t even say why exactly.

“That’s not a problem, is it?” Holly asked when Sasha remained silent.

“No, of course not.” If Ms. Prim-and-Proper was willing to work a lesbian wedding with her, there wouldn’t be a problem at all. Sasha had worked with dozens of other wedding professionals over the years, and it had always gone without a hitch. Why would this time be any different?

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“If anyone else walks in here and orders a dozen red roses, I’m going to scream.” As the latest in a long string of rose-buying customers disappeared down the street, Ashley sank against the counter and stretched her aching back.

Brooke, her part-time employee, laughed, making the small hoop in her nose vibrate. “Yeah, me too. It’s so lame. They all say they want something special and unique for V-Day—and then they order the most cliché thing ever.”

“Well, at least we’re making good money today.” Her little shop really needed that since business was always slow in January.

“Yeah,” Brooke said. “It’s the day of overpriced chocolates and guilt-trip flowers that people only buy because they’re supposed to.”

Ash circled the counter to choose the most beautiful gerbera daisies for the bouquet Holly had ordered. “Wow. That’s kind of jaded for a nineteen-year-old, don’t you think? You sound like—”

“Like you?”

“Me?” Ash shook her head. “I never said anything like that. I merely mentioned that it would be more logical if Valentine’s Day were in

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summer, when roses are actually in bloom. But aside from that practical consideration, I'm a romantic at heart."

"A romantic who hasn't had a date since way before I started working here."

Ash turned away under the pretense of getting sprigs of eucalyptus and some bear grass for the bouquet. This was exactly why Valentine's Day was both a blessing and a curse for her. The most romantic day of the year was a reminder that she was alone and would likely stay that way. She forced a smile as she returned to her workstation and faced Brooke. "Is my mother paying you to say that?"

Brooke grinned and brushed back the long side bang hanging over one eye. "Ooh! You think she would? I need all the money I can get to be able to leave this town and go away to college."

Before Ash could answer, the bell above the door announced another customer.

Barry Clemons, the owner of the grain and feed, stepped into the shop and shook drops of rain and sleet off his coat. "Brr. Hi, Ashley. Can't wait for spring. Bet your dad says the same."

"He does. You know him. Every year after harvest, he swears he'll finally take Mom on vacation, but by the time January and February come around, he can't wait to get back in the fields."

Barry chuckled, then sobered. "How are your folks? Must be a tough time of year for them."

Ash smiled through the stab of pain and sent a glance to the customer who had come in right after Barry. Thankfully, Mrs. Mitchell was busy looking at the orchids and the potted hydrangeas and didn't seem to be listening in on their conversation. "They're okay. Staying busy fixing tractors and doing barn repairs. Dad is even helping me out with deliveries today because we have so many online orders that my driver can't do it all. So, how can I help you?"

"I thought I'd get some flowers," Barry said.

"Captain Obvious," Brooke muttered under her breath.

Ash nudged her behind the cover of the counter. The customer was king, even though it was kind of obvious that he was here for flowers.

"What were you thinking of?" Ash asked.



He looked around the shop, which today wasn't as neat and orderly as Ash usually tried to keep it. The floor was dirty from the many customers who'd come in since seven this morning, when she had opened the shop two hours earlier than usual. She hadn't had much of a chance to tidy up her work area, so trimmings of stems and stripped leaves formed piles behind the counter. One of the adorable plush teddy bears had toppled over on the shelf, as if it had gotten tired waiting for someone to take it home. A heart-shaped balloon had escaped from the flower basket it had been tied to, and now it dangled from the ceiling.

Barry's gaze went from the floating balloon to the bouquets Ash had prepared for walk-in customers. Then he paused on Brooke and looked at her as if he had never seen her before even though she'd worked for Ash since the previous summer. A deep groove formed between his brows as he took in Brooke's nose ring, her kohl-rimmed eyes, and the edgy haircut, short except for a sweeping side bang that almost obscured her left eye.

Brooke met his gaze as if she didn't care what he thought of her.

Ash couldn't help admiring her. At Brooke's age, all she had wanted was to fit in and avoid anything that could make her the subject of gossip again—and that hadn't changed now that she was an adult.

Finally, Barry turned toward the walk-in cooler that took up most of one wall. In it, cut flowers were arranged in metal buckets. "A dozen red roses, please."

Brooke rolled her eyes in that way only teenagers could.

Ash nudged her again. "Why don't you go see if you can help Mrs. Mitchell?" When Brooke trudged away, Ash turned back to Barry. "Roses are always a great choice. I bet Heather will love them. Would you like them wrapped or in a vase?"

"Wrapped, please." Barry watched while Ash pulled a rose from one of the buckets.

She formed a circle with her thumb and index finger and started slotting flowers into it at an angle, constantly rotating the bouquet as she added more roses and some baby's breath. Finally, she created a frill around the bouquet with some leatherleaf fern and held her creation out to Barry for his approval.

He nodded. "Looks great. Thanks."

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Ash wrapped the stems with floral tape and trimmed them to an even length.

“Could you make up another bouquet and wrap them too?” Barry asked.

Flowers for his mother? How sweet. Ash smiled. “Sure. Roses too?”

Barry shrugged. “Anything will do. You pick.” He rifled through his wallet while he waited and put his credit card down on the counter. But then he paused and added a couple of bills. He glanced back over his shoulder at Brooke and Mrs. Mitchell. “Um, I’ll pay cash for the roses, if you don’t mind.”

Ash froze with her hand extended toward a bucket of peonies. Jesus. How much more obvious could he be? She schooled her face and tried to keep smiling, but it wasn’t easy.

God knew, she had thoroughly messed up her one and only relationship as an adult, but she had never, ever cheated.

Ash turned away from the peonies and picked yellow carnations and pink snapdragon instead. Heather probably wouldn’t know that the flowers in her bouquet symbolized disappointment and deception, but at least Ash could imagine that she was warning her in some way, saying through flowers what she would never dare voice.

A few minutes later, Barry left, cradling the two bouquets and holding the door open for Mrs. Mitchell and her potted hydrangea.

Brooke stared after him. “Did he just...?”

Ash sighed. “Yeah, I think so.”

“What an ass. Who do you think it is? The chick he’s hooking up with, I mean.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.” Ash really liked Fair Oaks and the people in this little town—well, most people, most of the time—but the one thing she despised was gossip.

“I bet it’s Cora. I’ve seen her head into the feed and grain a couple of times, and I don’t think she was there for the corn. She’s a postal worker, for fuck’s sake.”

“Poor Heather,” Ash said. “She probably has no idea that he’s giving her a bunch of ‘anything will do’ while sending red roses to another woman.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She’ll find out like this.” Brooke snapped her fingers. “This is Fair Oaks after all. Secrets don’t stay secret here for very long.”

A chill skittered down Ash's spine, making the air in the flower shop appear even cooler. Her own secret had nearly come out a year and a half before, when Travis had told their former classmates about her car being parked in front of Holly's house all night long. But that relationship had ended years ago, and everyone had probably dismissed Travis's suspicions as his dirty little fantasies.

She was safe, especially since she had decided that another relationship wasn't worth the risk. She'd stay far, far away from the women of Fair Oaks...which was easy to do since they were all straight.

Well, all except for the two women who were now entering the shop to collect the bouquets they had ordered.

Holly was the first to step inside, while Leo hung back, her guarded pop star mask firmly in place.

Was she still angry with Ash? There had been a time when Ash could read her well, but that had been back in high school, when they had been best friends. They hadn't exchanged more than a quick hello in the year and a half since Ash had tried to warn her away from Holly. It had been a stupid move, caused by hurt and jealousy; she could admit that now, at least to herself.

She was over it. Okay, mostly over it. She swallowed against the lump in her throat as she watched them walk toward her, hand in hand.

Seeing them together was always a little weird. The first girl she had ever kissed dating the first—and only—woman she'd ever been in a relationship with... It was mind-boggling.

But they looked good together, Ash had to admit. Happy.

Brooke watched them approach with a grin. "Let me guess. You want a dozen red roses?"

Ash sent her a warning glance. She really had to talk to Brooke. If Brooke wanted to keep working for her, she would have to learn to hold her tongue in front of customers.

"Um, no." With her free hand that wasn't holding on to Leo's, Holly pointed at the bouquet Ash was still working on. "Actually, I think this one is for us."

The light caught on a ring glistening on Holly's left ring finger.

The ribbon Ash had been about to tie around the gerbera stems dropped to the worktable. A gasp escaped her, and she stared at Holly's

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hand. As a nurse, Holly had never been one to wear any jewelry, especially not a tasteful but obviously expensive diamond ring. Her gaze darted to Leo's hand, which sported a similar ring. "Oh my God! Is...is that...? Are you...?"

Holly curled her hand around the ring as if to protect it. A flush of joy colored her cheeks. "I know today is crazy for you. That's why I didn't want to say anything today. But if Brooke could hold down the fort for a minute, maybe we could go and talk in the back."

"Okay," was the only word Ash could get out.

Leo still hadn't said a word as Ash led them around the counter and through the open door into the back room.

Casper, Ash's golden retriever, jumped out of his doggie bed and rushed over to greet them.

Ash was grateful for the distraction so she could get herself together. The low buzz of the flower cooler compressor filled her ears—or maybe it was the chaotic thoughts tumbling through her mind.

Brooke had stared after them, but now she quickly busied herself rearranging the greeting cards next to the counter, affecting a look of sullen teenage disinterest.

Ash didn't buy it for a second. She closed the curtain that separated the workroom from the front of the shop, which she rarely ever did. For once, she wished for a real door.

With trembling hands, she cleared the small, round table in the corner of bows, little packets of flower food, and floral picks with pink hearts and pushed two chairs and a stool over to it. "Please, sit." She took the stool and sank onto it.

Casper settled down at her feet as if wanting to lend support.

Leo and Holly sat across from her without letting go of each other's hand.

Again, Ash's gaze was drawn to their rings. "You...you're getting married?"

A joyous smile lit up Holly's face. "Yes."

"Wow, that's...um..." Finally, Ash's good manners kicked in, and she said, as if on autopilot, "Congratulations. I'm really happy for you." And she was. But at the same time, so many conflicting thoughts and emotions were crashing down on her that she felt as if she were caught in a hailstorm.

“Thanks.” Holly beamed, and even Leo’s celebrity mask was replaced by a warm smile.

They radiated so much happiness that Ash had to look away. How could they be so happy with their sexual orientation, while Ash still struggled with hers? She couldn’t imagine ever getting to a point where she would want to celebrate her love for a woman with a big event that would probably include the entire town.

“We would both really like it if you would come to our wedding and also do our flowers,” Holly said.

Ash peered over at them from under half-lowered lashes. “Are you sure?”

“If you’d rather not do a wedding between two women because of what people—or your parents—might say...” Leo said.

That concern had crossed Ash’s mind. Her parents and some of her more conservative customers wouldn’t be too happy about her being involved in a same-sex wedding, but that wasn’t why she hesitated. “No, that’s not it.” She lowered her gaze to the table. “I mean, after what I said about Holly, I would completely understand if you’d rather use a florist in Kansas City.”

For several seconds, no one answered.

Casper let out a low whine as if sensing the rising tension.

Ash looked up. *Oh shit.* Unlike Ash, Holly had never been one to hide her emotions, and now it was written all over her face that she hadn’t known about Ash’s careless words.

Both Ash and Leo opened their mouths, but before either of them could say anything, Holly lifted her hand. “I don’t want to know. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” Leo said, heat in her eyes.

“Leo, after everything that happened—your father dying, you firing your manager, and me finally understanding that I can have a happy relationship despite being asexual—I thought we agreed that we don’t want to hang on to any bitter feelings from the past. That’s part of why we want to get married, right? To have a new beginning—and that includes a new beginning for you and Ash too.”

Tears burned in Ash’s eyes. She hadn’t expected that Holly of all people would defend her to Leo. It made her feel even worse about the words she’d spoken in anger. “I know I owe you an apology. Both of you.” She glanced from Leo to Holly and back. “I was hurt and bitter, blaming everyone else

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for the way my life turned out. But I made my peace with it, and I'd really like to make peace with you too."

"I'd really like that too," Holly said softly. "I always regretted losing our friendship, and I'd like to work on getting it back."

Ash was speechless. She hadn't expected to be invited back into Holly's life. Maybe she should have known better. Holly had always possessed the biggest heart of anyone she knew.

Holly squeezed Leo's hand. "What do you think, honey?"

Leo looked down at her hand that was joined with Holly's, and when she gazed back up, her tense features had relaxed. "I think you're right." She exhaled and looked Ash in the eyes. "You were once an important person in my life. In both of our lives. I won't lie. It'll take a lot of work to get that friendship back, but we have to start somewhere. Would you be a part of our wedding and also do the flowers?"

Snippets of what her parents and the more conservative people in town would say echoed through Ash's head. She shook off those thoughts. If she wanted to earn back Holly's and Leo's friendship, she had to do something to deserve it. "I would be honored."

## Chapter 2

BY THE TIME ASH HAD checked her orders for the next day, cleaned up the shop, and prepped the leftover roses to donate to the local retirement home, it had long since gotten dark outside. Her hands were sore and covered in little nicks, her feet and her back were killing her, and except for the two cupcakes, she hadn't eaten all day. All she wanted was to crash on the couch with a cheese pizza from Casey's.

But before she could pass out from Valentine's Day-induced exhaustion, she needed to walk Casper. The poor boy hadn't even gotten his usual lunch break walk today. Ash's dad had merely taken him outside in between delivery runs.

At least the sleet—part rain, part snow—that had fallen all day had stopped, and she could drop off the money bags in the bank's night deposit box on her way to the park.

Fair Oaks lay in silence as they strolled through town. Casper's softly jingling dog tags produced the only sound around. All of the stores had closed hours ago. Streetlamps threw warm pools of yellow light onto the pockmarked asphalt of Main Street and the cracked sidewalks. Her breath condensed in front of her face, adding to the feeling of being in her own little bubble.

Being out alone at this hour was magical. By the time she reached the bank, Ash could already feel some of the stress leaving her.

A tall figure lurked in front of the night deposit box. A thick coat and a woolen hat made it impossible to even guess the stranger's gender, but the imposing height made Ash's pulse quicken.

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She clutched the strap of her purse, where she had stuck the bank bags, with one hand while white-knuckling Casper's leash with the other. God, she was glad she had the dog with her. If push came to shove, she was pretty sure he would defend her.

But Casper didn't growl. He let out an excited woof and bounded forward to greet the stranger—or rather the tiny dog at the person's feet.

The stranger turned, and the light of the streetlamp next to the bank illuminated Sasha Peterson's strong features. Her thick, brown braid stuck out from beneath her woolen hat and hung down in front of one broad shoulder. A sprinkling of flour dusted its tip. Apparently, she was on her way home from work too.

While the dogs began their butt-sniffing ritual, Sasha and Ash stared at each other.

"Jeez," Sasha said. "I didn't hear you walk up. You scared the crap out of me."

"Out of you?" Ash eyed Sasha's muscular six-foot frame. She didn't look as if she had much to fear.

Sasha shrugged. "I do cupcakes, not kung fu." She reached down to pet Casper, who sniffed her and then tried to lick her hands.

"Casper, no." Ash pulled him back.

"Are you dropping off today's cash too?" Sasha asked.

When Ash nodded, she pulled out the handle for her so Ash could drop her bank bag into the deposit box.

"Thanks." With the money safely dropped off, Ash headed toward the park, and Sasha followed.

Ash glanced at the fawn-colored French bulldog scampering after Casper on much shorter legs. "I didn't know you had a dog. Did you just get him or her?"

"Um, yeah, kind of. Snickerdoodle is my aunt's."

"Snickerdoodle?" Ash laughed.

The sound of Sasha's chuckle, deep and full of mirth, filled the night. "Well, my aunt wanted to name her Snatch because she's always snatching up anything edible, but I managed to talk her out of it."

"Sna—" Ash bit back a laugh. "Um, Snickerdoodle is not such a bad name after all. Although it's a mouthful for such a small dog." She watched



them out of the corner of her eye. The sight of the tall, solidly built woman walking her aunt's tiny French bulldog with its pink sweater made Ash grin.

"What?" Sasha patted her coat as if believing she had clumps of dough stuck to her clothes.

Ash hid her grin. "Oh, nothing."

They walked along the creek, silence falling between them. Since the creek was frozen, not even its gentle murmur filled the air.

Even though they had mutual friends, Ash had never talked to Sasha, at least not about anything important, so now she didn't know what to say. She had a feeling Sasha would be easy to talk to, but—truth be told—Ash had avoided her for years.

Except for Holly and Leo, Sasha was probably the only person in town who knew that Ash was gay—at least the only person who knew for sure. Not that she and Holly had ever talked about it, but Ash assumed that Holly had told her closest friend about them back when they had first gotten together.

Even worse, Sasha likely knew all the ugly details about their breakup too.

Ash wasn't proud of the way she had handled their problems back then, and she hated that another person knew about it. It made her feel exposed, as if she were strolling through town stark naked.

She shivered and drew her coat more tightly around herself. For a second, she considered telling Sasha that she would prefer some peace and quiet after her busy day and wanted to walk her dog alone, but that would have been rude, so she continued on without saying anything.

Thankfully, Sasha either didn't know what to say to her, or she didn't feel the need to talk.

When they neared the bridge leading to the part of town where Ash lived, Sasha cleared her throat. "So, good day?"

Ash nodded. "Long day too."

"I hear you. I've been baking since three a.m. I think I'm going to need a few days to get my stamina back before we get together."

*Stamina? Get together? What on earth...?* Ash's foot slid out from under her on a wet patch of grass.

"Whoa!" Sasha caught her before she could fall. "Careful."

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Sasha's scent—cinnamon and something else, something spicier—engulfed her. Ash was much too aware of the strong fingers wrapped around her elbow. Annoyed with herself for even noticing Sasha's scent or the way her hand felt on her arm, she pulled away. "W-what do you mean?"

"It's dark, and the grass is wet, so you'd better stay on the path, or you'll—"

Ash waved her hand. "Not that." Then the potential meaning of Sasha's words hit home, and a blush warmed Ash's face. "Oh. You're talking about getting together with the gang on Saturday, right?" *Duh, what else did you think she was talking about? A date?*

That was impossible. As far as she knew, Sasha was straight. Even if she weren't, after everything that Holly had probably told her, Ash was sure that Sasha would rather cut the grass on the high school's football field with a pair of nail clippers than ask her out.

"Um, no, that's not what I meant," Sasha said. "Sure, I'll be at Johnny's on Saturday, but I was talking about just the two of us."

"Just the two of us?" Ash's brain was stuck on repeating the words without understanding them. For a second, she was nearly convinced that she had fallen asleep on her couch after work and this was just one of her crazy reoccurring dreams in which someone outed her in public and the whole town turned their backs on her.

"Well, us and the happy couple, of course." Sasha laughed. "Or do you think Travis, Jenny, and the others will have any valuable input on flowers and cake?"

Ash stopped next to the bridge. "Flowers and cake?" She searched Sasha's brown eyes, which appeared almost black in the light of the nearly full moon. "What are you talking about?"

A line formed between Sasha's brows. "Um, me cake, you flowers? I thought Holly and Leo talked to you."

"You mean about their wedding? Yes, they did. But what does that have to do with...?" Realization struck. "Oh. They want you to do the wedding cake." Of course. Sasha was one of Holly's closest friends after all, so why would they hire someone else?

"Yes. And they want us to work together to coordinate the colors and design. They suggested we all get together sometime next week or the week after to talk about the details."

“Oh.”

“Didn’t they mention that?” Sasha asked.

Ash scratched her head. Had they? Today had been crazy busy, and finding out that her ex-girlfriend was going to marry the first woman Ash had ever kissed had been a bit of a shock. But she was pretty sure she would remember if anyone had mentioned that. “Um, no, I don’t think they did.”

Sasha bent her head and studied her closely. “Is that going to be a problem for you?”

“No,” Ash said quickly. A little too quickly. “No problem at all. Why would it be a problem?”

Sasha was still scrutinizing her. She folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

“It’s not going to be a problem,” Ash said so loudly that Snickerdoodle’s bat ears swiveled in her direction.

“Good.” It didn’t sound conciliatory but rather like a challenge.

“Yeah. Good,” Ash repeated.

They stood next to the bridge in a silent stare-down until Snickerdoodle let out a high-pitched whine.

Sasha bent down, picked her up, and cradled her against her chest. “I’d better get her home. Frenchies are pretty sensitive to the cold. See you tomorrow at three for cupcakes.”

Ash just nodded, not knowing what to say. With Casper pressing against her leg, she watched Sasha’s tall shape disappear into the darkness.

So she and Sasha would be working together to make sure Holly and Leo had the wedding of their dreams. No big deal, right? She had just been caught off guard for a moment.

They would meet a time or two to make sure Sasha’s fondant matched the color of Ash’s centerpieces at the reception. She had done that before, back when Sasha’s aunt had still been running the bakery, so it would be just business as usual. When they met to talk about the details, she would be the model of cool, calm, and collected.

With a decisive nod, she turned away from where Sasha had disappeared and strode across the bridge toward home.

\* \* \*

## Not the Marrying Kind

On Friday evening of the week after, Sasha tucked her portfolio under one arm, took the covered tray of cake samples from the passenger seat, and shut the door of her SUV with a firm nudge of her hip.

Only Holly's Jeep Liberty and Leo's BMW X5 were in the driveway as she carried the tray toward the house. No sign of Ashley or her ten-year-old silver GMC Terrain anywhere.

She hadn't shown up at Johnny's last Saturday, and Sasha had been busy in the bakery kitchen all week, so her staff and Aunt Mae had manned the counter, and she hadn't seen Ashley since that weird conversation at the creek on Valentine's Day.

Sasha still hadn't been able to figure out what Ashley's problem was. Why the hell would it be such a big deal for Ashley to work with her? Which it clearly was, no matter what Ashley said.

Sasha might not be the popular girl next door that Ashley was, but she generally got along with everyone, and her friends told her she was fun to be around. So why would Ashley act as if working with her was a huge inconvenience?

She had racked her brain but couldn't think of any reason. Unless...

Sasha paused on the broad veranda. Had Ashley somehow found out about that stupid, little crush Sasha had on her back in high school? Was that what made her appear so uncomfortable any time she was around Sasha?

Nah. That couldn't be it. That had been fifteen years ago. She was no longer that smitten sixteen-year-old who had admired Ashley from afar. Ashley had probably been clueless anyway. She had hung out only with Leo and the popular crowd, without paying Sasha any attention.

But if that wasn't it, what else had made Ashley as twitchy as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs?

The front door swung open before Sasha could find an answer or ring the doorbell.

Holly stood in front of her, an amused smile on her face. "Are we having our cake consultation on the veranda?"

"Haha." Sasha gave her a one-armed hug and carried the tray past her into the house.

She'd been a regular visitor since Holly and Leo had moved in, but the house and what they had made of it still took her breath away each

time she came by. She especially liked the living room, where Holly led her now. With its high ceiling and the fireplace that dominated one wall, it managed to be both spacious and cozy. Two overstuffed chairs and a tan couch invited you to curl up and relax, and Chance—the red tabby that ruled the house—had done exactly that. He barely lifted his head when Sasha entered.

“Where’s your future wife?” Sasha asked as she set down the tray on the coffee table.

An affectionate smile curled Holly’s lips. She pointed to the sliding glass doors that led out onto a deck overlooking the large, tree-lined backyard.

A motion-activated light flared on as Leo stepped out of the former guesthouse that they had converted into a music studio. She crossed the backyard, slid open the glass door, and immediately slung one arm around Holly as if she hadn’t seen her for weeks. “Hey, Sasha. Sorry. I sometimes lose track of time when I’m composing. Am I late?”

“Just a little,” Sasha said. “And so is Ashley. Isn’t she coming?”

The sound of the doorbell interrupted them before anyone could answer.

“Speak of the devil,” Leo muttered.

Holly nudged her, whispered something that sounded like “New beginnings, remember?” and went to open the door.

Seconds later, Ashley rushed into the living room, holding out what was probably her portfolio as if it were a peace offering. “I’m so sorry, guys. I swear I left on time, but my car wouldn’t start, so I had to walk all the way.”

She looked more as if she had *run* all the way. Her cheeks were flushed. She must have either lost or forgotten her hair clip, so her nearly waist-long, blonde hair cascaded down her back in loose waves.

Damn if that didn’t make her even more attractive. Sasha cursed her libido for even noticing.

“Don’t worry,” Holly said with a quick pat on Ashley’s arm. “We haven’t started yet. Sasha just got here too. Take a seat.”

Leo and Holly took the two overstuffed chairs, which stood side by side, leaving the couch for Sasha and Ashley.

Sasha folded her frame between Ashley and the cat. Since Chance had somehow managed to take up half the couch, they were forced to sit close,

## Not the Marrying Kind

so much so that Sasha could sense Ashley's warmth against her thigh and shoulder.

Under the pretense of putting down her portfolio on the end table, Ashley slid a little to the side, her entire body as stiff as a board.

*Jeez. Does she think I have Ebola or that my queerness is contagious?*

If Ashley even had a clue that Sasha wasn't straight. Sasha didn't hide her sexual orientation by any means, but since she hadn't dated in years, it wasn't exactly common knowledge in town either. As the owner of the only flower shop in Fair Oaks, Ashley probably heard a lot of gossip, though. Maybe someone had told her that Sasha appreciated a good-looking woman as much as a handsome man, and that was what was making her so uncomfortable around her.

Sasha decided to ignore her and focus on the brides-to-be instead. "So, where will the ceremony and the reception be held?"

"What dresses will you be wearing?" Ashley asked at the same time.

They looked at each other, then away.

"No dress for me," Leo announced. "I've been put into enough sexy dresses and uncomfortable shoes to last me a lifetime. It's a lesbian wedding, so I'm taking full advantage of that fact and will dress comfortably."

Sasha grinned. "Phew. I take it that means no hideous pink taffeta dresses for the women in the wedding party either?"

"Well," Leo drawled, "that depends on how nice you are to us."

"I'll be very nice. I'll even make you the most beautiful wedding cake you've ever seen. Have you thought about what you want?" She slid her portfolio across the coffee table and invited them to take a look at the photos from previous weddings. "Three tiers? Four? Or something completely different? A lot of couples are doing cupcakes instead of a traditional cake right now."

Holly paused on a picture of a three-tiered wedding cake. "I want cake." She looked at Leo, who immediately nodded. "Something traditional, but also something that is just...us."

One thing immediately came to mind. "How about a three-tiered vanilla sponge cake with apricot-orange filling and either vanilla buttercream icing or ivory fondant? It would practically be a wedding cake version of your favorite scones."

"Perfect," Leo and Holly said in unison.

“That was fast. Looks like we won’t even have to do a cake tasting. Well, I’ll just take my cake samples back with me, then.” Sasha pretended to reach for the tray.

With a growl, Leo snatched it away and cradled it protectively against her chest. “Don’t you dare.”

Sasha laughed, and even Ashley smiled at her antics.

“Let me get us some plates so you two can stay and look at Ashley’s flower options.” Sasha squeezed past Ashley and walked over to the open kitchen, which was separated from the living room by a U-shaped island. She knew where the plates were kept but had to look around for the forks, which gave her an opportunity to watch her friends and Ashley.

“So where will you have the reception?” Ashley asked while Leo and Holly flipped through her portfolio.

“We booked the ballroom of the country club,” Holly said. “Our moms are already up to their necks in wedding planning, eagerly flipping through bridal magazines, so we’ll probably be able to give you a good idea of the décor soon.”

“And the ceremony?” Ashley asked. “Do we need flowers for the church benches and the altar?”

“No,” Leo answered. “Even if the reverend were willing to perform the ceremony, neither Holly nor I are particularly religious. Maybe we’ll just go to the courthouse and have someone there perform the ceremony.”

“You know that’ll start rumors,” Ashley said quietly.

Leo chuckled. “Of what? One of us being pregnant, so that’s why we’re getting married quickly?”

“No, but people might say—”

“Why would they care what people might say?” Sasha put the plates and forks on the table and plopped back down on the couch.

The impact of her heavier weight nearly made Ashley bounce off the couch.

Sasha hid a grin. Maybe it would jostle Ashley out of her constant concern about what people might think. “It’s their wedding, so who cares what anyone else thinks?”

Ashley looked down at her hands that lay folded on her lap.

“You know where I’d really like to have the ceremony?” Holly asked before the silence could grow too tense.

## Not the Marrying Kind

Leo grinned at her. “I don’t think we can have it up on my mother’s roof, sweetheart.”

They laughed together.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I was thinking of our spot at the creek.” Holly looked over at Sasha and Ashley. “That’s where Leo asked me out for the first time, where I came out to her as asexual, and where we had our first date.”

“And our first argument as a couple,” Leo added, but she was smiling and reached over to take Holly’s hand. “The creek would be the perfect spot, so yes, let’s make that happen.”

“I could decorate the railings of the bridge with the flowers of your choice. The classic option would probably be white roses, but if you want a more modern touch, you could also have calla lilies or—” Ashley continued listing options.

Sasha stopped listening because flowers weren’t her thing. She reached for the stack of plates, removed the aluminum foil from the tray, and put several of the small samples on each plate.

When she handed Ashley her plate, their fingers brushed.

The slight roughness of her skin was a surprise—and so was the tingle that ran up Sasha’s arm. It was probably just because Ashley’s hands were rough from working with thorny stems all day, so her touch tickled, Sasha told herself. Or maybe all that wedding talk was making her a bit hormonal. Any good-looking person would have made her react like that, and Ashley was admittedly pretty, even if she did have a stick up her ass.

Sasha pulled her hand away and busied herself with her own plate.

Ashley slid her fork into the first mini-cupcake and took a bite. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her face took on a look of rapture that made Sasha wonder if that was how she looked when she enjoyed the other pleasures of life.

She pushed the thought away.

Then Ashley took another bite, and a low, almost sensual moan escaped her lips.

*Not helping, Ashley!* How was she supposed to get over the last remainder of her stupid teenage crush if Ashley continued to make erotic sounds like that? Abruptly, Sasha stuffed an entire mini-cupcake into her mouth.



Leo let out a moan too. “Mmm. Good thing we’ve already decided on our cake. It would be impossible to pick one. They’re all so good.”

“Better than sex,” Holly mumbled around a mouthful of cake sample.

Ashley paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and looked as if Holly had slapped her.

Just because Holly had made a joking remark about sex?

A lot of the people in town were like that—they were fine with their lesbian neighbors as long as they weren’t confronted with their sexuality. But Sasha had hoped Ashley wouldn’t be like those people. It would make working together uncomfortable.

Finally, after more cake had been eaten and more wedding plans made, Sasha and Ashley packed up their notes and their portfolios and walked to the door. Sasha hugged her friends goodbye, and Ashley followed her example but didn’t look exactly relaxed about it.

*Come on. Get over yourself, Ashley.* Sasha shook her head behind Ashley’s back and walked toward her car.

Only when Ashley continued on down the street did Sasha remember her car problems. It was completely dark and cold outside, and while the most dangerous crime being committed in Fair Oaks was a couple of teenagers stealing beer from the mom-and-pop grocery store, Sasha would have felt like an ass if she had made Ashley walk home.

She tossed the empty tray into the back and opened the passenger-side door. “Want a ride?”

\* \* \*

Ash turned and looked at Sasha across the roof of the SUV.

Sasha was holding the passenger-side door open invitingly, but her body language and her tone said something else. Clearly, she didn’t want Ash to ride with her either. Not that Ash was eager to get into the car with her. The last hour had been uncomfortable enough, since she’d been sitting pressed up against Sasha on the couch.

Sasha had seemed just as awkward. She had jumped at the chance to get the plates from the kitchen as an excuse to get away from her. A few times, she had seemed downright grumpy—but only when she was talking to Ash. Now who had a problem working together?

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Ash shook her head. “No, thanks,” she called over to Sasha. “It’s not that far. I can walk.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s on the other side of town.”

Stupid? Was that what Sasha thought of her? Ash gritted her teeth.

Leo and Holly’s neighbor walked past with his dog. “Hi, Ash. Hi, Sasha.”

“Hi, Joe.” Ash waved, then turned back to Sasha, who still stood waiting, the passenger-side door wide open. If they continued to discuss this for longer than the ride home would take, people would start to wonder what was going on. “Okay, fine. I’ll ride with you. Thank you.”

She walked around to the passenger side and climbed in.

Sasha closed the door before getting in on the other side.

They rode in silence for a while.

When Sasha braked at the town’s only traffic light, she glanced over at Ash. “It’s really great that they’re getting married, isn’t it?”

Ash nodded.

“I’m so happy Holly finally found someone who understands and accepts her. Not like those assholes she dated before.”

A wave of heat shot up Ash’s chest and made her cheeks burn. She clutched the door handle so tightly that her fingers started to cramp. Was that why Sasha had offered her a lift? So she could finally get her long-held resentment off her chest and accuse her of treating Holly like shit? “Listen.” She tried to speak very calmly, but her voice came out sounding like crunching gravel. “I know you don’t like me because you think I’m one of those assholes. But what happened between Holly and me is complicated and, frankly, none of your business. So can we please forget about it and just work together like two professionals?”

Sasha stared at Ash. Her jaw moved up and down, but it took several seconds until any words came out. “You...Holly...you were...together? You...you’re gay?”

Now it was Ash’s turn to stare. She pressed her trembling hand to her stomach. Nausea gripped her. “Oh my God. You mean, you didn’t know?”

Sasha slapped the steering wheel with both hands. “No! I had no fucking idea!”

They sank against the backs of their seats. “Holy shit,” they said in unison.

## Chapter 3

SASHA COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. ASHLEY Gaines, Fair Oaks's darling and the wet dream of every boy in Sasha's high school class, was a lesbian or bi. And not just that. She and Holly had been a couple.

*Hell on a stick!* No one had told her a thing. She stared over at Ashley and tried to make out her features in the glow of a streetlamp next to the car.

But Ashley had put her elbows on her knees and buried her face in both hands, groaning quietly.

A loud honk from behind made them jump.

Sasha glanced in the rearview mirror.

Brandon Eads, former star quarterback and Ashley's ex-boyfriend, had stopped his car behind them and gestured at the traffic light, which had long since turned green.

Sasha felt as if she were trapped in some bizarre soap opera. She hit the gas a little too hard and sped across the intersection.

Before she could sort her chaotic thoughts enough to ask a question, they reached Ashley's cute, little house at the edge of town.

"Please don't tell anyone," Ashley said, her eyes wide and pleading as if her very life was now in Sasha's hands.

"I won't, but—"

"Thank you." Ashley released her seat belt and opened the passenger-side door. "And thanks for the ride."

"Wait!" Sasha grasped her arm and stopped her from exiting the car. "You can't drop a bomb like that on me and then just leave."

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Ashley longingly looked toward the escape that was her front door before slowly turning to face Sasha. Even in the dim light, it was easy to see that her cheeks had taken on the color of raspberry filling. Panic flickered in her eyes. Her gaze darted down to Sasha's hand on her arm.

Quickly, Sasha let go and made a conscious effort to gentle her tone, not wanting to come across like a bully. "So Holly and you...?" She still couldn't believe it.

Ashley closed the passenger-side door before nodding.

"Jesus."

Ashley peered at her out of the corner of her eye. "You really didn't know?"

"How the hell was I supposed to know?"

"I...I thought..." Ashley hunched her shoulders. "I thought Holly might have told you. I mean, you're her best friend."

"That's what I thought," Sasha mumbled. Holly not trusting her cut deep. They had been through so much together—the death of Holly's father, Sasha's father getting remarried, and Holly quitting her job at the hospital to work in home health care. Why hadn't Holly told her?

"I assumed you knew," Ashley said. "I thought that was why you..."

Sasha threw her a gloomy look. "Why I what?"

"Oh, nothing, just... Nothing." Ashley shivered.

Now that Sasha had shut off the engine, it was getting cold inside the SUV.

"Can I come in to talk for a minute?" Sasha asked. "It's getting cold out here, and to be honest, I could really use a drink."

Ashley glanced up and down the street and finally nodded, as if not wanting her neighbors to see her sitting in the dark car with another woman. She got out and led the way to the front door.

Sasha followed and tried not to crowd her as Ashley fumbled with the key, trying to get the door open without any success. Her fingers trembled so much that her key chain jingled, and Sasha had a feeling that it wasn't just the cold affecting her. "Here, let me." She reached around her and took the bunch of keys from her hand.

Their fingers brushed, and Ashley pulled away as if burned.

God, she was a mess. For the first time, Sasha understood that the appearance of perfection that Ashley exuded was just that—merely an appearance, a carefully created illusion.

Sasha unlocked the door and handed the keys back, this time careful not to let their fingers touch.

Casper was waiting by the door. He barked once, tail wagging, and tried to jump up to greet Ashley with doggie kisses.

Ashley bent down to pet him. She buried her face in his fur for a moment but then quickly straightened as if realizing that Sasha was watching. “Come on in.” She walked farther into the house.

After giving Sasha a quick sniff, the dog followed.

The hall opened up into a living room that wasn’t even half the size of Leo and Holly’s. It was clean and tidy and would have looked a bit like the set of a theater production if not for little, personal touches—a small bouquet of some orange flowers on the coffee table, a thoroughly chewed squeaky toy and a tennis ball on the floor, and a paperback with a bookmark sticking out.

“What can I get you?” Ashley asked. Now that she could take refuge in the role of hostess, she sounded less shaky.

“Whatever you’re having.”

“Except for when we’re meeting the gang at Johnny’s, I rarely drink. But I have a bottle of wine somewhere, if you want.”

Sasha sighed. “Forget the drink. Most of all, I was hoping for some more information. You really threw me for a loop here.”

Ash sank into a recliner, looking like a cornered animal. She waved at Sasha to take a seat.

Sasha sat on the couch. She waited for Ashley to start talking, but she just sat there, looking anywhere but at her. Sasha put her forearms on her thighs and leaned forward. “So are you bi, or what the heck is going on?”

“No,” Ashley said so quietly that Sasha had to strain to hear her. “I...I’m a lesbian.”

Sasha arched a brow at her. It sure hadn’t looked like it when she had been making out with Brandon on the bleachers. *Oh, come on. Don’t be mean. So what if it took her a little longer to figure out her sexual orientation?* She forced herself to lean back. “How long have you known?”

## Not the Marrying Kind

Ashley still wasn't looking at her. She pulled her legs up and clutched her knees to her chest. "Since I was eighteen."

"Eighteen?" Sasha echoed.

Ashley shrugged. She painted patterns on the fabric of her jeans with her fingernails. "I started to figure it out when Leo..."

"When Leo what?"

"Forget it."

"When Leo came out?" Sasha ventured a guess.

"I said forget it, okay?"

So Ms. Nice had some bite in her after all. Sasha could respect that, even though not getting the answers she wanted was frustrating. "And you and Holly? When did that happen?"

"We started to spend more time together after she got back from nursing school."

"Spend time together," Sasha repeated to give her brain some time to catch up. "But how did you become an item? You're so closeted, and Holly isn't exactly known for chasing after women."

A deep blush tinted Ashley's cheeks. "Remember the party I had when I opened the flower shop?"

Sasha stared, openmouthed. That had been seven years ago! She nodded and waited for Ashley to continue.

"Um, I got a little tipsy, and when Holly drove me home, I complimented her eyes in a way a straight friend probably wouldn't. That's when she found out about...um, me."

Was that why Ashley rarely drank anymore and never more than a beer? Had she gotten even more careful over the years?

"From there, it just...happened, bit by bit." Ashley sighed. "I guess we both needed someone to cling to back then."

Sasha still couldn't believe it. "How long were you together?"

"Not long," Ashley said.

Sasha continued to look at her.

"Three months, two weeks, and a day."

Not a long time, but still it was three months, two weeks, and a day that Holly had been with Ashley without telling anyone. Or had she told other people, just not her? "So no one knew?"

Ashley vehemently shook her head. “No. No one. Well, Travis guessed, but...”

“Oh, yeah. That. I heard him tell the boys about your car being parked in front of Holly’s all night and what he thought it meant, but I always put it down to his overactive imagination. Guess you weren’t just binge-watching *The Walking Dead* or whatever TV show was popular back then after all.”

Ashley didn’t answer. She kneaded her folded hands so strongly that Sasha almost expected her to break a knuckle any second. “Sasha, I... Please...” She lifted her head and finally managed to look Sasha in the eyes. “Please, don’t tell anyone.”

For the first time, Sasha realized that Ashley’s eyes were the exact color of the nougat cream Sasha used to fill her famous hazelnut cake. “It’s not my story to tell, but is this really how you want to live the rest of your life—always lying and hiding a big part of yourself?”

“Want?” Ashley shook her head. “I don’t want that, but I don’t have much of a choice in this town. I have a business to think of.”

“So do I,” Sasha said.

“Yeah, but you’re not gay.”

“Well, strictly speaking, I—”

The doorbell rang.

Casper jumped up from his spot in front of the recliner and raced into the hall, barking loudly.

Ashley unfolded her arms from around her knees and stood up quickly, as if she was glad to escape further questions. She hurried toward the door, but after just a couple of steps, she paused and looked back. “Please promise me you won’t say anything to anyone.”

“Jeez, Ashley! I already said I wouldn’t tell anyone. Do you think that badly of me? Do you really believe I’d just out you against your will?”

Ashley studied the floor at her feet. “No, I just...”

“I promise, okay?”

“Thank you.” Ashley ran her hands over her arms and sides as if trying to wipe away all traces of their conversation before she went to open the door.

“Hey, honey,” a deep, male voice came from the hall.

## Not the Marrying Kind

Was that Ashley's father? After what Sasha knew now, it sure wasn't a new boyfriend.

"I brought your car back," he said. "All fixed. It was just the water pump, like I suspected. I replaced the belt too, just in case."

"Thank you, Daddy. How much do I owe you for the parts?"

"Nothing."

"Dad..."

"Nothing," he repeated. "Just bring some flowers for your mother when you come for dinner on Sunday, and we'll be even. You are coming for dinner, aren't you?"

Ashley sighed. "I'm coming."

"How did you get home from that consultation you had?" her father asked. "You didn't walk, did you?"

"Um, no." Ashley paused. "Sasha gave me a ride."

Sasha took that as her cue to announce her presence. One of them constantly hiding was enough. "Hi, Mr. Gaines."

"Oh, I didn't know you had a visitor, honey." A few seconds later, Tom Gaines filled the doorway. At six foot four, he was one of the few people in town who could make Sasha feel small. "Hey, Sasha. How's the bread-and-muffin business going?"

Sasha chuckled. "Can't complain. But I'd better be on my way. A baker's day starts early." She pointed toward the driveway. "If you dropped Ashley's car off, do you need a ride home?"

Ashley pushed past her father into the room. "That's not necessary. I can drive him home."

Sasha studied her. Was she afraid that Sasha would let something slip if she was in the car alone with her father, even though she had promised not to say anything? Knowing Ashley, her family had no clue about her sexual orientation either. Or did she just not want to be indebted to Sasha, even in this small way? "It wouldn't be a bother. But if you're sure..."

"I'm sure." Ashley took the car key from her father.

Clearly, that was Sasha's cue to leave. She followed them to the door. "Guess I'll see you tomorrow at Johnny's, then."

"Um, I don't think I can make it. There's a lot to do at the flower shop."

Her father huffed. "You close at noon on Saturdays, and everything else can wait until Monday. Go meet your friends."



Jae

“But I have to send out some invoices and pick up the vases from—”

“Go.” Her father’s bass echoed through the night. “You don’t want to worry your mother and me by working too much, do you?”

Sasha shifted her weight and glanced toward her car. *God, this is awkward.*

Ashley sighed. “Guess I’m going.”

So Sasha would see her tomorrow after all—her and Holly. She really didn’t know how to deal with either of them after what she had found out tonight.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# NOT THE MARRYING KIND

BY JAE

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