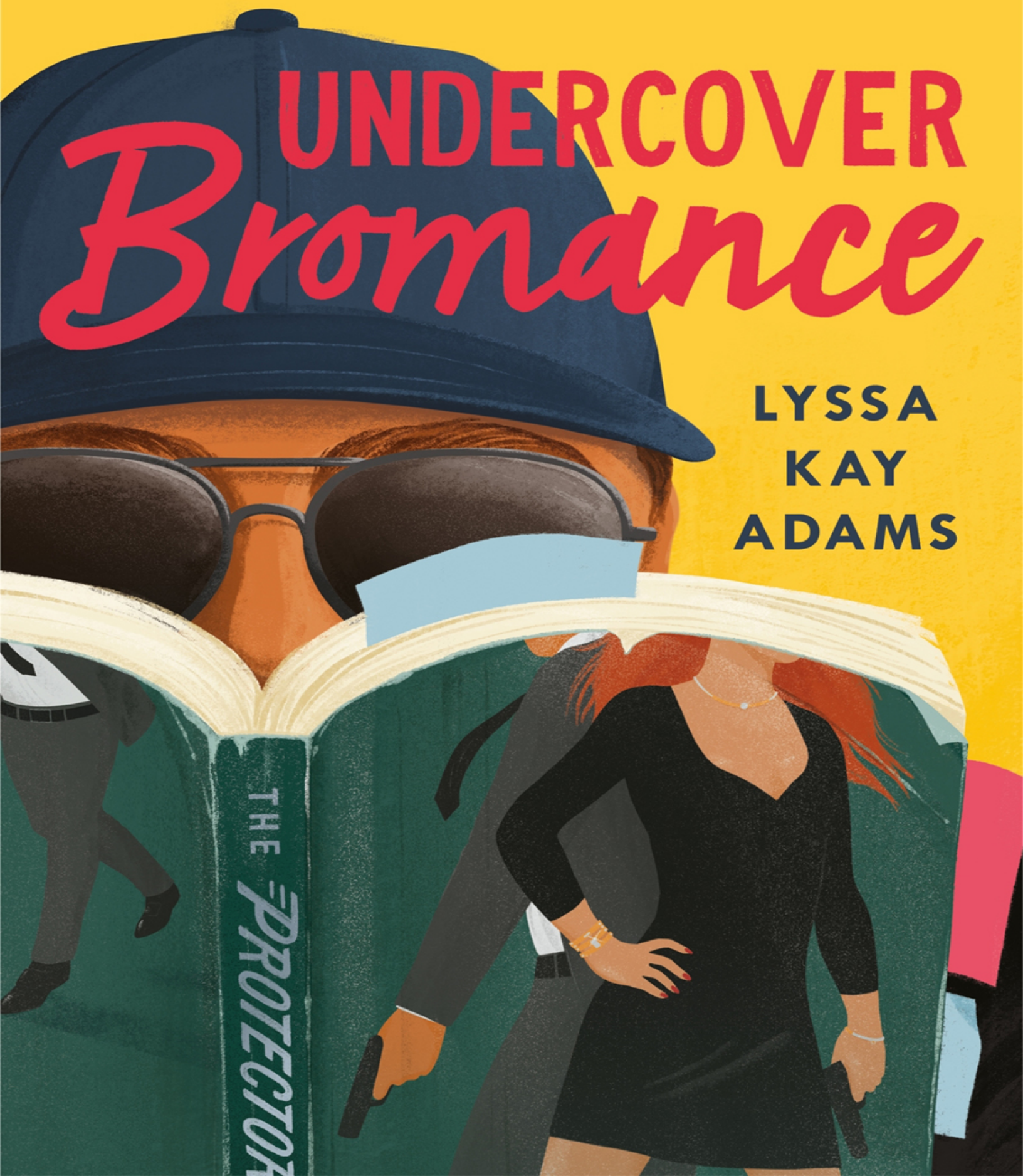


What if real life is better than fiction?

UNDERCOVER *Bromance*

LYSSA
KAY
ADAMS



UNDERCOVER *Bromance*

LYSSA KAY ADAMS



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About the Author



Lyssa Kay Adams read her first romance novel at way too young of an age when she swiped one from her grandmother's stash. After a long journalism career in which she had to write way too many sad endings, she decided to return to the stories that guaranteed a happy ever after. Once described as 'funny, adorable, and a wee-bit heartbreaking,' Lyssa's books feature women who always get the last word, men who aren't afraid to cry, and dogs. Lots of dogs. Lyssa writes full time from her home in Michigan, where she lives with her sports writer husband, her wickedly funny daughter, and a spoiled Maltese who likes to be rocked to sleep like a baby. When she's not writing, she's cooking or driving her daughter around from one sporting event to the next. Or rocking the dog.

Connect online with Lyssa:

lyssakayadams.com/newsletter

Twitter: [@LyssaKayAdams](https://twitter.com/LyssaKayAdams)

Instagram: [@lyssakayadams](https://www.instagram.com/lyssakayadams)

Facebook: [/lyssakayadams](https://www.facebook.com/lyssakayadams)

Praise for *The Bromance Book Club*:

‘A you’re-gonna-burn-dinner book because you will not want to put it down. Laugh out loud with tons of heart, this is an absolutely adorable must read’ Avery Flynn, *USA Today* bestselling author

‘A delight! . . . I raced to finish this book, but still never wanted it to end!’
Alexa Martin, author of *Intercepted*

‘A delightful, fast-paced read with the perfect mix of laugh-out-loud and swoony moments – every town should have a Bromance Book Club’ Evie Dunmore, author of *Bringing Down the Duke*

‘It is the reading aloud in this story that ultimately wins my heart, and shows that everything worth knowing can be learned from romance’ kc dyer, author of *Finding Fraser*

By Lyssa Kay Adams

The Bromance Book Club
Undercover Bromance

About the Book

UNDERCOVER *Bromance*

**The first rule of book club:
You don't talk about book club.**

Braden Mack thinks reading romance novels makes him an expert in love, but he'll soon discover that real life is better than fiction.

Liv Papandreas has a dream job as a sous chef at Nashville's hottest restaurant. Too bad the celebrity chef owner is less than charming behind kitchen doors. After she catches him harassing a young hostess, she confronts him and gets fired. Liv vows revenge, but she'll need assistance to take on the powerful chef.

Unfortunately, that means turning to Braden Mack. When Liv's blackballed from the restaurant scene, the charismatic nightclub entrepreneur offers to help expose her ex-boss, but she is suspicious of his motives. This is a job for the Bromance Book Club.

Inspired by the romantic suspense novel they're reading, the book club assists Liv in setting up a sting operation to take down the chef. But they're just as eager to help Mack figure out the way to Liv's heart. . .even though she's determined to squelch the sparks between them before she gets burned.

To Mom

*Thanks for raising me to be a strong woman
and for teaching me that there really isn't any other kind.*

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Not gonna lie. This book nearly killed me, and I wouldn't have survived without the help of my patient agent, Tara Gelsomino (you were right, Tara; this book was, indeed, very ambitious), and my creative, reassuring editor, Kristine Swartz. Thank you for putting up with the panic attacks and helping me bring Mack and Liv's story to life. Thank you, also, to the entire Berkley team. Bridget O'Toole and Jessica Brock, you are the best at what you do. I am forever in your debt for answering all my questions about marketing and publicity. And I would be a total jerk if I didn't shout a loud THANK YOU to the copyeditors who catch important details, including interesting tidbits about chicken genitals.

All my love and thanks to my writing squad—Meika, Christina, Victoria, and Alyssa—and my hilarious Binderhaus crew. As always, you keep me sane.

Thank you to my family. I love you all so much. You make it possible for me to live this dream. I do what I do for you.

Lastly, thank you to survivors. I believe you. Always. #MeToo. (I refuse to thank, however, the real Randy the Rooster. You're an asshole, Randy. Leave the damn hens alone.)

CHAPTER ONE

Braden Mack pulled his Porsche SUV into an empty spot at the back of the dark parking lot and waited for the signal. Facing him from two rows down, a Suburban idled with its lights on.

A moment passed. Then two.

Finally, the Suburban flashed its high beams twice.

It was time.

He turned off the engine, silenced his cell phone, and shoved it in the pocket of his leather jacket. As he exited his car, the men in the other vehicle did the same. One by one, their hulking frames unfolded from the Suburban, their breaths forming little puffs around their faces. Mack met them halfway between the two cars.

“You’re late,” said Del Hicks, one of Mack’s closest friends.

“I had to save a marriage.”

“Another lonely wife?” That was from Derek Wilson, a local businessman.

“Men never learn.”

“Which is why we’re here, right?” said Malcolm James, his voice deep and Zen-like behind the thick beard that hung nearly to his collarbone.

“Right.” Mack sized up each man, measuring guts and commitment. “Anyone who wants out, say it now, because the minute we start this, there’s no going back.”

“I’m in,” Derek said.

“Yeah, man.” Del pounded one gloved hand into the other. “Let’s do this.”

“What the fuck are we doing again?” whined Gavin Scott, one of the newest members of the group, his shoulders hunched against the wind. “Besides freezing our balls off?”

Mack turned and looked at the building. A bright-red sign lit up the bustling sidewalk that ran the length of the strip mall. MUSIC CITY BOOKS. For three years, their book club had hidden in the shadows. Read in secret.

Met behind closed doors. There were ten of them in all—professional athletes and city officials, tech geniuses and business owners. And, in the case of Mack, the owner of several Nashville bars and nightclubs. All drawn together by a shared love of books that had made them better men, better lovers, better husbands.

Except for Mack on that last one. He was currently one of the last single guys in the group. “What are we doing?” he repeated, looking at the guys. “We’re going to buy some goddamned romance novels in public.”

He planted his hands on his hips and waited for the dramatic response. Maybe some cinematic music or something, or a loud cheer from the guys. But all he got in response was a resounding fart from the fifth member of their group, a hockey player whom everyone just called the Russian and who had an unfortunate intolerance for dairy products.

The Russian clutched his stomach. “I have to find the bathroom.”

Mack shook his head. “Let’s go.”

The Russian took off first with a slightly lopsided gait. The rest of them followed, with Mack in the lead. They waited at the edge of the parking lot for a line of cars to pass before jogging to the sidewalk. The Russian disappeared inside without a backward glance, his steps growing quicker every few feet. Things were getting dicey there. That bathroom had no idea what it was in for. RIP to the bookstore’s plumbing.

Mack took a deep breath, hand on the door handle. He looked once again at the rest of the guys. “Okay. Here are the rules. Everyone has to buy at least one book for the rest of the club to consider for our next read. No hiding the covers. And if anyone asks, you are not buying it as a present. You’re buying it for yourself. Any questions?”

“What if someone recognizes us?” Gavin grumbled. Of all the guys, he was probably the most famous and recognizable right now. As a player for the Nashville Major League Baseball team, the Legends, he’d skyrocketed to national fame last year when he nailed a walk-off grand-slam homer in a playoff game.

“Who cares if we’re recognized?” said Malcom, another famous face. He was the running back for the Nashville NFL team. “We spend a lot of time talking about the unfairness of how our toxic masculine society forces us to be ashamed of embracing romance novels. Yet we buy our books in secret. It’s time we practice what we preach.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Mack said, standing tall.

“Of course not,” Gavin snorted. “Malcolm has a genius IQ, dumbass.”
Mack flipped him off.

Gavin returned the gesture.

Del sighed and opened the door. “I’ll go first.”

They attracted attention as soon as they walked in, but Mack doubted it was because anyone recognized any of them. How often did a group of hulking, good-looking men walk into a bookstore together? They were like an offensive line for the Literary League of Tennessee.

“Where’s the romance section?” Del asked quietly.

Mack shook his head, eyes searching the signs that hung from the ceiling. “I don’t see it.”

“We’re going to have to ask for help,” Malcolm said.

Gavin cursed and tugged the brim of his cap lower to hide his face.

They approached the information desk, and a woman in an *I Read Banned Books* T-shirt looked up from her computer screen. “Can I help you?”

“Can you tell me where the romance section is?” Malcolm asked.

She squinted. “Like marriage and self-help?”

“No,” Mack said, sidling up next to Malcolm. He propped one hand on the desk and leaned toward her with a smile. “We mean romance novels.”

“You guys are looking for the romance novel section,” she said, skepticism hanging on every word.

“We sure are.” Mack winked.

The woman’s cheeks flushed under his attention. “I’ve never had men ask for romance novels.”

Mack leaned closer and lowered his voice to a level somewhere between seductive and conspiratorial. Her blush deepened. “There are a lot of us,” he murmured.

She pointed toward the back of the store. “Last shelves on the right.”

Malcolm led them through the store. Gavin made a disgusted noise. “Is there anyone you don’t flirt with?” he asked Mack.

Mack shrugged. “Not my fault if I’m born with natural charm.”

They stopped at a single aisle in the back with a meager selection of paperbacks. Just one wall had been set aside for romance. “This is a disgrace,” Malcolm said, shaking his head.

Gavin glanced around nervously. “I wouldn’t mind if we were still shopping online.”

“Have some pride,” Mack said, turning his head to read the spines of the books.

The Russian returned. “Good bathroom here. Very clean.”

The Russian could identify the best public bathrooms in every major city in the United States. If he ever retired from hockey, he could create an app ranking them and make more money than he ever did as a player.

Mack found his favorite author and pulled *The Protector*, her newest book, off the shelf. A romantic suspense about a Secret Service agent and the president’s daughter. He loved a little danger with his romance, and he especially loved an enemies-to-lovers story. There was just something satisfying about two people discovering that what makes them fight is also the thing that makes them perfect for each other.

“Are we meeting Friday night?” Gavin asked, glancing at a book with a red spine. “The game doesn’t get out until probably seven, so Del and I can’t meet until late.”

“It’ll have to be Saturday,” Mack said, cracking open his book to read the first page. “I have a date with Gretchen Friday night.”

A knot of tension unfurled in his gut. Tomorrow night would officially be three months with Gretchen, a local attorney he’d met at a party, and he wasn’t sparing any expense to make it special for her. He’d pulled every string he had to make an impossible-to-get reservation at Savoy, one of Nashville’s swankiest restaurants, which was owned by a celebrity TV chef. And if all went well, he planned to do the thing he’d never done before—have the talk. The *let’s be exclusive* talk.

The silence behind him was suddenly too obvious to be a coincidence. He turned around and found the guys having a silent conversation with raised eyebrows and hand gestures. Del dug into his wallet and shoved a twenty-dollar bill at the Russian.

“What the fuck is that? What are you doing?”

They jumped with matching expressions of guilt. “He owed me money,” the Russian said, shoving the twenty in his pocket.

“Bullshit. What are you guys talking about?”

The Russian’s shoulders drooped like a puppy who’d just been scolded for pissing on the carpet.

“He won the bet.”

Mack’s eyebrows furrowed. “What bet?”

“That you would choose a romantic suspense,” Del said quickly.

Mack folded his arms over his chest, tucking the book under his armpit. “You expect me to believe that you made a bet about what kind of book I would choose?”

The Russian whistled and looked around. Del smacked him upside the back of the head.

“For fuck’s sake.” Gavin sighed. “They have a running bet over how long until you dump Gretchen.”

Mack blinked. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“It was his idea,” the Russian said, pointing at Del.

Del didn’t deny it. Instead, he shrugged. “I’ve lost a lot of money, but I’m impressed that you’ve stuck with her this long. This has to be a record or something.”

Mack gaped, trying not to be insulted, but what the fuck? Sure, he probably deserved his reputation as a one-and-done bachelor, the kind of guy with a different woman on his arm every weekend. He’d just never met anyone he could imagine settling down with. And despite what most people thought of him, he did want to settle down. But his own friend was betting against him? If that wasn’t a kick in the balls, he didn’t know what was.

Mack pointed at Del. “I’ll have you know, douchebag, that I’ve *stuck with her* this long because I like her. She’s beautiful, smart, and ambitious.”

“And totally wrong for you,” Malcolm interrupted, entering the conversation for the first time. He’d been studying the shelves during most of the exchange but now turned around with four books tucked in his massive hands.

“Excuse me?” Mack sputtered. “How is she totally wrong for me?”

“Because all the women you date are wrong for you,” Gavin snorted.

Mack sputtered again before responding. “Dude, you’ve known me for less than six months.”

“Yeah, and in that time you’ve dated six different women. Amazing women. All smart, talented, gorgeous. *Perfect.*”

“And that’s a problem?” He sounded defensive, which made him feel defensive. Dammit, he *was* defensive. They were supposed to be buying books, not analyzing his love life.

Gavin shrugged. “You tell me. You dumped them all.”

“Because it didn’t work out with them,” Mack said in a growl.

“And it’s different with Gretchen?”

“Yes,” Mack said.

“How?” Malcolm asked.

Mack had no response to that. It was different with Gretchen because, because . . . dammit, because he was ready for it to be different. Wasn't that enough? He was tired of watching his friends live happily ever after while he fruitlessly searched for the future Mrs. Mack—someone he could spoil, grow old with, and cherish forever. He was the founder of the damn book club but the only one who'd never experienced the real thing. So, yeah, he was working extra hard this time to stick with it because, dammit, he wanted his own happily ever after.

Gavin held up his hands in a truce. “Look, all we're saying is that for all your talk about being the expert, it seems like you miss the most important lesson of these books.”

“Which is?” His tone now edged toward petulance, but he didn't like being lectured about the lessons of the manuals—which was what they all called romance novels—by the newest member of the club.

“There's a big difference between romancing someone and loving someone.”

Mack rolled his eyes. “Easy for you to say. You fell in love at first sight with the perfect woman.”

Gavin sobered. “My wife isn't perfect. She's just perfect for me. And there's been nothing easy about our marriage.”

Tension once again tugged at Mack's gut, this time from guilt. Gavin and his wife, Thea, had nearly divorced six months ago before the book club stepped in to help Gavin get her back.

But rather than apologize for being an asshole, he dug in. “I'm going to prove you wrong,” he seethed.

Mack yanked his wallet from his back pocket, heart pounding with the arrogance of something to prove. He shoved a hundred-dollar bill at Del.

“Five-to-one odds that after tomorrow night, I officially have a girlfriend.”

CHAPTER TWO

“You look beautiful tonight.”

Mack reached across the table for Gretchen’s slim fingers. She smiled as he brushed his thumb across her knuckles. The earrings he’d given her last week for her birthday hung from her delicate earlobes and sparkled in the candlelight.

“Thank you,” she said. “You certainly say it enough to make me feel beautiful.”

“New dress?”

She laughed and looked down at herself. “Um, no. I got this at Macy’s a couple of years ago. Clearance rack.”

“It’s beautiful.”

She tugged her hand back. “Thank you. Again.”

Gretchen tore her gaze from his and looked around at the restaurant. Their VIP table in the loft gave them a full view of the urban-chic decor. Wrought-iron chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, and exposed-brick walls gave it an unfinished feel. But when paired with the dark woodwork and the ornate gold, it also had an old-world opulence to it.

“I always wondered what it looked like in here,” Gretchen said.

“What do you think?”

“It’s, um . . .” She winced as if reluctant to criticize. “It’s a little over the top.”

“So is Royce.”

“You know him?”

Mack adjusted his sport coat as he sat back in his chair. “We’ve met several times. Charity golf tournaments and that sort of thing. We tend to run in the same circles as business owners.”

“Ah. Of course.” She squinted. “I don’t really run in those circles, you know.”

“You run in more important circles.” Gretchen was a public defender specializing in immigration cases.

Their waiter approached the table with a bottle of chilled Dom Perignon. Mack had ordered it when he'd made the reservation, along with the signature dessert—the Sultan cupcake. It was so elaborate and expensive, it had to be ordered in advance. He couldn't wait for Gretchen to see it.

“Champagne?” Gretchen asked as the waiter popped the cork.

“We're celebrating,” Mack said with a wink.

The waiter poured two tall flutes and then left the bottle in a bucket of ice next to the table before saying he'd be back in a few minutes to go over the specials for the night.

“Sure,” Gretchen said, accepting her glass. “So what's the occasion?”

Mack raised his glass. “I closed the deal today on the new building,” he said. “But more importantly, here's to us. Three months. And hopefully many more.”

Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes when she clinked her glass with his. He thought at first that he was imagining it, but she looked away when she took a drink.

“Everything okay?”

She swallowed and nodded. “This is wonderful.”

“So are you.”

There it was again. The *not quite a smile* smile. Mack set down his glass and reached again for her hand. “Are you sure you're okay?”

“I'm fine. I'm just . . . To be honest, I feel a little guilty being at a place like this.”

“Why?”

“My clients can barely afford boxed macaroni and cheese for their children.”

“Doesn't mean I can't spoil you, does it?”

“I don't need to be spoiled, Mack.”

“But you deserve to be.” He tried again with the wink and the smile. This time it worked. Her fingers relaxed in his.

“Thank you. You definitely know how to wine and dine a woman.”

“I aim to please.” He gave her fingers a final squeeze and let go. “Now I hope you're hungry. Because I have a surprise for you later.”

Gretchen drank from her champagne and looked at her watch.

“I swear to God, why not just light a thousand bucks on fire?”

Liv Papandreas stepped back from the stainless-steel counter to study her latest culinary masterpiece with a disgusted shake of her head. As a pastry chef at Savoy, it shouldn't surprise her anymore what the one percent would waste their money on, but sadly, it did. And she had known the minute her boss put the gold-infused cupcake on the menu that the city's richest celebrities and show-offs would order it in droves just because they could.

Well, that, and so they could pose for an Instagram-worthy photo with Royce Preston, celebrity chef, television host, and the dickhead who signed Liv's paychecks.

Every week, millions of fans tuned in to his reality show, *Kitchen Boss*, for a dose of his smooth-talking charm. Little did they know that his smooth-talking charm was as fake as his hair. When the cameras were off, he was a belligerent douchebag who stole most of his recipes from his own staff. Liv had somehow managed to survive an entire year in his kitchen, mostly because she had a stubborn disdain for wealthy posers. Who could've guessed that a teenage career in breaking rules and antagonizing authority figures would actually help her someday?

Rumor had it that tonight's cupcake schmuck was some nightclub owner. Liv wouldn't know. Nightclubs weren't really her thing. Because people. People weren't really her thing either.

Suddenly, her fellow prison inmate—er, pastry chef—Riya Singh clapped her on the back. “You don't think your talents are worth a thousand dollars?”

“I think my talents are worth a lot more. I just don't think a single freaking cupcake is. Every single person who orders one of these should be forced to immediately write a check for the downtown food bank.”

“Starting with Royce.”

Yeah, right. Men like Royce didn't give money to charity. They hoarded it, flaunted it. Bribed their kids' way into elite colleges with it. And he was about to make a helluva lot more of it. In one month, the first official *Kitchen Boss* cookbook would be published—a cookbook full of recipes he'd ripped off. One of Liv's was in there—a twist on baklava using pomegranates and natural honey.

“I still don't understand why you don't just quit and take your sister up on her offer,” Riya said. “You could be free of this place forever if you wanted. The rest of us have to stay because we don't have any other choice.”

Liv's sister, Thea, had offered at least a dozen times to give Liv the money to open her own business. Thea was married to a Major League Baseball player who made a major league salary. But the thing no one seemed to understand, including Thea herself, was that Liv didn't want to succeed because of someone else's money. If that were the case, she'd just call her rich father and finally accept his endless offers to buy his way back into her life. She didn't want his guilt money, though.

Anyway, Liv had worked too hard and overcome too much to take the easy way out now. She had the drive and talent to succeed on her own, and she was going to. If she could last one more year here, she could write her own ticket in the cutthroat culinary profession, because everyone knew that if you could survive Royce, you could handle anything. Every single day was a fight, but Liv had worked too damn hard to risk her career now by spiking the man's breakfast smoothie with rat poison.

Not that she'd, like, thought about that or anything.

Jessica Summers, a young hostess who'd started just a month ago, crept over to the counter, biting her lip. "Is that it?" she asked breathlessly, staring at the cupcake.

"Yep," Liv said.

"I haven't worked a shift yet when someone ordered it. You can really eat the gold?" She bent down to study it, eyes wide. "What does it even taste like?"

"Ostentatious greed."

Jessica looked up. "Is that good?"

"Rich people think so."

The swinging doors to the kitchen slammed open. Everyone held their breath as Royce stormed in. He wore his standard uniform—a tailored suit, crisp white shirt with the top three buttons undone to reveal a smattering of chest hair, and a leather necklace that he claimed was a gift from some indigenous tribe but Liv would bet cold hard cash was actually a cheap trinket from a shop downtown.

"Olivia," Royce barked, because he refused to use her nickname like everyone else. It was some kind of weird power-play thing.

Jessica gulped, cheeks red and eyes closed, as Royce approached them. Poor girl. She wasn't going to last long if she couldn't even handle the bark of his voice. You just had to know how to bark back.

"Is it going to be ready on time?" Royce growled.

“Have I ever been late with one?”

He turned a bright shade of red. His eyes gave her the once-over, and he shook his head. “Clean yourself up before we take that out there.”

Yeah. Not only did she have to make these gold-encrusted monstrosities, she also had to trail behind his holiness to deliver them to the customer. Royce was all about the show. Liv glanced down at herself. Chocolate was smeared across her coat. Hazard of the job. Royce snapped his fingers at Riya. “Give her your coat. Now. Come on.”

A clean coat was suddenly thrust in her line of vision. Liv shot an apologetic look at her friend as she unbuttoned her soiled coat and traded it.

“Get back to work,” he ordered Riya.

He stormed off again, and Jessica let out the breath she’d been holding. Liv could’ve sworn she saw tears in the girl’s eyes. Yeah, she was so not going to last. *Mental note: Help Jessica find another job before she has a nervous breakdown.*

Or before Liv really did spike his smoothie with rat poison.

Liv carefully lifted the tray holding the cupcake and met Royce by the doors. She tried not to openly roll her eyes when he told her not to fucking drop it.

As if she ever had.

The instant they entered the restaurant, Royce transformed into the easygoing guy everyone knew and loved from the show. An excited whisper followed in his wake, and he ate it up. He was all hearty waves and sideways peace signs. Phone cameras captured his every move, and behind him, Liv pretended to be proud of the gilded concoction she carried. She held the tray high in her right hand and pasted a smile on her face to hide the fact that she was silently wishing Royce would burst into flames. She followed him toward the VIP section of the restaurant, where a red velvet rope separated the chosen ones from the lesser mortals. Liv waited for Royce to approach the table first, of course. This was his show. From ten feet away in the dim lighting, Liv could make out the forms of two people at the table—a man with broad shoulders beneath a sport coat and a woman with glossy hair and smart eyes. Whoever this dude was, he was laying it on thick for his date. Their plates revealed the remnants of steak, lobster, and truffle pâté.

“Friends,” Royce said in his best TV show voice. “May I present to you the Sultan.”

The man turned in his seat and—oh crap. Liv knew him.

What was his name? Mike? No. Mack. Brad Mack? *Braden*. Braden Mack. He was a friend of her brother-in-law, Gavin. He was the dude who'd dragged Gavin into some weird, secret romance novel book club for men to help Gavin convince Thea not to divorce him. But, more important, he was the jerk who had eaten her Chinese food leftovers the first time they met. She'd been looking forward to those leftovers. What kind of person ate someone else's lo mein? The same kind who saw no problem spending a thousand bucks on a cupcake, apparently.

The man stood and extended his hand. "Royce. Good to see you again."

Of course. Of course he knew her boss. Because a guy who would waste a normal person's entire paycheck on a single dinner out would definitely run in the same circles as Royce Preston.

Royce shook Mack's hand and did the manly back-pounding half-hug thing. "I had no idea you were here tonight. I'll have to have a word with our hostess about that."

Oh no. Poor Jessica. Maybe Liv would have time to warn her before he chewed her to pieces.

"This is Gretchen Winthrop," Mack said, gesturing gallantly to his date. "She's an attorney."

"An attorney, huh?"

The woman lifted her hand for Royce to shake. Instead, he pulled it to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "Beautiful *and* smart," Royce said. "It's a pleasure."

Liv puked in her mouth.

The woman gently pulled her hand away. "Likewise."

Except she didn't really seem sincere in that. Liv liked her immediately. She was too smart for these guys.

"How's business?" Royce asked as Mack returned to his seat.

"Great," Mack said. "Just signed the papers on a new building in the old industrial area."

"That was you?"

"That was me."

"I had my eye on those buildings."

Mack spread his hands out in a fake apology. "Sorry. I'm leaning toward a restaurant this time."

“Ah, you’re expanding your empire,” Royce said. “Good man. Let’s talk and see if we can work together on some things.”

It was the kind of noncommittal, *we’re all in this together* bullshit Royce dished out to all the other rich men who walked into Savoy. But he wouldn’t follow through. Royce didn’t share the wealth or the limelight with anyone.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Gretchen suddenly said. “But I feel bad that she’s been standing there this entire time just holding that thing. Can she at least set it down?”

Royce shot Liv a deceptively blank stare that simmered with rage. His left eyebrow twitched almost imperceptibly. But then he broke into a broad grin. “Of course. Olivia, if you would.”

Liv strode forward, eyes everywhere but on Mack, and lowered the tray so the cupcake was eye-level with Gretchen. She tilted her face away from Mack, but he probably wouldn’t recognize her anyway. Her snug chef’s hat hid her curly hair, and she doubted Mack had studied her face long enough while eating her noodles for him to remember it now.

“The Sultan is our signature dessert, featuring a mixture of chocolates from twelve different countries,” Royce continued. “With a champagne-jelly filling and edible gold adornments, it’s served with a twenty-four-carat-gold spoon and a scoop of the finest Ugandan vanilla bean ice cream.”

“Wow,” Gretchen said with just enough snark for Liv to decide they should be BFFs. “I’m almost afraid to eat it.”

“How about a picture?” Royce said, walking behind Gretchen’s chair to pose.

Just once, Liv would love to see someone say no to a photo.

And wonder of wonders, today would be that day.

“Oh, that’s—no, I’m fine,” Gretchen said, and somewhere in the world, angels began to sing. If only Liv were telepathic, because her brain was screaming *YOU ARE MY BEST FRIEND*.

Royce’s eyebrow twitched again. It was bad enough that a woman had said no to a picture. But to do so in front of a staff member. Oh, the raging would be loud tonight. But definitely worth it.

Liv quietly cleared her throat and was just about to set the cupcake on the table when—

“Hey, I know you.” Mack leaned forward, studying her face. “You’re Thea’s sister.”

Without waiting for her to confirm or deny, Mack nodded at his date. “This is amazing. I had no idea she worked here. I’ve told you about Gavin, right? This is his sister-in-law.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Gretchen said. “I’d shake your hand, but obviously your hands are full. This looks delicious by the way. Thank you.”

Liv smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

Royce cleared his throat. Oh, shit. She’d said words, hadn’t she? That was bad. She was going to pay for that later.

“I swear, I didn’t know you worked here,” Mack said, still clueless. “Gavin only said that you worked at a restaurant downtown.”

“Olivia has worked for me for several months,” Royce said, not to be left out.

“A year,” Liv corrected quietly. Royce cleared his throat again. Quietly. Firmly. *You are so dead-ly.*

Mack suddenly stood. “We should get a picture. I’ll send it to Gavin.”

Liv darted a glance at Royce, whose forced smile suggested he was not happy about being overshadowed. He didn’t share the camera lens with anyone.

“I appreciate the gesture,” Liv said steadily. “But I prefer to stay behind the scenes.”

“No way,” Mack said. “You should get credit for your work.”

Liv imagined the top of Royce’s head literally blowing off, along with his toupee, but he was too much of a showman to do anything besides smile and say, “Absolutely. Olivia, please.”

She was going to pay for this later. It didn’t matter that she’d done nothing to encourage this. Royce wouldn’t see it that way.

“Wait,” Mack said. “Do you prefer Liv or Olivia? I’ve only ever heard Gavin call you Liv.”

“Liv, actually. But Royce calls me Olivia.”

“Why?”

Liv looked up. “Yeah, Royce. Why?”

Royce’s fake smile was so cold that it practically hummed “Ice Ice Baby.”

Mack shrugged and handed his phone across the table to Royce. Liv’s mouth fell open. He was . . . he was asking *Royce* to take the picture? No one did that to Royce. No one. *OMG, do not smile. Do not smile.* If she smiled, she would end up *in* the cupcake, not serving it.

Royce nodded, still smiling, but Liv knew that smile. It hid a boiling fury that Royce would certainly unleash later in a torrent of flying spittle and *I've met dead slabs of lamb smarter than you* outbursts. But what the hell was Liv supposed to do? Hit Mack over the head with her tray and run away?

Actually, that was a tempting idea.

Mack rounded the table and stood next to Liv. He slung an arm around her shoulders and—

The tray wobbled in her hands. She tried to correct, tried to steady it with her other hand, but her reflexes were too late.

Time slowed to the blurry speed of a horror movie as the cupcake slid to the edge of the tray. It balanced there for a moment, teetered like a car in a movie that stops just in time before plunging over the edge of a cliff.

It was just long enough for her entire career to flash before her eyes. Long enough for her to imagine all the ways she was going to kill Braden Mack for this. Long enough for a single word to drag along the length of her tongue. “Fuuucck . . .”

Then gravity did its thing.

And the cupcake landed in Gretchen’s lap.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” Liv dropped to her knees next to Gretchen’s chair.

“It’s okay,” Gretchen told Liv. She held her hands aloft, fingers coated with frosting.

“This is my fault,” Mack said. “I knocked the tray out of her hands.”

“Olivia, go to the kitchen,” Royce barked. “We will have another one made for you.”

“That’s not necessary,” Gretchen said, lifting the cupcake from her chocolate-stained lap to her plate.

“Can I help clean it up?” Liv asked. “Please. Let me—”

Royce cut her off. “Obviously your entire meal is on us tonight.”

Liv groaned.

“And please allow me to cover the cost of cleaning your dress.”

“Truly, that’s not necessary,” Gretchen said. “This was an accident.”

“This is my fault,” Mack said again.

“My staff is trained to handle anything,” Royce said. “Clearly that failed tonight. We will make this right.”

“There’s nothing to make right,” Gretchen said smoothly. “Accidents happen.”

“We will send someone over to help clean up the mess immediately.”

“I’m so sorry,” Liv said once again to Gretchen.

“That will be all, Olivia.”

Liv turned another homicidal glare in Mack’s direction before retrieving her tray. Then she spun on her heel and quickstepped toward the kitchen without so much as a backward glance. Liv figured she had roughly a ninety-second head start on Royce. Maybe it would be enough time for him to calm down.

Liv headed straight for the employee locker room and tore off her hat. She sank onto a bench in front of her locker as Riya rushed in.

“What happened?” Riya asked, unbuttoning the chef’s coat Liv had given her.

“You’re not going to want to be around me.”

“Oh shit, why?”

“I dropped it!”

Riya winced. “Oh, Liv.”

The slamming of the swinging doors outside made them both jump. “OLIVIA.”

Liv braced herself. She stood tall as Royce stormed into the locker room. He shook from head to toe, and his face was as red as a lobster in a pot.

“You,” he said, pointing at Riya. “Out.”

Riya squeezed Liv’s arm in sympathy before leaving.

Royce wagged a finger in Liv’s face. “My office. Twenty minutes.”

Then he turned and stormed back out, shouting as he did, “Find me Jessica!”

Shitshitshit.

Mack had nearly followed Liv to apologize again, but then he remembered Gretchen. He turned around and found her wiping her hands on her napkin.

“Are you okay?” he asked, crouching down next to her chair.

“I had a cupcake dropped on me, Braden. I wasn’t shot.”

“No, but this isn’t how I wanted tonight to turn out.”

“I’m a little more worried about how this night is going to turn out for your friend Liv.”

“She’s not my friend.”

Gretchen responded to that with furrowed eyebrows. Mack rushed to clarify. “I mean, I barely know her. But yes, of course I hope she doesn’t get in trouble for this.”

Gretchen braced her hands on the arms of her chair and started to stand. “I’m going to run to the restroom to get cleaned up.”

“Right. Of course.” Mack stood and held out his hand to her to help her rise.

The extent of the damage to her dress became clear when she stepped away from the table. A dark-brown splotch marred the delicate green silk. He knew enough about fine fabrics to know the dress was a lost cause.

He shrugged out of his sport coat. “Do you want this to cover it up?”

She smiled but shook her head. “I think that would just make it a little more obvious.”

Mack watched her walk away and then sat back down. Great. Just fucking great. Things had been going perfectly until that moment.

Two busboys dressed all in black arrived with plastic tubs and wet rags. With quiet apologies for the mess, they began picking up the remnants of the cupcake from the floor and Gretchen’s chair.

Mack stepped out of their way and softly cleared his throat. “Do you, uh, do you know if the woman who made the cupcake—is she getting in trouble for this?”

The two young men shared a nervous glance and had an unspoken conversation. One of them shrugged then and shook his head. “We don’t know anything about that.”

When they left, Mack dropped a couple of twenties on the table. Just because they were getting their dinner for free didn’t mean the staff should be shafted their tips.

Gretchen returned to the table a few minutes later. A wet spot had replaced the chocolate frosting.

“Are you ready to go?” Mack asked. “I was thinking I could drive you home to change and—”

“Mack,” she said, calmly cutting him off. “How much did that cupcake cost?”

Ah shit. That was a loaded question if he’d ever heard one. “Why do you ask?”

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