



L ivvy felt Evan's presence beside her as they walked up the path to the front door, though she had a feeling he shortened his stride to allow her to keep up without jogging. At five feet, eight inches, she'd never been short. But Evan had to be at least six-four. And gorgeous, too.

Though she thought she'd covered it well, she had nearly been rendered mute when he turned his hazel-gray eyes on her. Of course, who retained their ability to speak in front of someone with the presence of a Hollywood leading man?

Honey-blond curls flipped out from under his hunter-green beanie, and the matching scruff on his cheeks only added to the appeal. And when he smiled at her with those boy-next-door dimples? It was a wonder she could introduce herself at all. She only hoped she hadn't rambled incoherently.

"After you." He stepped in front of her to open the door and wave her inside.

She reminded herself to breathe. "Thank you."

What was wrong with her? She'd never reacted to a man like this, at least not to one who wasn't trapped on the silver screen. Her musings ended abruptly as she and Evan entered the den.

Plush sofas and chairs were arranged to create a perfect

sitting area. Everything was of the highest quality. One chair alone probably cost more than her entire apartment full of second-hand, yard sale furniture. An ornate brass chandelier would have bathed the room in a soft glow had the other lights been turned off. The room itself was more spacious than most of her apartment put together. Everything angled toward a massive fireplace that served as the focal point of the room.

The home she'd grown up in had a fireplace. She'd always liked its creek rock front and simple maple mantelpiece. It was practical and cozy. And compared to this one, it was plain. Larger than her bathroom at home, it was double-sided and encased in what looked like marble. Chic, sleek, and completely cold. Of course, what could you expect in a town where temperatures rarely dropped below the high forties? Why even have a fireplace?

Livvy licked her lips and hoped her discomfort wasn't evident on her face. It wouldn't do to have the first image of her on national television be that of a country bumpkin with her mouth gaped open like a fish. She needed to inspire confidence in the audience and judges. While the judges decided who moved on to the next round, audience perception could make or break a contestant after the show aired.

Eight pairs of eyes sized her up from their positions in the chairs arranged throughout the room. And that didn't include the ones hiding behind the cameras she wasn't supposed to look at, strategically placed in out-of-the-way corners. Well, waiting would only make the silence more awkward for everyone. It was time to let the competition know who she was and let them make up their minds about her. Livvy brushed a teal-streaked lock of hair from her face, straightened her shoulders, and smiled. Hopefully, she radiated warm and friendly rather than terrified and crazy.

*Please, Lord, let me get along with at least some of my housemates.*

“Hi, everybody. I'm Livvy Miller from St. Louis, Missouri, and I own a cupcake truck called The Sugar Cube.”

Silence continued. She fidgeted. Why wasn't anyone speaking? Could it have something to do with the fact that her introduction sounded like a mid-year transplant into a new school? She nudged Evan with her elbow.

"And I'm Evan Jones."

He moved to take a seat. Livvy followed his lead and claimed one to the right of the fireplace. Gazes bounced between her and Evan. Not usually one without something to say, Livvy wasn't sure what to make of this group. After a few seconds that seemed like years, an older woman with fluffy white chin-length hair and slim shoulders smiled.

"I'm Genevieve. I've studied pastry in Paris, Switzerland, essentially everywhere you can find the most delectable sweets. It's a pleasure to meet you, Livvy and Evan."

Whoa. Did everyone have such a spectacular baking pedigree? Why in the world had the producers picked her as a contestant? Was she the weak link they expected to vote off in the first episode?

Hopefully, her nervous thoughts didn't translate into her expression. She nodded toward Genevieve and shifted in her seat. A tall, middle-aged man with an angular face and pointed nose as slender as his build dipped his head toward her. A shock of straight black hair fell into his face before he brushed it back.

"I'm Elliott. I have also trained under the best pastry chefs the world has to offer, though I call London my home." His accent was smooth and cultured, and despite the air of sophistication that hinted the man would be no fun, Livvy enjoyed the sound of his voice.

Her smile relaxed, though the fear of being the only non-classically trained pastry chef was growing with each introduction. "I'm glad to meet you."

A man who appeared closer to her age than any of the other male contestants, except maybe Evan, stood and crossed the room. His thick golden hair was combed back to highlight clear blue eyes. He extended a hand toward her and smiled.

“And you and I definitely need to get to know each other. I’m Will. And while I have the same high credentials, my experience came in the current century. But don’t worry, honey. I’ll be happy to share some of the tips and tricks you may have missed working in your little cupcake truck.”

Livvy shifted uncomfortably and glanced at the other contestants. It had to be a misunderstanding; the man couldn’t be as arrogantly insulting as she thought. Genevieve wouldn’t look at her, and Elliot’s smile seemed tight. Others fidgeted in their seats. Apparently, he could be as full of himself as he sounded. She returned her attention to him.

With as much politeness as she could muster, she shook his hand. “Good to meet you, Will.”

He backed away, nodding as if he’d just given her the greatest privilege of her life. *Lord, are they all going to be like this? Please, let there be someone I can relate to.*

“I’m sure that offer to help would extend to anyone in the competition.” Evan’s easy voice cut through the tension. “Am I right?”

A sigh of relief escaped her lips as everyone’s attention moved from her to Evan. Maybe God was going to provide a friend she could relate to after all. And if he distracted Will, that was even better.

“Evan, is it? And what’s your training? I believe you omitted that from your introduction.” Arrogance and disdain oozed from Will. His tone implied he thought Evan lower than dog mess on the bottom of a sneaker.

Evan remained unruffled under the group’s scrutiny. In fact, stretched out in his chair, he looked beyond anyone’s ability to bother. “I’m from Texas, and I—”

“Texas?” Will’s chuckle as he interrupted was laced with derision. “Shouldn’t you be on a barbeque competition show? I think you’ll be out of your element here.”

Frustration welled up in her as Will spoke. After only a few

minutes, he was already getting on her nerves. This didn't bode well for the competition.

Evan simply shrugged.

"Not at all. My dad was the king of barbeque at our house, Mama ruled the kitchen, and Gram was the queen of baking. From the time I was a little squirt, I loved to help her with pies and cakes and anything else she happened to make." As he spoke of home and family, a bit of a drawl snuck into his voice.

Livvy grinned at the sound. If he wanted to keep talking about his Southern home, she wouldn't complain.

"So, you lack formal training?" Elliott inserted himself into the conversation.

Evan threaded his fingers together and leaned his head against them where they rested on the back of the chair. "Not at all. Home's what first lit that fire in me, but I've spent plenty of time building my knowledge of baking and honing my skills in the kitchen."

From the corner where he'd been sitting quietly, a man who appeared to be the oldest of the male competitors spoke up, both his voice and lightly olive-tinted skin hinting at Hispanic heritage. "Formal training is not the be-all, end-all. Perhaps of all sciences, ours has the distinction of being steeped in heritage, passed from one generation to the next. Talent existed long before degrees and certificates."

"Nicholas, please." Elliott rolled his eyes. "Years of culinary training under the best chefs cannot be overlooked in favor of training with a Nana in the home."

"And," Will cut in, "training from years ago cannot compare to what one currently receives. Think of all the advances in techniques that weren't available even thirty years ago."

Were they trying to bait him? As Livvy cringed at the insulting implication, Nicholas simply smiled at the pair. She tried to guess his age, but his round face and thick brown hair belied the salt and pepper in his trim beard and mustache. And

though lines appeared around his eyes when he smiled, youthful dimples accompanied them.

The fifth male contestant cleared his throat. He adjusted plastic-framed glasses a few shades lighter than his skin's rich brown before speaking. "I believe, gentlemen, that there is merit in each style of learning the art, craft, and science of baking. I've known excellent pastry chefs from each camp. I've also seen them secure enough in their abilities to defend their own path without venom."

"Come now, David." Genevieve rolled her eyes. "You surprise me. Where's your defense of your macho male ego? Why don't you feel the need to mark your territory as the expert-in-residence like the others?"

"Not all men feel the need to prove themselves the bigger man." David speared her with a glance. "I suggest the results will speak for themselves as the competition progresses."

Genevieve opened her mouth to retort.

"I think what we need is a new start." A soft, easy voice came from a woman with porcelain skin and straight, dark hair. "Maybe we should go find out who our roommates are for the duration of the competition. We can get settled and be back down here by seven. That's when Rhonda said dinner will be served. Tonight, it's their treat. After that, we'll be on our own."

The woman who spoke looked about Livvy's height but carried a little more weight. Her round face was open and friendly. Livvy hadn't caught her name, but she was right. This battle of the egos would not lead anywhere good.

Livvy nodded in agreement. "I think that's wise. But I missed your name?"

The woman's smile seemed genuine. "I'm Harper. Emma's over there." She gestured to a slim blonde woman across the room before introducing the woman sitting next to Emma. "And this is Alyssa."

"Nice to meet you both." Livvy acknowledged the women with a smile.

While Emma could be described as cute or even pretty, Alyssa's warm caramel skin tone and wavy light brown hair could only be described as beautiful. Livvy would have guessed her a model instead of a baker.

Livvy stood and motioned her head toward the doorway. "Let's go find our roommates and explore this mansion before supper."

They stood almost as one and moved to the door. Some of the men continued to stare each other down, but others also began drifting away. Livvy watched Evan rise casually from his seat, as uninterested in the men's discussion as David.

Evan's gaze shifted to meet hers, and she jerked her eyes away. Her cheeks heated at having been caught. She scurried out the door behind the other women without another look back.

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EVAN THOUGHT Livvy looked adorable with a blush blanketing her cheeks. There was a boldness in her lock of aqua hair and choice to ride a motorcycle cross-country for a baking competition, but she also blushed when caught looking at a guy from across the room. It was a unique combination.

Was her extroverted nature a show, or did she simply lack confidence around men? Evan had a feeling it would be worth the trouble to find out.

The uneasy feeling of negative attention came over Evan. He scanned the room. Will's narrowed eyes and rigid stance sent his arrogant alpha male message clearly without speaking a word. No trespassing.

The guy was delusional if he thought his brief, awkward exchange with Livvy meant anything. Livvy was polite, but it didn't take a genius to realize she had not been impressed. Evan lifted his chin in subtle defiance before following David from the room. Let Will interpret it how he wanted. If it made him think twice about approaching Livvy, good.

No one deserved a guy like Will, even if Evan didn't have plans to pursue her for himself. He was here to win *Cake That*. His family was counting on him, and that meant staying focused on baking instead of solving the mystery of Livvy, no matter how beautifully she blushed.

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“THIS IS SO EXCITING. The drama's already starting! Did you see the way the guys were acting? This season is going to be the best!” Blonde and perky, Emma bounced up the stairs ahead of the group.

If the model of the group was Alyssa, Emma could, without question, fill the role of cheerleader. There were so many personalities filling the rooms of the house. Livvy took a deep breath. How much would their different styles play a part in how the competition panned out?

“I don't think grade school antics to determine the alpha are something we should be happy about, Emma.” Alyssa shook her head as she followed at a more controlled pace.

The group unexpectedly stopped on the stairs, causing Livvy to bump into Genevieve. She looked up to find Emma facing the rest of the group with a pout.

“Well, I think you're wrong, Alyssa. I think it makes for great television and higher ratings. You agree with me, don't you, Harper?”

Harper bit her bottom lip, bouncing her attention from Emma to Alyssa and back again. “Personally, I don't like the added drama, but I can see your point about getting more viewers.”

While this was not a full endorsement of her views, Emma smiled brightly and continued up the stairs to the first bedroom. The squeal she emitted as she read the names on the door was enough to make Livvy's eye twitch.

“I'm so glad we're getting the double room instead of the



triple. And have you seen the bathroom in this one? It's positively amazing!"

The cheerleader act would get old quickly if Livvy ended up on the list as Emma's roommate. Only she didn't believe it was an act. Emma took to it far too easily as she squealed again and grabbed Alyssa by the wrist.

Delicately removing her arm from Emma's grasp, Alyssa pushed a light brown curl away from her face. She smiled politely, but it didn't reach her dark brown eyes. Livvy could only imagine the thoughts going through Alyssa's head after the stairway conversation, but Emma didn't seem to think anything of it at all.

Another pout pushed Emma's lips out like a petulant toddler as she huffed. "Oh, come on, Alyssa. You know we're going to have a blast. It will be just like a sleepover in high school."

Though she wouldn't dare ask and confirm her suspicions, Livvy judged the pair to be several years older than her. The idea that someone in her early thirties could still act like Emma made her cringe. She hoped her feelings didn't show on her face. Alyssa said something too quiet to hear and followed her exuberant roommate into their new room.

Genevieve looked between Livvy and Harper. "Well, I guess that means the three of us will be sharing a room. Why don't we find it and get settled? Come along, Livvy, Harper."

With her theatrics, nobody would forget Emma soon. Harper and Genevieve would be easy enough to remember, too, since they were sharing a room. Now, if Livvy could manage to remember everyone else's names, she'd be set.

As Genevieve led them into the master bedroom, Livvy's mouth dropped open. No, her room at home was a bedroom. This couldn't be called anything but a suite. A bay window occupied the expanse of the outside wall, complete with a cushioned window seat to look out over the manicured lawn, pool house, hot tub, and pool.

Two full beds dominated one wall while a third sat against

the wall nearer the entrance. The three beds took up most of the floor space but still allowed glimpses of the plush rugs in muted whites, beiges, and blues covering the hardwood floor. Hopefully, they would have a place for all their belongings.

“Oh, my goodness.” Harper’s voice was full of awe as it echoed from the doorway on the opposite side of the room.

Livvy followed the voice into an alcove with a built-in vanity and mirror. “Harper?”

“I’m in here.”

A right turn took Livvy in the correct direction. She looked in the first doorway on her left, but the only thing in that room was a toilet. A glance into a room on the right revealed a walk-in shower as big as her bathroom. She walked straight past both rooms into the most extravagant walk-in closet she’d ever seen. Built-in cherry wood shelves, racks, and drawers lined all the walls. A pale yellow granite island jutted out from one wall with more drawers underneath the countertop.

Taking it all in stride, Genevieve entered behind Livvy. “If you think this is nice, you should see our bathroom. Very posh.”

Livvy and Harper waited only until she’d moved from the doorway before bolting out the door and across the short hall. An enormous tub, surrounded by the same yellow granite, waited to relax away the tensions of each day. Double sinks rested inside granite countertops over cherry drawers and cabinets.

The stone floor would be cold on bare feet if not for the plush white rugs scattered strategically throughout the narrow room. Above the tub were several small windows, high enough to avoid indecency and spaced often enough to provide natural light.

A sigh escaped Livvy’s lips. Did she even really have to compete? Couldn’t she spend her days relaxing with a good book in this gorgeous bathroom?

“I know, right?” Harper seemed to read her thoughts as she stepped in beside her. “And did you see the pool? Gorgeous. I mean, I know the network uses this house for all their reality

shows and to house the competitors on shows like *Cake That*, but really. How are we supposed to focus with such luxury waiting for us?”

Livvy felt Genevieve’s presence behind them.

“You focus because the luxury goes away the minute you get eliminated from the competition.”

There was a little bit of Harper’s romantic dreamer in Livvy, but she had a good dose of Genevieve’s practicality too. Of course, she didn’t have Genevieve’s pedigree of top pastry chef instruction, but she hoped that wouldn’t be an issue.

Both women seemed friendly enough that this arrangement just might work out perfectly. It could be worse. She could have to live in an unending slumber party with the cheerleader. Livvy was outgoing, but she’d never been considered bubbly. Squeals and over-the-top exuberance would get old fast.