“Okay, I’m ready to help,” she announced when she arrived in the kitchen with him. Adam handed her an apron.

“Thank you,” she said as she accepted it from him and started to unfold it.

“Gingerbread batch number one is in the oven already. Just needs two more minutes. Each batch cooks in six minutes. Your job is to keep track of time.”

“Oh, I’m doing the job of an egg timer,” she quipped.

He ignored the sarcasm, even though she’d followed it with a grin.

“Gingerbread batch number two I’m making
with butter instead of margarine. And for our third experiment, I’m substituting corn syrup for molasses. This keeps the pastry from puffing out and maintains its shape. These are all variations of my mom’s gingerbread recipe. Hers used lots of butter. Stir this,” he instructed.

“Oh really? Did your mother do a lot of baking?” Taylor asked as she began stirring another bowl of a mixture he’d previously started.

The question caught him a little off guard, but Adam rebounded quickly. “She did. My Mom loved to cook and bake, and I enjoyed spending time in the kitchen with her.”

“My mother wasn’t much of a cook, but we didn’t starve,” she said and used the whisk to scrape along the side of the bowl. “My refrigerator is rarely stocked.”

“A good home-cooked meal can soothe the soul. My mother used to say that,” he added. She was quiet now, either focused on stirring or not really interested in talking about personal matters. He could understand that.

“Well, once you finish with this competition you’ll know how to make great gingerbread,” he offered optimistically.

“Something to add to my resume,” she said with a smile.

He didn’t look away when she smiled this time. Earlier that day, he’d told himself not to stare too long or read too much into the light feeling in the pit of his stomach when he’d seen
the pretty tilt of her lips. It was no big deal. And yet, right at this moment he couldn’t look away. And neither did she. That warmth in his chest just moments ago was now spreading, moving slowly like pouring molasses.

He dropped a few chunks of butter into the bowl she was stirring.

“A little trick they don’t teach you in culinary school: butter improves the taste of everything. You’ll have to use the mixer for this part.” He nodded toward the mixer at the other end of the counter.

“But no one will taste it. You should be concerned with durability.” Oh boy, the boss tone was back as she attempted to correct him.

But this was not only his kitchen, his domain, but baking was a huge chunk of his life. “I’ve never compromised on taste and I’m not about to start now.” He could let Taylor take the lead on what she felt was her area of expertise, but not here, not in the kitchen.

“And you went to culinary school?” Her skeptical tone was not lost on him.

He frowned and figured they’d had enough of the personal discussions for tonight. “Long story. Keep mixing.”

He picked up the grater and began pushing the stalk of ginger along its sharp prongs.

“Ah, you do know they have powdered ginger,” she said after a few seconds of silence.
When he looked over at her she nodded down at the grater.

“Creativity and inspiration can’t be rushed, okay? Rome wasn’t built in a day, and our gingerbread house won’t be either.” Okay, he did sound a little fanatical when talking about baking, but he couldn’t help it: this was his passion, and if he was going to be in this competition, he was going to give it one hundred and ten percent.

“Clearly not if you’re involved.” She stopped the mixer and looked at him with earnest concern. “Wouldn’t working with a recipe be more efficient?”

“I like to take my time. Let my creativity flow.” His tone was almost wistful as they continued the semi-joking banter that seemed to be their favored form of conversation.

She shrugged. “Sounds risky.”

“Maybe, but for every fallen soufflé there’s a perfect profiterole tower.”

They couldn’t seem to agree on anything. Whether it was her design for the gingerbread house or now, the recipe.

“You know, I’m really glad you’re not an architect, because that approach would not pass inspection. Now remember, we don’t want bricks. We need thin rectangles of gingerbread.”

“Why so thin?” he asked.

“Well, remember my design? It calls for thin pieces of gingerbread. I need for my design to
be ultra-sleek and modern.” She was clearly pumped by the idea; he could see it in the way her eyes lit up.

Again with the getting off track. He really needed to get it together.

“But that’ll make it more likely to crack.”
She frowned. “Maybe use less butter.”

Blasphemy!

“And compromise taste and texture? What do you say we stop the backseat baking? Remember our deal: in the kitchen I’m in charge.”

“Yeah, but I’m the arc…” She stopped mid-sentence and sniffed the air. “Do you smell smoke?”

He followed suit, sniffing as well. Without missing a beat he ran over to the oven and yanked the door open. Smoke poured out and he grabbed his oven mitts. Slipping them onto his hands quickly he pulled the tray of burned gingerbread out. He set it on the counter and stared at her.

She looked contrite—for about ten seconds. “Okay. So our first collaboration could’ve gone slightly better.”