**TWENTY-THREE**

**August 8, 2019**

Bryan hung his head down in despair in his bakery office chair. As he closed the credit account website, his stomach churned. The bakery’s cash balance was deflating like a loosely tied balloon. Nadia knew Bryan was unhappy with her decisions. He felt Nadia’s hands massage his shoulders from behind, and she kissed his neck. The warmth of her lips made Bryan feel vulnerable.

“Sugar bear. I know I screwed up,” Nadia said.

Bryan spun around, falling into her green eyes. “Honey, we are not doing well.”

“Why are you just now saying something?” Nadia said, surprised. She closed the office door.

“I didn’t want to alarm you.”

This was only half true. He felt trapped, believing that being honest would only lead to arguments. His reservations mostly came from wanting to make her feel as safe as her father had.

Nadia bit her lip and crossed her arms. “Everything is going to be fine. Right?”

“Yeah, honey, we’ll be fine. I promise,” Bryan said, hugging her. “We will figure it out.”

“Should I return the couch?”

Bryan smiled and shook his head no. “Actually, I like it.”

Susan, wearing a yellow print sundress that reflected her mood, lounged near the large window in the bakery, her right leg crossed over the left knee. She sipped her regular: a medium macchiato with a shot of espresso.

Bryan felt bogged down. He had woken up with Lindsey on his mind. He was thinking of calling Nadia’s mother when Susan entered—he needed some advice. Bryan’s sad eyes tugged at Susan’s motherly instinct, if her expression was anything to go by.

“Why is Lindsey hanging out with these conservative kids?” Bryan asked. He saw no reason to mention their money problems.

Susan smiled. “Kids like to test their parents. My son tested us. But he got it together.”

“I guess. This feels different. It seems like she’s looking for something she’s not getting elsewhere.” Bryan’s shoulders slumped. “I know my child. She wants my attention. I’ve been too consumed with the bakery.”

“She’s fine. Let her spread her wings. When she realizes life isn’t all moonlight and roses, she’ll come around,” Susan said with a comforting smile.

Trevor Murray, Bryan’s new operations manager, had started today, and now he wandered about the floor. He was a stocky young man in his early thirties, already balding, with no experience managing a bakery, but he had worked in the hospitality industry for nearly a decade. He had made it clear he was experienced enough at dealing with different kinds of people. He had given Nadia a loose handshake and had come across as standoffish to Stacey; Bryan chose not to be alarmed.

Bryan introduced Trevor to Susan, making sure Trevor knew she deserved special treatment. Trevor gave Susan a warm friendly greeting.

“I need you for a second,” Stacey whispered in Bryan’s ear.

“Is something wrong?” Bryan asked.

“You bet. I overheard two customers,” Stacey pointed at two older men, “making transphobic remarks about the boys sitting in the corner.”

“Really!” Bryan’s jaw tightened.

“I told them Sophia’s Cupcakes doesn’t tolerate hate speech of any kind.” Stacey said, her face flushed red. “They told me this was America and they can say whatever they want. So, I asked them to leave. They want to speak with the manager.”

Their twisted variety of privilege had pushed Bryan to the edge. “C’mon. Trevor, you too,” Bryan said, leading the team. He paused to find his breath.

“Hello, gentlemen. How can I help you?” Bryan said, smiling as wide as Texas.

“We want to speak to the manager,” one gentleman said, his full beard and facial hair covering his true expression beneath.

“Sir, I’m the partial owner. And you were speaking with one of our managers,” Bryan said, signaling to Stacey.

The man turned to face his friend. “This is just getting better and better. Is there anyone else I can talk to?” He glared at Trevor.

Bryan motioned no. The men’s aggressions bundled with their snide tone hurt him. He paused and looked at Trevor.

Trevor shook his head and took a step back. Bryan peered through Trevor like an X-ray looking for a spine.

“Sir, there is no one else to talk to,” Bryan said, making firm eye contact with the gentleman.

There was a long pause. “My first amendment rights give me the right to say what I want,” the gentleman said, sitting back in his chair. The certainty of his statement dripped off his words like melting icicles.

The man looked at Stacey and said, “This person here is infringing on my rights.” He drew out the “r.”

“Sir, no one is saying that you are not welcome to your feelings,” Bryan said. “We are asking you to refrain from voicing disparaging thoughts in our establishment and making other customers feel endangered, unwelcome, or uncomfortable. I don’t believe that’s asking too much.”

“You allow these girly boys to eat here dressed like this?” the man said, pointing to the group of young feminine-looking boys. Bryan saw what appeared to be four cross-dressing college-aged men.

Bryan held a blank stare. He wanted to fight back. What could Bryan do? A Black man fighting back would be framed as an aggressor and the privileged will always claim self-defense when losing.

Stacey fumed red as velvet cake color.

The gentleman paused, looking at Stacey. “What about you, sweetie?”

“I’m not your sweetie. Second, this is my community. Unapologetic and unashamed.” Stacey took her right earring off. “Asshole,” she whispered.

The men were speechless. *You go girl*, Bryan thought, tightening his fist. He had Stacey’s back because he knew Stacey had his. The entire bakery was rapt, listening to their conversation. Bryan turned around. Nadia had appeared, looking confused and bothered by the elevated tension.

“You think you’re a—” the gentleman said.

“Yes, a woman,” Stacey said.

Nadia stepped forward. Several customers pulled out their phones and started filming the trans wall of pride.

Nadia said, “Gentlemen, if you have a problem with being around us, then I think you should leave.”

The men looked into the cameras, realizing their faces, expressions, and words were being caught on video. Unexpectedly, the entire bakery started chanting, “Get out! Get out!”

The two men aggressively got up and headed out the door.

“I hate this,” Stacey said, picking up an overturned chair.

Bryan addressed the four boys at the center of the hate. He smiled, taking notice of each boy: one sported a blue wig and colorful knee-high socks with white Converse high-tops; another had messy brown hair with green eyeshadow and sat cross-legged wearing bobby socks over his lace leggings; the third wore a baby blue jumpsuit with the collar popped up and brushing against the tips of her dark hair; and the last boy quietly rocked a pair of jeans with a *Transwomen Are Women* t-shirt. There was strength in numbers, and Bryan was glad they had each other. They reminded him of Nadia, Stacey, and Sophia.

“Everyone, we’re sorry,” said Bryan. “We pride ourselves on being a safe space for the queer and trans community and I hope you will continue to patronize our bakery.” They nodded, clearly knowing this was not a function of the establishment. “Your bill is on us,” Bryan stated.

“Thank you,” they said in unison, happily.

Bryan positioned himself behind the cashier next to Stacey. They quietly stood together, speechless, as they surveyed the bakery. Trevor cleaned off the table, and Stacey mindfully watched him. Bryan’s mind ran free, spiraling down a hole: when did speech move from simply being unpleasant or crude to incitement, defamation, or just plain ole fighting words? *Is the Constitution supposed to protect that?*

“You can’t tell me those folks didn’t feel threatened,” Bryan said, breaking their silence.

“One kick right square in the nuts,” Stacey said, and she did a quick karate kick.

“Only you,” Bryan said, shaking his head and laughing. “Ladies, are we okay?” speaking to Nadia and Stacey.

Nadia nodded yes. “This is why I just want to bake,” she said, pulling down the sugar from a shelf.

“They try to portray themselves as innocent. Just being good citizens,” Stacey said. “Bullshit.”

“In my day, it was, ‘If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all,’” Bryan added.

Trevor stared out the large front windows. Bryan tapped him on the shoulder. “Are you okay? What happened back there?”

“Mr. Hicks, we need to talk.” Trevor paused, looking at the customers. “I hope you don’t expect me to address customers directly like that.”

“I do. As a manager, you don’t have a choice. We don’t tolerate any hate speech.”

“This is not my fight,” Trevor said. “Mr. Hicks, I need this job. But I’m not going to defend them.”

“Them!” Bryan scratched the back of his neck. “There is no us and them. Seriously, man. These are your coworkers. This is your work family.”

Bryan pointed to the front door. “If you aren’t going to adhere to our policies, then I must ask you to leave.”

“You can’t fire me!”

“Texas is an at-will state. Take me to court, I don’t care. I can prove you’re unwilling to follow our policies around discrimination and harassment. Now give me the fucking apron.”

The door slammed for the second time today. Bryan’s heart raced. He walked past Nadia, unable to look the staff in the eye, and he closed the office door. He cried, holding his head in his hands.

There was a knock. Bryan was not prepared to talk to anyone. The cis community must stand up, Bryan knew, but suddenly he was scared, realizing the privileged community was not going to stand with him.

A second knock.

“Come in,” Bryan said.

Susan entered, Nadia following behind her.

“You did the right thing,” Susan said.

“I’m scared. What’s it going to take for things to be different?” Bryan said, wiping away a tear. “People say we’re better than this. No, we’re not. This is who we are.”

Empathy was easy. Allyship was not enough to equal this level of hatred. He saw that advocacy was needed.

Later that day, Bryan learned the confrontation had gone viral. Stacey was jumping up and down.

“Over 200,000 views!” she crowed.

On the video, customers chanted, “Get Out!”