



**HIS
LONG-LOST**

Baby

LAYLA VALENTINE

HIS LONG-LOST BABY



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Also by Layla Valentine

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CHAPTER 1

BILLIE



“It’s okay. You’ll be okay.” Pressing my lips to my daughter’s soft brown hair, I enter the emergency room at a jog.

There’s no line at the front desk, thank God. Hurrying over, I lock eyes with the man behind the desk.

“My daughter is having trouble breathing.” The words spill out of me faster than lightning. “She was playing outside and then she started wheezing.”

The nonplussed man clicks on his computer. “Name? Age?”

“Quinn Hackett. She’s six.”

I try not to yell at him to move faster. I get that this is another day on the job for him and it’s not like Quinn is turning blue.

But how do we know she won’t be in another twenty seconds?

Fear grips my heart. I can’t lose my daughter. She’s the best thing that’s ever come into my life.

She’s all I have in the world.

The man asks some more questions, and I fumble to get Quinn’s insurance card out. Meanwhile, she clutches at my T-shirt, a robust first-grader reduced to a clinging toddler.

Tears fill my eyes and I blink them back. “How long is the wait?”

“Uh...” He inspects the screen.

Just then, a nurse rushes towards me, taking in Quinn’s wheezing and the fear in my eyes. “What’s her name?” she asks.

“Quinn. She’s having trouble breathing.” I clutch her tight, feeling helpless and scared.

The nurse nods. “Let’s take her back to an exam room and check her out. Does she have any allergies?”

“Not that I know of. She was playing outside when it happened.” I follow behind the nurse, Quinn still on my hip.

“And could she have been stung by a bee?”

We’re in the exam room, where she gestures for me to put Quinn on the table.

“Uh, no. She didn’t mention being stung by anything.”

Quinn sucks in a pitiful breath. “Mommy.”

“It’s okay.” I touch her back. “They’re gonna look at you now.”

There’s a knock on the door, and a doctor comes in. She smiles at us. “Hi Quinn, I’m Dr. Patel. I’m going to examine you, okay?”

Quinn nods, her small hand clutching mine tightly. I hold my breath as Dr. Patel listens to her chest and checks her oxygen levels.

“When was the last time she had an asthma attack?” Dr. Patel asks me.

My heart drops. “Asthma? She’s never had one before.”

The doctor nods, scribbling something down on her clipboard. “It looks like she’s having an asthma attack. We’ll give her some medication to help her breathe easier. Don’t worry, she’s in good hands.”

I nod, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. Asthma. I never would have thought Quinn had asthma. I feel like such a bad mother for not knowing.

The doctor administers the medication through an inhaler and within a few minutes, Quinn’s breathing starts to even out.

“Thank you,” I say to the doctor and the nurse. “Thank you so much.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” the nurse says with a smile.

The doctor leaves the room, and the nurse brings out a toy chest. She opens it up, offering Quinn a plastic trinket.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know,” I mumble, more to myself than anyone else.

The nurse eyes me. “You couldn’t know until it happens,” she says. “Does asthma run in the family?”

“I…” I hesitate and glance at Quinn, who is distracted by her shiny new plastic ring. “I don’t know. Her adoption was basically closed.”

It’s no secret that Quinn was adopted. I’ve told her from the beginning that instead of growing her in my belly I went searching for her and adopted her.

The adoption hasn’t caused any issues at all.

Until now.

“It’s not only genetic,” the nurse adds. “Environmental factors play a role.”

I nod, feeling extra down now.

The nurse takes a seat next to me and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’re doing the best you can for Quinn, and that’s what really matters.”

I nod, but I can’t shake off the feeling that I should have known. That I should’ve been more prepared for something like this.

“We can schedule a follow-up appointment with a pediatrician to discuss a long-term treatment plan,” the nurse says. “And in the meantime, here’s a prescription for her inhaler. Make sure you give it to her as needed.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking the prescription from her.

Quinn looks up at me with tired eyes. “Mommy, can we go home now?”

“Yes, baby,” I say, relieved. “We can go home now.”

As we leave the hospital, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

But at the same time, I know that I need to educate myself about Quinn's asthma and how to prevent future attacks. I can't let something like this happen again.

I can't help but wonder what other surprises await us. What other things have I missed about her? I feel guilty, like I've failed her somehow.

But then Quinn tugs on my hand. "Mommy, can we get ice cream?"

"Sure, sweetie," I say, ruffling her hair.

After grabbing our cones at our favorite spot, we go into the building's shady backyard. Spotting an ant hill, Quinn immediately goes over to check it out.

Knowing she'll be occupied for at least a few minutes, I pull out my phone and call my best friend.

"Hey," Monica answers. "What kind of wine should I bring for dinner tonight?"

I clear my throat before speaking. "White. But, um, I need to talk to you about something serious."

Monica's tone changes immediately. "Of course, what's going on?"

I take a deep breath before continuing. "Quinn was just diagnosed with asthma."

There's a brief silence before Monica responds. "Oh no, Billie. I'm so sorry. How is she doing?"

"She's okay now. We just left the hospital and she's excited to get some ice cream," I say, watching Quinn from afar. "But I'm worried about her, and I'm worried about what other surprises might be waiting for us down the road."

"I can understand why you're feeling that way," Monica says, her voice full of concern. "But you need to remember that Quinn is still the same wonderful kid she's always been. And you're doing everything you can to take care of her."

"I know, but I can't help but feel like I should've known about this before.

Like I should've been more prepared," I say with a sigh.

"Girl, you have such bad mom-guilt that it's crushing."

I laugh. "Yeah."

"Hey, you know what?" she says. "I just heard about something the other day. It's this genetic testing app that's been getting a lot of buzz. It's supposed to be really accurate and easy to use. Want me to send you the link?"

I hesitate. "Genetic testing?"

"Yeah, you get your results right on the app."

I watch Quinn follow a butterfly around the yard, her ice cream dripping down her hand. "What sort of results?"

"What you're talking about — medical predispositions. But also, you can find family on it." She pauses. "Oh."

"Yeah." I cringe.

Monica clears her throat. "Would it really be that bad if you found some of Quinn's relatives?"

I swallow, trying to ignore the knot that forms in my stomach. "I don't know. I mean, what if they don't want anything to do with us? Or what if they have expectations or obligations or—"

"Stop, stop," Monica interrupts. "You're getting ahead of yourself. You don't even know if you'll find anyone. And if you do, you can take it slow. You can assess the situation and decide what you're comfortable with."

I let out a shaky breath, realizing that she's right. "Okay. Okay, send me the link. Thank you, Monica. You're the best."

"Of course, Billie. Anything for you and Quinn. And hey, I'll be over soon with that white wine. We'll have a good dinner and forget about all this stress for a little while, okay?"

I smile, feeling grateful for her unwavering support. "Okay. See you soon."

After we hang up, I download the app and fill out the required information. Once I submit a sample, the company will begin analyzing Quinn's DNA and searching for any potential relatives. I try not to think about the possibility of discovering someone who is biologically connected to her, but my mind can't help but wander. Would they look like her? Act like her? Would they want to meet her?

Monica is right. I can't live in a world of what-ifs.

And I need to think of my priority. Quinn's health.

I finally feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe this app could give me some answers, some peace of mind.

I watch Quinn a little while longer, marveling at her boundless energy and infectious laughter. She deserves the best possible care and protection, and I'm determined to give her just that.

The butterfly Quinn has been watching leaves the yard, and my daughter comes over to me. Her ice cream cone is nearly gone, and she throws it in the trash.

"Mommy, can we play a game?" she asks, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Sure, sweetie. What game do you want to play?"

Quinn thinks for a moment before grinning widely. "Let's play hide-and-seek!"

I laugh. "Okay, but we need to stay in the yard. Don't leave it. You go hide and I'll count to ten."

Quinn runs off to find the perfect hiding spot, and I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. As I count, my mind wanders back to the genetic testing app. What if it really did find a relative of Quinn's?

What if it found her dad?

A chill runs through me. There was no father listed on her birth certificate, and her birth mother said he didn't want to be involved.

Which is beyond sad. After my own relationship past and then ending up raising a kid as a single parent, I really feel for Sara, Quinn's bio mom.

The poor woman. She didn't even live to see Quinn reach three months old.

Every time I think of her, I think of the man who turned his back on her and Quinn and rage fills me.

What if this app points us straight to him? Gives us his name?

What would I do then?

Suddenly, I hear a giggle and realize that Quinn must have found a hiding spot. I finish counting and begin to search the yard for her.

As I walk, I can't help but think about my own biological family. My mom and dad were barely around when I was growing up; I left home at eighteen and we've had limited contact ever since.

Which is fine.

Kind of.

It's not that I miss them. I just wish I had parents who gave a damn about me.

And a partner to share life with.

There's another giggle, and I reach a big oak tree in the corner of the yard.

I peek around the trunk, but see no sign of Quinn. I lean my head against the tree and close my eyes, listening for any sounds that might give her away.

It's in that moment, with the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves above me, that I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around and see Quinn standing there, grinning from ear to ear.

"You found me, Mommy!" she exclaims, throwing her arms around my neck.

I hug her tightly, savoring the feel of her small body pressed against mine.

"You're a great hider, baby girl," I tell her.

Her big blue eyes are bright and her smile is wide. And in that moment, I know that everything is going to be okay. We'll navigate this new chapter

together, just like we have everything else.

CHAPTER 2

BILLIE



“**Y**ou okay over there?” Monica raises an eyebrow at me from the other side of the office we share in downtown Olympus City.

“Huh?” I look away from my computer, where I’ve been working all morning designing a logo for a new cupcake company.

“You keep tapping your fingers against the desk.”

“I do?” I glance down at my hand and sigh. “It’s just... I guess I can’t stop thinking about the whole genetics thing. The results should be back any day now.”

“It’s okay to be nervous.” Monica slides in the keyboard at her standing desk. “I would be too. This is big.”

“Yeah.” I blow out a breath that fluffs my dark bangs and gaze out the window.

The office Monica and I have been renting together for the last few years is a total score. There’s an amazing view of the harbor, and we can walk to all sorts of restaurants and coffee shops from here.

But not even the best view of the West Coast’s tech hub can pull me out of this funk. I won’t be resting until I see those results.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes on the desk. I jump, startled, and quickly pick it up. It’s a notification from the genetics app, DNAU. The results are in.

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. “I don’t know if I can open this.”

Contained in this one app is all the information I’ve been searching for about Quinn. Her medical dispositions are only a click away.

And maybe there’s more, too.

Monica comes over and puts her hands on my shoulders. “How about we pause and get a cup of coffee first? Maybe open it at the coffee shop?”

My fingers loosen around the phone, and I let out a long breath. “Okay. Let’s go.”

As soon as we step out of the office, the bright sunlight hits my face, momentarily blinding me. I squint and take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. Monica places a comforting hand on my back and leads me towards the coffee shop across the street.

Once we’re inside, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills my nostrils, and I take in the cozy atmosphere of the place. There are a few people chatting over lattes, and some others typing away on their laptops. It’s comforting being in here, surrounded by all the plants and the colorful artwork.

We order our usual drinks and take a seat by the window, where I stare apprehensively at my phone, wondering what the results will reveal. My heart races with anticipation as I take a sip of my coffee, trying to calm my nerves.

Monica notices my hesitance and smiles gently. “It’s going to be okay, Billie. Whatever the results say, we’ll deal with it together.”

I nod slowly. We sit in silence for a few moments, sipping our drinks and watching the bustling city outside.

“I keep thinking about... everything.” I shake my head.

“Which part of everything?” She gathers her thick, curly hair into a bun and secures it with a tie.

I stare at my jeans. “Finding out I couldn’t have kids. Kevin leaving...”

She makes a disgusted noise. “Kevin.” She sighs his name like it’s a disease,

and that makes me laugh.

Monica never even met Kevin, but I'm not surprised by her response. He left me when we were halfway through the adoption process, saying that he "just wasn't ready" to have a family.

To say that crushed me would be an understatement.

I recovered, though. And I moved forward, applying for adoption alone and jumping on the first opportunity that came my way — a three-month-old baby girl.

The second I brought Quinn home, everything changed. She became my whole world. Since then, my number-one focus has been her.

I haven't even been on a date in the last six years.

That's not to say I don't long for a relationship. Of course I do. I'm human.

It's just that Quinn takes up all my time and energy.

I can't help but feel a pang of envy at the couples sitting around us. They look so happy and carefree. I wonder what it would be like to have someone to share the burden with, someone to hold me when the weight of the world gets too heavy.

But then I shake my head, banishing those thoughts. I don't have the luxury of indulging in those feelings.

I can feel the tension building up inside me. I keep glancing at my phone, the notification still unopened. Finally, I can't take it anymore.

"I'm going to do it," I say.

Monica nods in understanding, and I swipe the screen to open the app.

The home page lights up.

"What does it say?" Monica asks eagerly as I open the medical dispositions tab.

"It says..." My heart drops. "Not much. That she might be lactose intolerant."

“What?” Monica shakes her head. “Can I see?”

She takes my phone and goes through the app. Meanwhile, it feels like my stomach is on the floor.

Finally, Monica looks up at me. “Billie, there’s something else here.”

My heart is racing even faster now. “What? What is it?”

Her eyes are big. “This shows a link to a relative.” She hands the phone over.

Taking a deep breath, I tap the notification and feel my stomach flip as the new page opens. My eyes scan the results, and there it is. A match. A match for a biological parent.

A father.

Everything goes blurry, and I have to put the phone down for a second.

The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. I never thought this day would come, and I’m not quite sure how I feel about it. On one hand, I’ve always wondered about Quinn’s biological parents, but on the other, I’m not sure I’m ready to face the reality of it all.

“What does it say?” Monica prompts, her voice full of curiosity.

I clear my throat, trying to steady myself. “It says her biological father’s name is James Garris.”

Monica’s eyes widen. “James Garris? As in the tech mogul?”

I nod, still reeling from the shock. “I... maybe?”

James Garris is a household name, known for his ruthless business tactics and his wealth beyond measure. Could he really be Quinn’s biological father?

“I don’t know what to do,” I say, the words tumbling out of my mouth.

Monica places a hand on my shoulder, her expression softening. “Let’s start by looking him up.”

She’s already on her phone. I’m not sure I want to do this right now, but it’s too late. She’s typing and reading out loud faster than I can compute.

“Okay, here’s his bio. Born in California, college at Stanford... co-founded a tech startup in his twenties and quickly became a millionaire. Now, at thirty-eight years old, he’s the CEO of GarrisTech, a company worth over fifty billion.”

Monica looks up at me, excitement in her eyes. “Billie, you have to meet him. Think of the possibilities. Quinn could have access to anything she wants. Private schools, exclusive clubs. She could travel the world.”

I shake my head, still trying to process everything. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that, Monica. I mean, what if he doesn’t want anything to do with us?”

“Come on, Billie. You owe it to Quinn to find out. And who knows, maybe he’ll be thrilled!”

I take a deep breath. “Isn’t he known to be an asshole, though? That’s kind of his thing.”

Monica shrugs. “Maybe, but you never know. He might surprise us all.”

I chew on my bottom lip, considering her words. She’s right about one thing: I do owe it to Quinn to find out the truth. But the thought of meeting James Garris, of facing him and telling him that he has a daughter... it’s almost too much to bear.

But I know I have to do it. For Quinn’s sake.

“Okay,” I say, finally. “Let’s do it.”

Monica grins, already scrolling through her phone again. “I’ll find his company’s information. We’ll set up a meeting.”

As she types away, I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. This is it. The moment I’ve been waiting for, albeit unsuspectingly. The moment that will change everything.

I just hope I’m ready for it.

“Wait.” I grab Monica’s wrist. “Don’t do it yet.”

She freezes. “Okay...?”

I lick my lips. “Quinn’s birth mom said that the father wanted nothing to do

with them. That he walked out of their lives. I don't..." My voice cracks. "I don't want that kind of person in my daughter's life. Even if he does want to meet her, the chances of him letting her down will be high." I shake my head. "I'm not doing that to her."

"Okay." Monica puts her phone facedown. "I'm with you, then. You shouldn't get in touch with him."

"Except I need his family medical history." I point at my phone. "The app wasn't any help there. I need to know what sort of conditions I need to look out for with Quinn."

Monica's lips twist. "So you do want to meet him?"

"Yes, but I don't want him to know about Quinn." I drop my head into my hands and groan. "And yes, I know how impossible this sounds."

"Unless..."

I peek up at her through my screen of wavy black hair. "Unless what?"

"What if you got close to James somehow? And then you could ask him health questions and never tell him about Quinn?"

I laugh. "That's crazy. How would I even get close to him?"

Monica grins. "Maybe you could apply for a job at his company. Get to know him that way."

I raise an eyebrow. "You want me to work for Quinn's father?"

Monica shrugs. "If it means getting the information you need for Quinn's health, then yes. I do."

I chew on my lip, considering her proposal. It's risky, but it might be the only way to get what I need without involving James in Quinn's life.

I twist my fingers and stare out the window.

This is insane. What kind of cans of worms could I be opening up by doing this?

"I can't." I shake my head. "It's too risky. Let's just forget about this whole

thing.” I grab my latte and take a sip.

Monica looks disappointed.

“Fine,” she says, picking up her phone again. “But we’ll have to find another way to get that information.”

We sit in silence for a few moments, both lost in thought. I can’t believe this is happening. All I ever wanted was to be a good mother to Quinn, and now I’m tangled up in this mess with her father.

“There is no other way to get the information,” I grumble.

She frowns sympathetically. “Maybe we could hire someone to break into his doctor’s office and get it.”

I laugh. She always knows how to cheer me up. “No. We’re certainly not doing that, but thank you for the idea. I appreciate it.”

She holds her coffee cup up for cheers. “Anytime.”

As we finish our drinks and walk back to the office, I can’t shake the feeling that Monica is right. I need to find a way to get that information for Quinn’s sake. But how?

CHAPTER 3

BILLIE



“**M**ommy. Mommy!” Quinn grabs my hand and shakes it, and I drop my phone.

“What? What is it?” I stare into her eyes, fear gripping my chest, already halfway off the couch.

Did she hurt herself? Is she having another asthma attack?

“The show is over.” She points at the television, where the credits are rolling on her favorite cartoon.

“Oh.” I blink at the TV, my eyes having trouble adjusting from staring at my phone for... well, how long, I’m not really sure. Long enough that I missed a whole TV episode.

You would think one or two pictures of James Garris would be enough. But nope. Not at all.

Apparently I needed to go down a whole rabbit hole of them. Needed to get lost in endless pages full of his blue eyes, rich brown hair, and big smile.

And his body.

Oh my God — his body.

There were a few pictures of him shirtless, running down sidewalks. I still feel guilty about those ones.

This is James Garris! Mega asshole. All the stories I’ve read since Monica

looked him up in the coffee shop support that reality. According to one article, one time he parked sideways in front of a grocery store — in the handicapped spots!

If there's anyone more self-centered than James Garris, I've never heard of them.

But that body...

I drag my eyes away from the TV and back to my daughter. She's still staring at me, her hand still stretched out for my attention.

"Uh, yeah. It's over, sweetie." I reach down and grab her hand. "Did you enjoy the show?"

She nods vigorously. "Yes! It was so funny!"

"That's good. Did you understand it?"

"Yes." Her eyes go wide and she shakes her head. "Well, some parts. It was tricky."

"Ah, I see. Maybe next time we can watch it together and I can explain it to you." I smile at her, grateful for the distraction.

She grins back at me. "That would be awesome! Can we have popcorn too?"

"Sure we can. Let me go make some now." I stand up, trying to push James Garris and his perfect body out of my head.

As I walk towards the kitchen, my mind drifts back to Monica's suggestion of breaking into James Garris's doctor's office. It's crazy, illegal, and downright dangerous. But what other options do I have?

I shake my head, grabbing the popcorn kernels from the pantry. This is not who I am. I don't break the law.

But I have to protect my daughter.

I take a deep breath and try to push the thoughts of breaking and entering out of my head. I'll figure something out. I always do.

We pop some popcorn and eat it on our apartment's tiny front porch, then it's

time for bath and bed. The whole time Quinn is playing with bubbles, brushing her teeth, and freaking out over not being able to find her favorite pajamas, my mind is on James Garris.

Her father.

The man who should be in her life but couldn't be bothered to show up.

Pushing the anger down, I read Quinn a bedtime story and tuck her in.

"Mommy?" She snuggles her stuffed elephant close. "What if I have another asthma?"

My chest squeezes, and I instantly want to cry.

"What if I have to go to the hospital?" she asks.

"You have the inhaler, remember? We'll use that." I rub her back gently. "You're okay tonight. And tomorrow. And the next day too."

She rolls over onto her side and pulls the blanket up to her chin. "I love you, Mommy."

"I love you too, baby." I walk to the window and pull the curtain closed. "Go to sleep. I'll be right in my room."

When I walk into my bedroom, I press my hands over my eyes. I can't do this. I can't worry about one more thing.

This has to end.

I pick up my phone and start typing James Garris back in. I'm just going to look at the job openings at his company. Maybe there will be something for a graphic designer.

If there is, I'll take that as a sign from above and I'll apply.

As I browse through the job openings, I can't help but feel a sense of defeat. How many times have I said I would never get a job at a big company like this? That I preferred the freedom of freelancing and running my own business? And now I'm considering it just so I can keep tabs on my daughter's father.

I toss my phone onto the bed and stare up at the ceiling. Is this what my life has come to? I never imagined this when I became a single mother. But here I am, grasping at straws just to keep my daughter safe.

But it also feels right.

I'm doing this for Quinn, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for her.

I pick up the phone, and there it is. A job opening at GarrisTech for a graphic designer.

I hesitate for a moment, but then I remind myself why I'm doing this. It's not about getting a job at a big company, it's about ensuring my daughter's safety. And if that means working for her father's company, then that's what I'll do.

Even though being anywhere near James Garris is sure to be uncomfortable in a number of ways.

A man that ruthless shouldn't be so hot. It should honestly be illegal.

I finish filling out the application then take a deep breath... and hit submit.

"No going back now," I mutter to myself, my fingers crossed.

CHAPTER 4

BILLIE



“**R**ight this way.” Audrey, my new manager, bustles down the eighth-floor hallway of GarrisTech, her heels clicking with every step.

“Over there is one of the kitchenettes.” She points.

I nod and don’t say anything. Being here still feels surreal. I got the job after only one interview, and they asked me to start the following week.

So here I am, step one of Operation Retrieve Medical Information in place.

What step two is, I really don’t know. Right now I’m planning on winging it.

Audrey stops and gestures to a large office with floor-to-ceiling windows. “That’s his office.”

I walk over and lift my hand to peek through the glass. James Garris is sitting at his desk, talking on the phone. His expression is one of annoyance as he glances at his computer screen. The way his brow furrows when he narrows his eyes makes him look truly terrifying. He’s wearing a suit, and it’s tailored perfectly, but he somehow manages to make it look like he’s ready to tear something apart.

Audrey steps beside me. “I know I shouldn’t say this about the boss and all, but the man is a jerk. He chews people up and spits them out.”

I blush as I turn to face her. “I’m sure he’s not that bad.”

She laughs. “Oh, honey he is. But you’re in luck. He’s only starting his day

now.”

“Well, that’s good,” I murmur.

“So…” She eyes me. “How did you get into graphic design?”

I shrug. “I’ve always been good at drawing, so I guess I just fell into it.”

“And what made you want to work here more than any other company?”

I look over at the office. “I need the money. The starting pay was good.”

She frowns at me. “You don’t have to lie about it, you know. Nobody will fault you if you’re here because you want to be with him.”

What? Did she honestly just say that?

“I’m not lying.” I shift uncomfortably. “I’m… here to take care of my daughter.”

Audrey smiles. “That’s really sweet. It’s so hard being a mom.”

“She’s my world.” I bite my lip. “Well, I should get to work.”

I hurry across the office, mind reeling. Was she seriously trying to get me to say I wanted to hook up with James Garris? Or was I reading between the lines and imagining something that wasn’t there?

I reach my cubicle and suck in a breath as a wave of anxiety threatens to overwhelm me.

James Garris is in the office, and he’s only a few hundred feet away from where I’m sitting. If I turn my chair to the right, I can look out and see the huge windows that look into his office.

This is so strange. It’s almost like having an ex-boyfriend move in next door.

My phone buzzes, and I see a text from Monica. *How’s it going? Got any info yet?*

She has to be joking. I’ve been here for all of thirty minutes.

I glance back at James’s office. He’s up now, pacing around the room while talking on the phone. One strong hand reaches up to adjust his necktie, and I

swear I melt into the chair.

Suddenly, he turns to the side and his blue eyes lock right onto mine. We stare at each other for a long second, and all the noise in the office fades away.

My heart pounds. I'm on the verge of getting up and walking into his office and...

He breaks away from my gaze and turns back to his desk. His hand goes up to his head and he runs his fingers through his hair. I feel like I might pass out.

His phone call ends, and he strides out of his office and out of view.

I'm a complete and total dork, but I'm almost certain I'm blushing.

Instead of coming over to the cubicles, James gets into the elevator and disappears. It feels like I exhale fully for the first time since entering this building.

If I'm going to be this undone every time I see him, how will I ever talk to him?

I need to get over being so affected by him. So what if he's attractive? So are millions of other men.

"Hi." A guy with close-cropped blond hair and a kind expression appears on the other side of my cubicle. "It's your first day here, right?"

I turn to face the stranger, grateful for the interruption. "Yes, it is. Hi, I'm Billie." I hold out my hand, and he shakes it with a friendly smile.

"I'm David." He points to the cubicle next to mine. "I'm your neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood."

I chuckle. "Thanks. Nice to meet you, David."

"So, how's the new gig treating you?" He leans against the partition between our cubicles.

"So far it seems... intense," I admit. "But I'm excited to be here."

David nods sympathetically. “Yeah, it’s a cutthroat environment. But if you can handle it, you’ll go far.”

I frown. “What do you mean, ‘if I can handle it’?”

He shrugs. “This place isn’t for everyone. You have to be willing to work longer hours, put up with a lot of pressure, and sometimes even sabotage from your colleagues.”

My stomach drops. “Sabotage? What do you mean?”

David leans in close, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. “This is a competitive industry, Billie. People will do whatever it takes to get ahead. I’ve seen coworkers steal each other’s ideas, spread rumors, and even frame each other for mistakes they didn’t make.”

My stomach twists at his words. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. “That sounds horrible.”

David chuckles. “It can be. But it’s not all bad. There are good people here too. Like me,” he adds with a grin.

I can’t help but smile back at him. “I’m glad to hear that. It’s nice to have someone friendly around.”

Whether his friendliness is genuine or not, I can’t tell. It could be that he’s trying to get me to trust him in order to keep a closer eye on me.

I hate thinking that way, but so far this whole office is giving off extreme mean-girl vibes. It feels like I’m back in high school.

“Do you have any questions?” David asks.

“Um.” I look at the desk in front of me. “Is there an office supplies closet?”

“Yep. One floor down.”

“Thanks.”

I give him a smile and stand up. There are a few things in my cubicle I noticed I need, and I already feel constrained by this place. A few minutes of stretching my legs would be nice.

David goes back to his seat and I make my way over to the elevators. The one on the end opens immediately, and I step into the empty space.

Whew. All right. A moment alone to breathe.

“Hold on!” a man yells, and a second later he darts through the closing doors, barely making it on.

I start to say hello to him, but my mouth ends up falling open with no sounds coming out.

It’s James Garris.

I’m standing right next to my daughter’s biological father.

He stares straight ahead, smoothing his suit, not even noticing my staring.

Good God, he smells amazing. Like sandalwood and citrus. I can’t help but take a deep breath, trying to commit the scent to memory.

The elevator starts descending, and I try to steady my breathing. This is not the time or place to be getting all hot and bothered over a man, especially not him.

But damn, it’s hard not to. James is tall and lean, with chiseled features and piercing blue eyes. He’s the kind of guy who turns heads wherever he goes, and he knows it.

I tear my gaze away from him and focus on the elevator doors. I just need to get through this quick ride...

Wait. What am I thinking?

This is the opportunity I came here for!

Gathering all my courage, I clear my throat. “I’m Billie. Today is my first day. I’m a...”

He gives me a withering look, and the words die in my throat. With that one expression, he says everything.

What is a pleb like you doing talking to me? Are you really going to say something?

Go ahead. Be my guest.

As if to prove my point, his phone buzzes and he fishes it out of his pocket. He glances at the screen and types out a quick message before putting it back.

I'm staring at the back of his head, seething.

I want to yell. I want to punch something.

This is James Garris, the sperm donor who knocked up Quinn's birth mom and then bailed when she got pregnant. He didn't want to be a father, and he made that very clear.

I'm shaking with anger. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm down.

At least my anger is better than my pain.

James's phone buzzes again, and he checks it.

I can't help it. I want to give this guy a hard time, want to remind him how rude it is to ignore someone. It doesn't matter that I'm just another employee at his company. I'm a human being too.

"Nice weather today," I comment.

He arches a brow. It's raining cats and dogs outside.

James doesn't say anything, though, just goes back to scrolling through his phone. I grit my teeth and stare at the elevator doors.

Why did I have to run into him on my first day? Of all the days...

The elevator shudders and comes to an abrupt stop. James looks up from his phone, his expression unreadable.

"What the hell?" I murmur, clutching my purse.

James hits the emergency button but nothing happens. "Looks like we're stuck," he says flatly.

"Yep," I snap.

Silence falls between us, broken only by the occasional beep from James's phone. I try to ignore him, but it's impossible. He's right there, inches away

from me, and I can feel his heat like a physical thing.

I take another deep breath, trying to calm down. This isn't the time to lose my shit.

But then, the doors finally ding open, and I step out quickly, not wanting to spend a second longer in his presence than I have to.

As I make my way to the supply closet, I try to shake off the encounter. I have a job to do, after all. I need to focus on that.

But as I walk through the halls, I feel his eyes burning into my back.

Does he know who I am? What I'm here for? Is the hunted actually one step ahead of me?

I shake away the doubt. That's impossible. No way could he know who I am.

And not that it matters. Once I have the information I need, I'll be out of this company in a minute. James Garris will forget all about me, just like he forgot all about his daughter.

CHAPTER 5

BILLIE



“Okay. So how’s it going?” Monica curls up on my couch and blows on her tea.

It’s nine p.m. and Quinn has just gone to sleep. Time to talk about all the juicy stuff.

Except what I have to report isn’t very juicy.

I drop my head against the cushions and groan. I’ve been working for James all week and except for our interaction on my first day, I haven’t spoken to him once.

And I still don’t know how I’ll get his health information. Which is a serious problem.

“Bad,” I say. “I thought that once I had my foot in the door, I’d figure out what to do next.”

Monica frowns. “You need to figure out a way to get that information, girl. What about his assistant? Maybe you could try and get close to her.”

I shake my head. “She’s always with him. And even if she wasn’t, I don’t think she’s the type to give away confidential information.”

Monica takes a sip of her tea. “What about breaking into his office?”

I sit up straight. “What? No, Monica. That’s illegal.”

She shrugs. “I’m just trying to brainstorm here. You need to find a way to get

that information.”

I know she’s right. This is Quinn’s well-being we’re talking about here. I can’t afford to waste any more time. But breaking into James’s office? That’s a line I’m not sure I’m ready to cross.

“What if you just asked him?”

I shake my head. “I tried talking to him in the elevator, and he literally looked at me like I was dog poop he’d stepped in.”

Monica sets down her mug and leans forward. “Then maybe it’s time to try a different approach. You could try seducing him.”

I almost choke on my tea. “What? Are you crazy?”

But as soon as the words leave my mouth, I realize that maybe she’s onto something. It’s extreme, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

But, really? Am I willing to stoop that low?

“I can’t do that,” I say, a small part of myself disappointed. Seducing James would have been oddly satisfying...

Except he would never go for me. He made that and so much more clear in the elevator.

“I don’t think I’m his type, anyway,” I add.

Monica scoffs. “You seriously have no clue how gorgeous you are, do you?”

I roll my eyes at her, but I can’t deny that her words give me a small boost of confidence. “Thanks, but I don’t think that’s the issue here.”

“Every man who is straight has a type, and that’s female.”

I laugh and shake my head, not agreeing at all. Then again, who am I to say?

“Okay,” I say slowly. “Let’s say I do it. How would I even go about seducing him? It’s been so long...”

I trail off. Monica knows about the desert that is my dating life, but it’s still embarrassing to talk about.

She leans back in her chair, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “Well, first off, you need to figure out his interests. What does he like? What turns him on? Then you need to do some investigating. Find out what he likes to do in his free time, what kind of women he’s into.”

I nod slowly, feeling like a spy in a movie. “Okay. And then what?”

“Then you work on your appearance,” Monica says, looking me up and down. “You already look great, but why not step it up a notch? Get a new outfit, do your hair and makeup differently...”

I swallow nervously. Already, this is feeling like a flimsy plan. I remember what Audrey said my first day on the job, how she reduced me to yet another woman trying to bed the boss.

I don’t want to even pretend to be that way. There has to be another way.

Monica takes another sip of her tea before placing it back on the coffee table. “Fine. If you don’t want to seduce him, what about blackmail?”

My eyebrows shoot up. “What do I have on him?”

“I don’t know, but maybe you could dig around and find something. Everyone has secrets.”

I consider her suggestion for a moment, but then shake my head. “I don’t want to start something like that. It’s too risky.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Monica asks, her voice tinged with impatience.

I let out a deep sigh. “I don’t know. I’ll have to figure something else out.”

We sit in silence for a few moments and then it hits me. “What about going through his trash? Maybe I could find a statement from his doctor. If it’s itemized, I might have something.”

She snaps her fingers. “That’s perfect!”

I nod, feeling satisfied — and nervous. If I get caught going through James’s office, no doubt I’ll be fired. Maybe even have the police called on me.

It’s the least immoral of all our ideas, though, so it’s the one I’m going with.

Here's keeping my fingers crossed that it actually works.



The next day, I'm sitting at my desk working on the week's project when Audrey bustles up. "Last-minute meeting," she says. "James's office. The whole design team is needed."

I swallow nervously, feeling a knot form in my stomach. This is it. This is my chance to get into his office and search for anything that might help me in my quest to win his heart.

I quickly gather my things and make my way down the hall, my heart pounding in my chest. When I arrive at James's door, I pause for a moment to take a deep breath before knocking lightly.

"Come in," a voice that sounds like it belongs to James's assistant Terri calls out from the other side of the door.

I push the door open and step inside, doing my best to keep my nerves in check. James is sitting behind his desk, his gaze focused on the papers in front of him. The rest of the design team — nearly a dozen people total — are sitting and standing around the room.

A minute passes without James saying anything. He just keeps reading his papers.

I glance around the room. Is this normal?

"When is the meeting starting?" I whisper to David, who's standing next to me.

He just shrugs, looking as confused as I feel.

"Good morning, everyone," James finally says, looking up from his work. "I've called this meeting to discuss plans for the Green Digit project."

He outlines the project goals and the preliminary work that's been done. Despite my nerves, I find myself impressed by his knowledge and attention to detail.

As he speaks, I can't help but steal glances at him. He's dressed in a sharp suit, his dark hair perfectly styled. I wonder if he's noticed my new outfit, my hair styled in loose waves. Probably not.

But then, as if sensing my thoughts, he looks up and catches my eye. For a moment, I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. But then he looks away and continues with his presentation.

As the meeting goes on, I find myself getting lost in thoughts of him. I imagine what it would be like to be with him, to feel his strong arms around me, to kiss his soft lips.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. What the hell is wrong with me?

The man is a jerk! Even if he hadn't abandoned his pregnant ex, I would still think very little of him.

I try to focus on the discussion, but my mind is racing with plans of searching his office for any information I can find.

"So with all of that in mind," James is saying, "let's take a look at the rough design template."

His assistant clicks on the screen on the wall, where the design template appears in a large size.

It's for some new app about plant care, but the design is boring. Flat.

I speak up before I even realize I've opened my mouth.

"I have to say, the graphics aren't great," I say, my eyes locked on James. "It needs more color and some interesting designs to really make it pop."

James turns to look at me, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "Do you have any suggestions on how to improve it, Billie?"

I freeze. He knows my name?

I need to say something, but my tongue feels heavy. The whole room stares at me, and I lick my lips.

"Whenever you're ready." James steeples his fingers and grins, and I want to

knock the smirk right off his face.

My heart races, but I pull myself together. This is my moment. If James sees I'm a real asset to this team, then that could be the open door I need.

"I think we could add more greenery to the design, maybe some floral patterns, to really emphasize the plant-care aspect of the app. And we could use brighter colors to make it more eye-catching."

James strokes his chin, considering my suggestion. "That's a good point, Billie. Let's work on incorporating those changes into the design."

Audrey glances at me, her lips turned down. She looks pissed — and maybe a little jealous.

Of what, though? That James like my idea? Or that I have his attention at all?

In fact, now that I notice it, she's not the only one sending me dirty looks.

I feel a rush of relief and triumph. I've made myself useful, and I've gotten a foot in the door. It's the first time James has even spoken to me, and maybe this means he'll even come to trust me and I'll get my chance to be alone in his office.

He goes over a few more points, and everyone listens attentively and takes notes. With the meeting dismissed, I head for the door with everyone else.

"Billie." James's deep voice stops me in my tracks.

I turn around slowly, doing my best to keep my face composed. "Yes?"

As he walks up to me, I can't help but catch a whiff of his cologne. He smells so good. I shake my head, trying to focus.

"Good suggestions today." He studies my face as if seeing me for the first time.

"Thank you, sir," I say, my heart pounding. "I'm glad I could contribute."

James nods, his eyes lingering on me for a moment longer than necessary. "I was wondering if you could come to my office later to discuss the project further. Just the two of us."

My heart leaps in my chest. This is it. This is my chance.

“Of course,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “When would be a good time?”

“How about in an hour?” he suggests. “I have a few things to wrap up, and then I’ll be free.”

I nod, feeling a smile spread across my face. “I’ll be there.”

As I walk away, I can feel the eyes of my coworkers on me. Some look jealous, others confused or annoyed. But I don’t care. I’m having a one-one-one in James’s office, and it doesn’t really matter what he has in store for me.

I’m on the path to achieving my goal, and nothing is more important than that.

CHAPTER 6

JAMES



“**M**r. Garris?” My assistant, Terri, holds her tablet aloft, eager and ready.

I blink, my eyes adjusting from staring out the window. “What was that?”

“I asked what would you like for lunch, sir?” She cocks her head, the slightest expression of concern on.

Which is saying a lot. In her early fifties and having personally assisted some of the most powerful politicians and CEOs in the world, there’s very little that fazes Terri.

Seeing her concerned about me is more than a little unnerving.

“Perhaps your favorite salad?” she prompts.

“Yes, that sounds good,” I say, my mind still preoccupied. “Thank you, Terri.”

She nods and begins typing on her tablet. I take a deep breath, trying to clear my head. The meeting earlier went well, and Billie’s suggestions impressed me. But it wasn’t just her ideas that caught my attention. It was her, her confidence, her poise under pressure. There’s something about her that draws me in and makes me want to know more.

“I need a water,” I say.

“Of course.” Terri starts to leave my office, but I shake my head.

“I got it.”

She hesitates at the door. “Mr. Garris, are you feeling well?”

“I’m fine, Terri,” I say, waving her off as I stand up from my desk. “Just need some fresh air.”

I make my way to the kitchen across from my office, taking deep breaths and trying to get my mind off of Billie. It’s not appropriate to be thinking about an employee like this. But there’s something about her that makes me feel alive again, something I haven’t felt in a long time.

I fill a cup with water and chug it. There’s a mini fridge in my office, of course, but sometimes I need to stretch my legs and look at something different for a few minutes. See things from a fresh perspective.

Running my fingers through my hair, I straighten my tie and head back to my office.

As soon as I step inside, I see Billie waiting for me, her back turned to me as she studies one of the paintings on the wall.

I watch her for a moment, admiring the curve of her back and the way her dark hair falls in soft waves down her shoulders. She’s wearing a navy-blue skirt that hugs her hips in a way that’s both professional and alluring.

“Billie,” I say, my voice low and smooth. She turns to face me, and I can see the surprise in her eyes. Her cheeks flush pink.

“Close the door,” I say, my voice low and commanding. I make my way over to my desk, doing my best to not look at her.

She turns to do as I say, and I take the seat behind my desk.

“How long have you been here for?” I ask.

For a moment, she seems to hesitate, but then she steps forward. “About a week.”

I nod, pretending to read through some documents on my desk. I can feel her watching me, always watching me. It’s like she’s lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. She’s like all the other ambitious

people at this company.

Except... different, somehow.

Anyone else would have been fired on the spot for criticizing a design without being first asked for their opinion.

I look up at her, taking in the way her eyes dart nervously over my face. She's not like the others. She's not just ambitious, she's brilliant. I can feel it in the way that she moves, in the way that she speaks.

"I'm sorry if I overstepped in the meeting earlier," she says, her voice soft. "I just thought that maybe my ideas could help. I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't," I say, leaning back in my chair and folding my arms across my chest. "In fact, I was impressed."

Her eyes widen slightly, and I can see the corners of her mouth twitch upwards. "Really?"

I nod, a slow smile spreading across my own face. "Really. I think there's a lot of potential there."

She steps forward, her body language hesitant. "Thank you, sir."

I wave off the formal address. "Call me James."

"All right, James."

It's unexpected how much I like hearing my name on her lips.

So unexpected that I actually regret giving her permission to use it.

Clearing my throat, I drag my mind out of the gutter. "And what are your thoughts on the company so far, Billie?"

She takes a deep breath, her eyes flickering up to meet mine briefly. "I think it's an exciting place to be. And your leadership is very inspiring."

I smirk, feeling a surge of pride. "Is that so?"

"Yes," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "You have a way of getting results that is very impressive. And you're always so calm and

collected.”

I lean back in my chair, studying her intently. “And what about you, Billie? Do you know how to stay calm and collected under pressure?”

She nods slowly, her eyes locked on mine. “Yes, I do. I’ve always been good at handling stressful situations.”

“Good,” I say, standing up and walking around my desk to stand in front of her. “Because this environment is a fast-paced one, and I guarantee unlike any you’ve experienced yet. There’s a reason we’re the most successful tech company on the continent.”

Billie gulps, her eyes widening slightly at my words. I can see the apprehension in her expression, but also a hint of excitement. She’s like a deer caught in headlights, but with a fierce determination lurking beneath the surface. I can’t help but find her all the more alluring.

“I’m up for the challenge,” she says, her voice steady.

I lean in closer to her, so close that I can smell the sweet scent of her perfume. “I don’t doubt that,” I say. “In fact, I think you’ll excel here. You have a certain... fire in you that I appreciate.”

She shivers, and I can’t help but feel a surge of desire at the sight. I can tell she’s attracted to me too, even if she’s trying to hide it.

But, no. What am I thinking?

I didn’t call Billie in here to hit on her. My employees are strictly off-limits when it comes to that. On the contrary, I called her in because I liked her ideas in the meeting and I want to hear what else she has to say.

“You have a good eye.” I return to my seat and gesture for her to sit across from me.

Billie takes a seat, her eyes fixed on me as I shuffle through the papers on my desk. I can’t help but feel a sense of power as I look up at her. She’s a beautiful woman, with rich black hair and wide blue eyes, and I know that I have a certain effect on her. But I need to stay focused on the task at hand. I need to hear her ideas, and see what she can bring to the table.

“I want to bring you onto the Green Digit project. As head designer.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Oh.”

I can see the excitement in her expression and I can’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction. Billie is talented, and I know that she’ll do an excellent job.

She nods eagerly, her eyes lighting up. “I won’t let you down,” she says.

“I know you won’t,” I reply, my voice low. “And in return, I’ll make sure you get all the resources you need to make this project a success.”

She smiles at me, and I can’t help but feel a sense of warmth spreading through me. This is what leadership is all about — recognizing talent and nurturing it.

“It will mean spending a lot of one-on-one time with me,” I add. “And I want you to know that I have high expectations. Whatever you think you know about this business, throw that out the window.”

Billie hesitates, her long lashes fluttering.

“Will that be a problem?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, not at all. I’m ready for the challenge.”

I can’t help but feel a spark of excitement at her response. Billie is exactly the kind of employee I need for this project. With her talent and my guidance, we can make Green Digit a huge success.

“Great,” I say. “Let’s get started right away. I’ll arrange for you to have access to all the resources you need, and we can start working on the project plan tomorrow morning.”

As I begin to explain the project to her, I can see the excitement growing in her eyes. She’s like a sponge, soaking up every detail and idea I throw her way.

As we stand up, I’m aware of how close we are, and how the atmosphere between us has shifted. But I remind myself that I’m her boss, and this is a professional relationship.

“Thank you,” she says, smiling up at me. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” I reply, returning her smile. “Now, let’s get to work.”

She moves to leave, and I catch her arm. “One more thing,” I say, my voice low.

“Yes?” she asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Realizing that I’ve overstepped by grabbing her arm, I quickly release it.

Shit. What the hell is wrong with me?

It’s like my thinking brain has gone to hell. This woman walks into the room and everything up there gets scrambled.

“James?” she prompts. “You said there was something else?”

“Yes.” I clear my throat and take a step back from her. “I want to see what you come up with for the project before we present it to the rest of the team. Just to make sure everything is perfect.”

She nods, a look of relief washing over her face. “Of course, I’ll make sure it’s ready for your review.”

“Perfect,” I say, feeling some of the tension between us dissipating. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

As she leaves my office, I can’t help but wonder what just happened between us. I’ve always prided myself on being professional and composed, but something about Billie throws me off balance.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I have a project to focus on, and I won’t let anything distract me from making it a success.

Maybe it’s been too long since I’ve been with a woman, and that’s what has me all messed up.

Pulling out my phone, I text a girl I’ve been casually dating for the past couple months. And of course it’s casual.

I don’t do serious. I tried that a couple times, and it wasn’t for me.

But as I stare at her name on my phone, I can’t help but feel a sense of emptiness. This woman, who I’ve been seeing for months, doesn’t excite me

the way Billie does.

I shake my head, trying to push the thought away. I can't let myself be distracted by an employee.

Dinner tonight? I text Camille.

She responds almost immediately.

Sure, where do you want to meet?

I quickly reply, suggesting a restaurant I know she likes. As I hit send, I can't help but wonder if I'm making the right choice. Maybe I should cancel and focus on work instead. But then again, a night out might be just what I need to clear my head.

Billie is smart and creative. Beautiful, too. But if she's going to be a distraction then that will be a problem, and it's up to me to make sure things don't come to that.

CHAPTER 7

BILLIE



“It’s time to put your shoes on, sweetie.”

“No!” Quinn sits on the living room floor, arms crossed. “I don’t want to.”

I sigh, catching sight of the clock on the wall. Damn it. We should have left for school drop-off ten minutes ago.

I kneel down in front of her, trying to coax her into getting ready. “Come on, Quinn. You don’t want to be late for school, do you?”

“I’m not going today.”

“What do you mean you’re not going?” I ask, my patience wearing thin. “You can’t just skip school whenever you want.”

“I don’t feel good,” she whines, rubbing a hand over her stomach.

I reach out to feel her forehead, checking for a fever. “You don’t feel warm. Are you sure you’re not just trying to get out of going to school?”

She shakes her head adamantly. “No, Mommy. I really don’t feel good.”

I let out a long sigh. In the past, when I was working for myself, I could afford this kind of delay.

But I can’t today. Not on the first day of my big project with James.

Quinn pouts, but eventually relents and gets up to put her shoes on. As she

does, I look around our tiny apartment and try to ignore the gnawing feeling of dread in my gut.

Things have been tough lately. Money is tight, and I feel like I'm constantly running on fumes. The only thing keeping me going is the thought of the project I'm working on with James.

James. The thought of him sends a shiver down my spine. I can't deny that I'm drawn to him in a way that I shouldn't be. He's smart, successful, and incredibly attractive. But he's also my boss, and I can't afford to let my feelings get in the way of my work. This job is the in I need.

Taking a deep breath, I bring my attention back to Quinn. "Are you nervous about going to the pumpkin patch?"

She shakes her head, apparently having forgotten all about today's field trip. "No, I'm excited. We get to pick our own pumpkins!"

"That sounds like fun," I say, forcing a smile. "I'll pick you up from school and we can carve the pumpkin together, okay?"

Quinn grins, her eyes lighting up. "Really? Can we make pumpkin pie, too?"

I chuckle. "Maybe we can save that for another day. We should hurry, though, so you don't miss your class leaving."

As we drive to school, Quinn chatters on about the pumpkin patch and the different pumpkins she hopes to find. I try to stay present in the moment, enjoying her excitement, but my mind keeps drifting to James. I wonder if he's as nervous as I am about working together. I wonder if he's thinking about me, too.

When we arrive at the school, I give Quinn a tight hug before she disappears into the crowd of kids. I watch her go, feeling a pang of guilt for not being able to spend more time with her. It would have been great to be able to chaperone today's field trip.

But I can't afford to let that guilt consume me. I need to focus on this project. Need to remember I'm doing this for her.

Pulling out of the school parking lot, I glance again at the time. There's no

way around it. I'll be at least twenty minutes late to work.

And based on everything I've learned about James so far, he won't like that. Not one bit.

I try to push the thought out of my mind as I speed towards work, but it's no use. My mind keeps conjuring images of James, his piercing blue eyes and chiseled jawline. I can't help the way I feel, but I know it's dangerous to let my guard down around him. One wrong move, and everything I've worked for will go up in smoke.

Finally, I arrive at the office, heart racing and palms sweating. I rush to the elevator, hoping I'm not too late. As soon as the doors open, I'm face-to-face with James. He looks up from his phone and narrows his eyes.

"You're late," he says, his voice cold and clipped.

"I know, I'm sorry," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. "My..."

I trail off, not wanting to tell him about Quinn. That feels way too personal and exposing. Even if he doesn't know that she's his daughter.

"My cat got sick," I finish. "I had to drop her off at the vet."

James eyes me for a moment, and I feel like he's seeing right through me. My heart pounds in my chest as I wait for his response. Finally, he nods curtly.

"Fine. Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

I nod, relieved, and follow him into his office. We sit down at the table where the project materials are laid out. James starts to explain what he wants me to do, but I can't focus on his words. All I can think about is his proximity, his cologne filling my senses.

It's dangerous, I know. But I can't help myself. My body reacts to him even as my mind screams at me to stay away.

As he goes over the details of the project, I feel his eyes on me. I glance up, and our eyes meet for a brief moment before I look away.

"So." He straightens up and folds his arms. "What designs do you have drawn up for this?"

I feel my eyebrows rise. He expects me to already have some designs? We just started ten minutes ago!

Apparently, the implied expectation was that I would work on them last night.

I mentally curse myself for not realizing this earlier.

“I have a few ideas,” I lie, grabbing my notebook and flipping through the pages. “But I’ll need some more time to develop them.”

He nods once. “I’ll take a look anyway.”

Something glints in his eye. Is he calling me on my bluff? Waiting for me to admit that I don’t have any rough designs down?

And then I remember them: the doodles I drew months ago when I was designing graphics for an app for a client. They loved the ideas but eventually went with a different template.

Those old sketches will be perfect to show James now.

I swallow hard, trying to maintain my composure as I hand him my notebook. He flips through the pages, nodding occasionally. I can feel his gaze burning into me, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Interesting,” he finally says, setting the notebook down. “But I think we can do better.”

My heart sinks. I knew I should have worked on those designs last night. These are good, but they’re not a perfect match for what we need now.

“I can come up with something better,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment.

“I’m sure you can,” James says, standing up and walking over to me. He leans down, his face inches from mine. “But I need you to do it now. We have a deadline to meet, remember?”

I nod, feeling a flush spread across my cheeks. His proximity is overwhelming, and I can’t think straight.

“I’ll get right on it,” I say, standing up.

“You don’t need to go to your desk.” He starts clearing space at his. “I need you right here so we can bounce ideas off one another.”

My stomach flips, and I can’t tell if I’m more excited or terrified.

As I sit down, I can feel his body heat radiating off of him. The scent of his cologne is intoxicating, and I can’t help but take a deep breath in. He notices my reaction, and a small smirk appears on his lips.

I ignore him. The man is probably used to every woman he sees fawning over him.

Well, not me. Even if he is insanely attractive, I’m not going to fall for it.

I brush a piece of hair out of my face. “So, what specifically are you looking for in these designs?” I ask, trying to focus on the task at hand.

He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms. “I want something sleek and modern, but not too cluttered. It needs to be user-friendly.”

I nod, jotting down notes in my notebook. “Got it. What about the color scheme? Any preferences?”

“That’s where I see you coming in. You had quite the opinion on colors in our meeting yesterday. What do you think?”

He asks the question like it’s a challenge, like he wants me to prove myself to him.

Fine. Challenge accepted.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts before diving in. “I think we should go with a monochromatic color scheme,” I say, keeping my tone confident. “Maybe with some pops of a brighter color for accents. It’ll give it a clean, modern look while still being visually interesting. Yes, it needs color but it will be too distracting from the content if we go big with the green tones. That’s also something people would expect from this app, and we want to stand out while supporting and driving where we want the user’s focus to go.”

James considers this for a moment before nodding in agreement. “I like it. Let’s start with a base of black and white and work from there.”

I nod, feeling a sense of satisfaction that he's taking my ideas seriously.

As we start brainstorming, I can feel the energy between us building. Our ideas start to flow freely, and we bounce off each other effortlessly. I can't remember the last time I worked with someone so in sync with me.

I can see where Quinn gets her intelligence and creativity from.

But not her empathy. This man doesn't have a shred of that, and I need to remember who I'm dealing with.

"What about a lighter shade of this?" James reaches over and taps my tablet, and his hand brushes mine. It's a small gesture, but it sends a jolt of electricity through me. I can feel my face flush as I quickly pull my hand away, trying to ignore the way my heart is racing.

"Y-yeah," I stammer. "That's great."

He goes around the desk and picks up his coffee from earlier. "Good. Let's see how that looks."

I can't help but notice that he's not looking directly at me. Did he notice my reaction when he touched me?

Did he feel what I did?

It doesn't matter. James Garris is the kind of man who chews women up and spits them out. Just look at what he did to Quinn's birth mom.

"I'll make the change." I focus on the screen again.

"It's almost lunch. I'll have something ordered in so we can keep going."

Of course he doesn't leave his office for lunch. Does the man do anything other than work?

Other than hitting gym, that is. Even through his suit, it's clear he's perfectly toned.

I bite my lip. What's wrong with me? I'm here on a mission!

"How does salad sound?" James picks up his phone to call his assistant.

My heart beats a little faster as I nod. I've found an in, and I'm gonna go for it before I lose my nerve.

I wait until he's placed the order and hung up. "Salad is perfect," I say. "High blood pressure runs in the family, and I just want to do what I can, you know?"

My cheeks warm. Will this work?

"Hmm." He nods and picks up his phone.

I swallow hard. "What about you? What sort of things run in your family? Allergies, say... or asthma?"

My voice squeaks at the end, and James looks at me like I've grown a second head.

He sets his phone down on the desk and crosses his arms, studying me for a moment. "Why do you ask?"

I shift in my chair, feeling suddenly exposed. "Just curious, I guess. It's always good to know your coworkers' medical history, in case of emergencies or anything like that."

James raises an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

I nod, desperately trying to maintain eye contact. "Yes, it's just a precaution. I mean, you never know when something might happen and you need to know if someone has a history of heart disease or something like that."

He leans back in his chair, his eyes still fixed on me. "I see. Well, fortunately for me, I have a clean bill of health."

I bit the inside of my cheek. O-kay, so that's good...

But what about the rest of his family?

"Do you have any siblings?" I ask, then smile big. "I'm an only child."

Hopefully, that was a smooth-as-butter transition, and it just looks like I'm trying to get to know him better.

"Lunch should be here soon." He stretches his arms above his head. "It's a

good time to take a break if you want one.”

I try not to look defeated. “Oh. Right. Sure.”

Feeling like I’ve failed horribly, I grab my purse and head for the door. As I’m opening it, I see James’s reflection in the glass. He’s looking right at me, a puzzled expression on.

I take a deep breath and push the door open before stepping out into the hallway. Damn it, I need to get my act together. I can’t let him get the best of me like this.

Time is running out. I don’t have the cutthroat attitude to stay at this job forever, and if I don’t get the information I need before I leave then my chance will be over.

James is clearly a hard nut to crack, but I’m also determined. When it comes to Quinn, there’s very little I won’t do.

CHAPTER 8

JAMES



“James!” A little shriek fills the air and Alexa runs at me, her pigtailed flying behind her.

Her little brother Manny follows, and a moment later the two rug rats are around my knees.

“What did you bring us?” Alexa demands.

Carlos, who has walked into the backyard right behind me, shakes his head. “Hey, now. James isn’t your personal toy store.”

I shake my head, trying not to smile. “Your dad is right. I’m not a personal toy store. However...” I reach into my pockets.

The kids shout with glee, knowing what’s coming next.

I pull out two small bags of candy and hand one to each of them. They each grab a handful and run off to play.

“Thanks, James,” Carlos says, clapping me on the back. “The kids love you.”

I shrug, a little uncomfortable with the praise. “I love them too. They’re good kids.”

We take our beers and sit down at the picnic table, enjoying the warm evening. Carlos has invited me over for a barbecue, and I’m happy for the distraction. Work hasn’t been its usual sanctuary this last week, and I’ve been feeling oddly ungrounded.

The sliding door opens, and Carlos's wife Jen comes out. "Hey, you." She puts a dish of watermelon on the table.

"Hey." I get up and she pulls me into a hug.

I've never been much of a hugger, but with some people it's not optional. And, even if I won't admit it, I like getting hugs at this house.

Hell, I like everything about this house. The sounds of laughter and the smell of cooking meat fill the air, and I feel at peace. It's been a long time since I've felt like this, and it's all thanks to Carlos and his family.

"What can I help with?" I ask Jen.

"Nothing," she says. "Everything is done. We're just waiting for the burgers to cook."

Carlos opens up the grill and flips said burgers over. "What's new with you?"

"Nothing much." Immediately, a picture of Billie flashes up in my mind.

Which is weird. We have new employees all the time. There's nothing special about her.

Aside from her beauty.

And her brains.

And her creativity.

"...real nice woman," Jen is saying.

I pull myself away from my thoughts, feeling ashamed for getting so distracted.

"I think you'd really like my friend Flo." Jen picks up a few toys from the patio and tosses them into the toy bin. "She's single, too."

"Oh." I could go on a date with her friend. Sure. Why not?

I went on three dates last week — with three different women. They were all... okay.

Fine. They were boring. The women didn't do it for me, and I don't get why.

They were all gorgeous and eager to please me.

Maybe too eager. Maybe I'm craving time with someone who isn't tripping over themselves to lay out a red carpet for me. Someone like...

"No way," Carlos says. "You're not setting Flo up with James. She's too nice. He'll crush her to pieces." He looks at me. "Sorry man, but it's true."

Usually I appreciate his blunt honesty. Today, though, it's bothering me.

People have called me even worse things than an asshole before, and I've always just shrugged the comments off.

But what if they're true?

"Remember that girl last year." Carlos snaps his fingers. "The one with red hair. What was her name?"

I try to focus on Carlos's question instead of my own insecurities. "Lila?" I suggest.

"That's the one." Carlos nods. "What happened to her?"

"She moved away," Jen says.

"No, I mean, what happened between you two?" Carlos cocks an eyebrow at me. "I thought for sure you two were going to be a thing."

I know what Carlos means. Lila and I had a connection that was hard to ignore. We laughed at the same jokes and had similar taste in movies. But then, one day, I started feeling like I was being boxed in. Like I couldn't breathe.

I stopped returning her calls, and that was that.

"I don't know," I lie. "It didn't work out."

"Too bad," Jen says. "She was really sweet."

I push Lila out of my mind and try to focus on the present. "So, about Flo..."

Carlos laughs. "Nice try, buddy. Find your own date."

I grin, but inside I'm feeling more and more unsure about what I want.

Maybe I do need to find my own date. Someone who challenges me instead of pandering to my every whim.

“I’m going to mix up the lemonade,” Jen announces, before heading inside.

The sound of cartoons fills the air. Alexa and Manny are inside now, watching TV. Which leaves Carlos and I alone on the patio.

“So, how’s work?” he asks, taking a sip of his beer.

I take a swig of my own beer before answering. “Work is work. Same old, same old. How’s the T-shirt business?”

“It’s been good, man.” Carlos leans back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his face. “We’re really starting to pick up some steam now the new location is open. And I’ve got a big order coming in next week.”

“That’s great, Carlos. I’m happy for you.” I genuinely am. Carlos has come a long way since our group-home days.

There was a time when the two of us were nothing but troubled teens without families, just trying to get by in the world. It’s good to see him succeeding.

“What are you working on?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment before answering. I usually love talking about work, but lately I’ve been trying to get it off my mind.

“This app for a new plant care company,” I say. “And other things too, but that one I’m working on personally.”

“It’s not going well?”

I eye him. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugs. “When you talk about it you look... I dunno... upset.”

I swallow against a lump in my throat. “There’s this new employee.”

Carlos leans forward, interested. “New employee?”

I nod. “Yeah. Her name is Billie. She’s just... she’s been making things difficult. I don’t know if I can work with her.”

“What’s the problem?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “She’s just... she’s always questioning everything I do. Like, I’m the one in charge, but she acts like she knows better than me. It’s frustrating. But she’s also smart. We’ve ended up using more than a few of her ideas.”

Carlos laughs so hard he spits out beer.

“What?” I demand.

He’s still laughing. “Your ego a little bruised, bro?”

I frown at him. “No, it’s not that. It’s just... I don’t know how to handle her. I’ve never had someone challenge me like this before.”

Carlos leans back in his chair, a serious look on his face. “Look, man. You’re a smart guy. But sometimes you need someone to question your ideas. It makes them stronger. Maybe it’s good that she’s pushing back on you.”

I consider his words. Maybe he’s right. Maybe this is exactly what I need. “You think so?” I ask.

He nods. “Trust me. I’ve been in business for a while now. You can’t always surround yourself with yes-men. It’ll only hurt you in the long run. There’s more than that, though, isn’t there?”

“What do you mean?” I pick at my beer bottle’s label.

“All the things you listed about this woman are positives.” He smirks at me. “I think she gets under your skin because you like her.”

“What?” To my embarrassment, my voice pitches. “No I don’t.”

Carlos raises an eyebrow. “Come on, man. I know you. You always get flustered around pretty girls.”

I scowl at him, but I know he’s right. Billie is pretty — confident, with dark hair that falls in sharp angles around her face. She has a sharp wit too, and is a breath of fresh air at the company. I can’t deny that I’m drawn to her, even as she challenges me at every turn. It’s frustrating as hell.

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit. “It’s like every time I talk to her, I either

want to strangle her or kiss her.”

Carlos laughs again. “Ah, the classic love-hate dynamic. How old are we again?”

I chuckle despite myself. “Shut up.”

“But seriously,” he says, leaning forward again. “Have you talked to her about it? Told her how you feel?”

I shake my head. “No. And I don’t date my employees. I’m not that stupid.”

“What if she didn’t work for you? Just out of curiosity.”

I suck in a breath.

“Let me guess.” Carlos looks up at the sky. “You’d bed her once or twice and then move on, and then try to tell yourself your feelings for her mean nothing.”

I scowl at him.

“James.” He gives me a serious look. “It’s okay to be afraid to get close to someone. After the way we grew up...”

He trails off, and my throat tightens.

“You did well for yourself, though,” I say. “You have a wonderful family.”

“Yeah.” He studies my face. “Don’t you want that?”

“I...” The lump in my throat only gets bigger.

I’d really like to change the subject.

Luckily, right then the kids burst through the sliding glass door and onto the patio. Manny and Alex are little tornadoes disguised as humans. They catapult past us, knocking over a lawn chair in the process.

“We wanna play in the hose!” Manny yells.

Carlos grins and stands up. “Go ahead, guys. Just don’t get the adults wet, okay?”

They nod eagerly and run off towards the hose, giggling and screaming. I watch them go, feeling a sense of warmth in my chest.

“Hope I didn’t chew you out too hard,” Carlos says.

I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. I needed someone to talk to about this.”

“I get it. It’s tough when you don’t really know what you want or how to get it.”

“Yeah,” I say, staring down at the label on my beer bottle once again. “I just wish things were simpler sometimes.”

“Me too, man,” Carlos says, clapping me on the back. “But life isn’t like that. Sometimes you just have to take a risk and see where it takes you.”

I nod, but I don’t feel any different. I have no issues taking risks when it comes to business. Without that tenacity I wouldn’t be where I am today.

When it comes to something like this, though, it’s a different story.

Am I really just a serial dater who breaks hearts? The thought doesn’t sit well with me. Maybe it’s time to take a step back and reevaluate my priorities. Maybe it’s time to figure out what I really want in life.

But then again, Billie keeps popping up in my mind. It’s like I can’t escape her, even when I try. And when I do think about her, my heart beats just a little bit faster.

I take a swig of my beer, trying to push the thoughts away. But once something is in my head it takes up permanent residence.

Maybe Carlos is right. Maybe I am a serial dater. Maybe I just go out with women for the sake of it, not because I’m genuinely interested in them.

I’m not in the right headspace for a relationship, and if I keep going down this path, I’ll just hurt more people.

But that doesn’t mean I don’t crave companionship. I want someone to talk to, someone to share my life with. But not someone who will just fall in love with me because of my job or my looks.

I look up and meet Carlos’s gaze. There’s a softness in his eyes that catches

me off guard. “You okay?” he asks.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?” he says, his voice gentle.

I manage a small smile. “Yeah, I know. Thanks, man.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, the sound of the kids playing in the background. The sun is setting, casting a warm orange glow on everything around us. It’s a beautiful evening, and I’m in one of my favorite places with my favorite people.

Why is it, then, that I feel so empty?

CHAPTER 9

BILLIE



“So how’s it all going in the Big Bad Wolf’s office?” David asks as we leave the coffee shop.

I glance around, making sure no one from the office is nearby. “It’s... nice.”

“Really?” He raises an eyebrow, obviously not believing me.

I sigh. “James has pretty high expectations. It’s a lot to keep up with.”

David sips his latte as we walk down the cloudy street. “I bet. But you seem to be handling it well,” he says, giving me a reassuring grin.

I return the grin, but inside I’m struggling. It’s not just the workload that’s getting to me. It’s James.

Every time I see him, my heart races. Every time he smiles at me, my knees go weak. It’s like I’m back in high school with a crush on the popular boy.

But I’m not a teenager anymore. I’m a grown woman with a job to do. I can’t let my emotions get in the way.

“Hey, you okay?” David’s voice brings me back to reality.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just tired, I guess.”

“Well, maybe you need a break. Working here can be demanding, I know.”

I sigh. Yes, I would love a break, and I’m looking forward to exactly that.

Tonight, as soon as I get home and the babysitter leaves, I'm making dinner and then crashing on the couch to watch a movie with Quinn. I don't care about any laundry or dishes to do. Those will need to wait.

"I'm impressed you've lasted this long," David says. "Two whole weeks."

I stop walking. "What do you mean?"

He looks at me like it's obvious. "You don't know about the firing rate at GarrisTech?"

I shake my head, feeling a knot form in my stomach. "No, I don't."

David's expression turns serious. "Well, let's just say it's not easy to keep your job here. James has a reputation for being a hard-ass."

I swallow hard, thinking of James's stern demeanor and unyielding expectations. "I had no idea."

David gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, Billie. You're doing great. Just keep your head down and keep working hard."

I nod, trying to push away the anxiety that's starting to creep up inside me. I need this job. If I lose it then there goes my chances at getting the information I need.

I make a mental note to work even harder. To prove myself to James and to the rest of the company. I won't be just another statistic on the firing-rate chart.

David and I part ways in the building, and I stride to James's office. To my surprise, it's empty. He must be taking his own break.

My heart speeds up. This is it. My opportunity to go through his office and see if I can find any medical information.

He told me he doesn't have any issues, but how do I know he wasn't lying and he was just trying to end the conversation?

I take a deep breath and slowly turn the handle of James's office door. I step in, immediately noticing the scent of his cologne. It's musky and rich, and I'm hit with the urge to bury my head in his neck and inhale deeply.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts, and begin to search through his desk drawers. I find nothing but paperwork, pens, and some knickknacks.

And no photos.

Which would be odd for most people, but what should I expect? Given how he abandoned Quinn before she was even born, it's clear James doesn't value relationships.

Disappointed, I turn to leave when something catches my eye. A small notebook, tucked in the corner of his desk.

My curiosity gets the best of me, and I pick it up. Flipping through it, my heart races as I read his handwriting. It's a journal, filled with musings and thoughts about his work and personal life.

I know I really shouldn't, but I can't resist reading more. As I turn the pages, I stumble upon an entry that catches my attention. It's dated a few days back and reads: "I shouldn't be feeling this way about an employee, but I can't help it. I know I need to keep my distance, but it's becoming harder and harder each day."

My heart beats faster. James has an office crush?

Could it be... me?

I've seen the way his gaze lingers on me, the way his pupils dilate when we lock eyes. I haven't given these reactions much thought, but putting them together now it seems entirely plausible.

My heart jumps all the way into my throat, and my hands start shaking. Quickly, I snap the notebook shut. This is wrong. I should never have read the page in the first place.

Putting the notebook back where I found it, I whirl around just as the door opens and James strides into the room.

I freeze, holding my breath. His eyes meet mine, and for a moment we just stare at each other. I'm not sure what he's thinking, but I can feel my face flushing with embarrassment.

"Good. You're back." He crosses the room and takes a seat in one of the

corner armchairs, where he left his laptop. “Let’s get to work.”

I inwardly sigh with relief. Okay, so I didn’t look as suspicious as I thought I did. Thank God.

I take a deep breath, trying to concentrate. But my mind keeps drifting back to the notebook and James’s words. Does he really have feelings for me? Or am I just reading too much into it?

Finally, after what feels like hours, James looks up from his laptop. “You seem distracted,” he says, his voice calm and even.

I swallow hard. “I’m fine,” I say, my voice shaking slightly.

He looks at me for a long moment, his blue eyes seeming to bore into my soul. “It’s not something that will get in the way of work, will it?”

I lift my chin slightly. “Nothing will get in the way of me doing my job.”

“Good.” He nods once, looking satisfied, then drops his gaze back to his computer screen.

The rest of the afternoon, I manage to mostly stay focused. Except for here and there, when my mind drifts back to what I saw in James’s journal.

Maybe he wasn’t writing about me. Maybe it was someone else at the office.

I can’t tell which option would be worse: James liking me, or him liking someone else.

Thinking about him with someone else fills me with jealousy. Which is ridiculous. Despite his money and good looks, James is anything but a catch. He could be a Greek god and have all the money in the world and it wouldn’t make up for his lack of empathy and caring.

When the clock hits five, I stand up and start to gather my things. James gives me that familiar look — the one that says he’s displeased but he’s waiting for me to figure out why.

“Well.” I shoulder my purse. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“It’s only five.” He frowns.

“I know...” I say slowly. That’s when the work day ends at GarrisTech.

“We have a lot of work to do, Billie.”

I can feel my heart racing. I know what this means: he wants me to stay late again. My babysitter can only stay so long, and I have to be home before she leaves. But there’s no way I can tell him that.

“I can stay a little longer,” I say, trying to sound accommodating.

“A little longer?” He scoffs. “We have a deadline to meet. You can’t just leave when you feel like it.”

“I understand that,” I say, my voice trembling slightly. “But I have a—”

“A what?” He raises an eyebrow. “Another job? What could possibly be more important than what we’re doing here?”

I clench my fists, anger boiling inside of me. Is he being serious? What could be more important than work?

A dozen other things! Like my family, my health, my sanity. But I don’t say any of that. Instead, I force a smile and say, “Nothing. You’re right. I’ll stay until the work is done.”

James nods, apparently satisfied, and goes back to typing on his computer.

The brief attraction I had to him is gone. The man is arrogant, domineering, and completely uninterested in anything that doesn’t benefit him personally. Anyone who might end up with him is unfortunate.

“I just need to run to the restroom.” I head for the door, not waiting for a response.

In the bathroom, I pull out my phone and text Chelsea, Quinn’s babysitter. Fingers crossed she can stay later. If not, my only other option is Monica, and I’m pretty sure she’s on a shoot until late tonight.

Sure, I can stay, Chelsea texts back. *Quinn wants to call, if that’s okay?*

I chew on my lip and glance at the door. I desperately want to talk to my daughter — especially because there’s a good chance I won’t make it home until after she’s asleep.

I just don't want to risk James hearing me.

Making a quick decision, I call Chelsea's phone. It's Quinn who answers.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Hey, baby girl," I say, beaming at the sound of her voice. "How was your day?"

"It was good," she says. "We painted today. And I made a new friend. Her name is Aurora."

"That's great, sweetie," I say, feeling a pang of guilt in my chest. I wish I could be there with her, watching her paint and make friends. But instead I'm stuck here, working for a boss who doesn't care about me at all.

"I miss you," she says, her voice small. "When are you coming home?"

"I'm not sure," I admit, feeling a lump form in my throat. "But I'll be home as soon as I can, okay? And when I get there, you might be asleep but I'll still come in and make sure Morris Elephant and you are comfy."

She sighs. "O-kay."

I hate the sound of disappointment in her voice. It's like a knife twisting in my gut.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep the tears at bay. "Hey, how about we make a deal?" I say. "If you go to bed on time tonight, I'll take you to the goat farm this weekend. Sound good?"

"Really?!" she squeals, and a smile spreads across my face.

"Really. Scout's honor," I say.

"Yay! Thank you, Mommy!"

I smile, feeling a little bit better. "No problem, Quinnie. Mommy loves you so much."

"I love you too," she says, and we say our goodbyes.

I hang up and take a deep breath. I can do this. I just have to get through

tonight, and then I'll have the weekend with Quinn. And on Monday, I'll come up with a new way to find the information I need.

Maybe James's secretary has it. I wouldn't be surprised if Terri were the one who scheduled his doctor's visits.

Tucking my phone away, I wipe a couple tears from the corners of my eyes and head out of the bathroom.

And right into James's chest.

"Oh!" I jump back like I've been shocked. "I'm sorry."

"Everything all right?"

My jaw actually drops. Is that... concern in his voice?

He's probably just faking it. Trying to get me to trust him. Or stop me from telling everyone what an asshole he is.

"Fine." I stand a little taller.

He raises an eyebrow. "You sure? You seem a little upset."

I try to keep my guard up, but my emotions are still raw from the conversation with Quinn. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"I heard you talking on the phone."

My chest tightens. Is he trying to get me to admit something?

Hell no. I'm not playing that game.

"Do you make a habit out of listening to what's happening in the women's room?" I cross my arms.

His face falls, and it's probably the first time I've really scored a point against him. The win makes me feel so jubilant I want to jump and shout for joy.

Instead, I giggle.

Which he hates.

James's eyes darken, and I realize that I might have pushed him too far. But I can't help myself. Every time he's around, I feel like I'm suffocating.

"Is that an accusation?" His voice is low and dangerous.

I shake my head, trying to keep my laughter under control. He's trying to turn this around on me, but I won't be falling for it.

His face is still red, and he doesn't press the issue any further. Instead, he steps aside and gestures for me to go ahead of him.

"Thanks," I mutter, brushing past him.

I can feel his eyes on my back as I walk away, and it makes my skin crawl. But I don't turn around. I don't want to give him the satisfaction.

As I round the corner, I realize that the floor is quiet. Everyone else has left for the day.

It's just me and James.

Alone.

I start to pick up my pace, but James catches up. "Hold on a minute." His voice is soft, and I can feel his breath on my neck.

I freeze. What does he want now?

I turn to face him, and his eyes are intense. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to listen to your conversation. I was on my way back from the bathroom as well. It was completely unintentional."

I stare at him, trying to figure out if he's telling the truth. His expression is open, but I've learned to be wary of him.

"Why should I believe you?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly.

"Because it's the truth." He takes a step closer, and I can smell his cologne. It's a musky scent that makes my stomach flutter.

I try to shake off the feeling, reminding myself that I can't trust him. But as I look into his eyes, I see a glimmer of sincerity. Could it be possible that I've misjudged him?

I take a deep breath and nod. “Okay. I believe you.”

Relief washes over his face, and he smiles. “Thank you. I know we haven’t exactly had the best relationship, but I want to change that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“Because we work together.” He looks away, his cheeks turning pink. “I know it’s probably hard to believe, but I do care about my employees.”

I’m taken aback by his confession. It’s hard to wrap my head around, but at the same time, I can’t help but feel a flutter in my stomach.

“I know we’ve had our differences,” he says, “but I just wanted to say that I respect you, Billie. You’re a strong woman, and I admire that.”

I blink a couple of times, trying to process what he’s saying. Is this some sort of manipulation tactic? But his expression seems genuine.

“Thank you,” I say cautiously.

He clears his throat and looks away. “Well, uh, let’s get back to work, shall we?”

I follow him back to the office, feeling like I’m in the twilight zone. Everything has been flipped on its head.

And all it took was me calling him out on some bullshit. Who would have thought?

With James’s back to me, I smile. Maybe working with him doesn’t have to be such hell after all.

CHAPTER 10

BILLIE



“**H**i Terri. How’s it going?” It’s mid-afternoon on Monday and I’m sidling up to James’s assistant in the break room.

Terri smiles warmly at me, and I can tell she’s happy to have some company. “Hey Billie, it’s going pretty well. Just trying to keep up with James’s crazy schedule.”

I chuckle, gesturing at the coffee I’m currently sipping. “He’s a handful, all right — hence the need to caffeinate.”

Terri laughs. “I hear ya. It’s been a busy day so far.”

“Yeah.” I sip my coffee again, feeling nervous. Terri is one of the few people here who seems genuinely nice, but I’m not talking her up to pass the time. I need information.

Maybe she can tell me if any of James’s family members have medical conditions. I can’t ask directly, though. I need to be careful.

“Hey,” I say. “Do you know if James has any family?”

Terri’s expression shifts slightly, and I can tell she’s surprised by my question. “You know, I don’t know. I’ve never heard him talk about them. Why do you ask?”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “Just curious, I guess. It’s weird that he’s never mentioned them before.”

Terri nods slowly. “Yeah, it is strange. I know he’s a private person, but I feel like I know so much about his work life and next to nothing about his personal life.”

I nod in agreement, trying to hide my disappointment. “I know what you mean. Anyway, thanks for chatting with me, Terri. I should probably get back to work.”

Terri smiles and waves goodbye as I leave the break room, frustrated. I thought I might be onto something here, but it looks like I’ve hit a dead end. Again.

In his office, James is walking back and forth, talking on the phone. I linger outside for a moment, watching as he gestures with each word. There’s something so commanding about him. So intense.

It draws me in, making it impossible to look away.

Heat flushes through me, and I lick my lips. My body still hasn’t gotten the memo that James isn’t someone we should be interested in.

I try to shake off the feeling and enter his office, clearing my throat to get his attention. He turns towards me, his gaze piercing as always.

“Sounds good,” he says into the phone. “Talk soon.”

He hangs up and nods at me. “We have a meeting in about an hour that you’ll need to prepare for. I’ll email you the details, but it’s with the client so I need you to make sure everything is perfect.”

I nod, already mentally preparing myself for the task. “Got it. Anything else?”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s all. You can go ahead and get started on that. And Billie?” He pauses, his voice low and commanding. “I need you to be on your A-game today.”

I swallow, feeling a shiver run down my spine. “Of course, James. I always am.”

He nods once more, and I go to take a seat across from him, but suddenly my phone starts ringing. It’s Quinn’s school.

I freeze and stare at the phone in my hand. It's not even two, and school isn't out for another hour and a half. Which means they're only calling because something is wrong.

Immediately, anxiety takes hold. A dozen different scary situations flash through my head, even as I tell myself it's probably nothing.

"Sorry, I need to take this," I say. I'm not asking James, I'm telling him.

Hurrying out of his office, I walk swiftly down the hall. It's not until I'm out of his earshot that I answer the phone.

"Hello, this is Billie," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Is everything okay?"

"Hi, Billie. It's Danielle Fields, the school nurse." There's a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm afraid Quinn has a fever, and she needs to be picked up."

I stop walking and chew on my lip. Chelsea is in her college classes until three. And Monica isn't available today.

Which means that I need to go.

James is gonna freak, but at this point I don't even care. I just need to get to my little girl.

"Thank you," I tell the nurse. "I'm leaving work right now."

I rush back to James's office, my heart pounding in my chest. When I enter, he looks up at me, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Taking personal calls now?"

I ignore him and start gathering my things.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his voice softer now.

Cool. So because I didn't respond to his being an asshole, he's trying on the nice-guy act.

I couldn't care less about his switching masks. Not at a time like this.

“I need to leave.” I straighten up and face him. “Sorry, but it’s an emergency.”

James stands, his hands slamming down on his desk. “Are you kidding me, Billie? We have this meeting in an hour. This could be a huge deal for the company. You can’t just leave like this.”

“I have to go take care of my daughter,” I say, my voice firm. “I’m sorry, James, but this is more important.”

I didn’t plan on ever telling him about Quinn, but there it is: out there in the open.

I have to take care of the daughter you abandoned, I silently add.

He stares at me for a long moment, and I can see the anger in his eyes. But then, just as suddenly, it dissipates. “I didn’t know you have a daughter.”

I purse my lips. “Would that have changed your mind about hiring me?”

He pauses. “Legally, I can’t—”

I scoff. “Legally? So if you could get away with not hiring parents, you would. Nice.”

I shake my head and turn for the door, aware that I’ve pissed him off but not giving a rat’s ass.

“It’s why I never had children,” James says quietly. “They get in the way of success.”

I freeze, my hand on the door handle. Red clouds my vision. So that’s why he walked away from Quinn. He didn’t want her to get in the way of his “success.”

“How can you say that?” I spin around to face him. “Children are not obstacles to be removed. They are human beings with their own lives, their own emotions. They are not objects to be discarded when they become inconvenient. God forbid someone had treated you that way as a child.”

Something flashes in his eyes. Hurt.

I pause. Did I imagine it?

A moment later, and his cool facade is back. He raises his eyebrows at me. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Well, it sure sounded like it,” I snap. “I have to go take care of my daughter, but you stay here and focus on your precious success.”

I slam the door behind me and storm out of the building. James’s words echo in my head, and I feel a deep anger bubbling up inside of me. How can someone be so callous towards their own child? It’s unconscionable.

But I can’t dwell on it now. I have to focus on getting to Quinn and making sure she’s okay.

I speed through traffic, my mind racing with worry. When I finally arrive at the school, I rush inside and make my way to the nurse’s office.

Quinn is sitting on the bed, her eyes puffy and red from crying. My heart drops at the sight of her. I rush towards her and wrap my arms around her.

“Oh, baby. It’s okay. We’ll get you home and feeling better.” I touch her forehead. She’s burning up.

“Her fever is a hundred and one,” the nurse tells me. “I recommend fluids and rest, along with some medicine to take the fever down.”

I nod. “Thank you. I’ll take care of her from here.”

The nurse hands me a small bottle of medicine and a sheet with instructions before we leave the office. I hold Quinn close to my chest as we make our way to the car, her small body feeling so fragile in my arms.

As I buckle her into her car seat, I can’t help but think about James and his vile attitude towards children. It’s fine to not want kids, but it sounded like James actually hates them.

How can anyone view their own child as an inconvenience? As something that gets in the way of success? It’s unfathomable to me.

I start the car and we begin the drive home. Quinn is quiet in the back seat, her head resting against the window as she dozes.

As we pull into the apartment complex’s parking lot, I feel grateful for the

simple things. For the roof over our heads, for the medicine that will help Quinn, for the love that surrounds us. It's easy to get caught up in the pursuit of success, but at the end of the day, what truly matters is the people we care about.

I carry Quinn inside and tuck her into bed, making sure she's comfortable. Then I sit beside her, my hand on her forehead, monitoring her temperature.

James might very well fire me for today.

I want to say it was worth it, but was it? I'm doing all of this for Quinn, and every health scare she has terrifies me a little bit more.

As I sit there, watching my daughter sleep, my mind drifts to James again. It's hard to imagine what could have happened in his life to make him so bitter towards children. Maybe he had a terrible childhood himself. Or maybe he's just a selfish person who doesn't care about anyone else's needs.

Either way, I know that I'll never be like him. I'll always put Quinn first, no matter what. And I'll always cherish the simple things, like holding her hand or reading her a bedtime story, because those are the moments that matter.

James doesn't know anything about that, and he never will. So while he may have billions of dollars and hundreds of employees at his beck and call, and I live in an apartment and get clothes off the discount rack, at the end of the day I'm the fortunate one.

CHAPTER II

JAMES



Standing at my office window, I stare out at the busy street below. It's eight thirty, and Billie is half an hour late.

Letting out a sigh, I shove my hands into my pockets. I was too hard on her yesterday.

It's not just the fact that she had to leave early. I understand that.

It's that she didn't tell me she has a kid.

Not that she's obligated to. I just hate that she didn't, because that's one more thing I didn't know about her.

Add that to how she looked when she came back into the office — so afraid, so fragile — and then her clear expectation that I would be rude to her, combined with my frustration over the meeting, and it was the perfect storm.

I snapped. Said something pretty uncaring.

I was wrong, and I need to take it back. Who knows if she'll even want to hear an apology, though?

The phone rings on my desk, and I whirl around. Billie?

Nope. It's Roger, one of my associates on the East Coast.

"Roger," I answer, trying to put on my best happy voice. "How's it going?"

"James, my man!" Roger says, his voice booming through the phone. "I'm

doing great, thanks for asking. And yourself?”

“I’m fine,” I say, my mind still on Billie. “What’s up?”

“Just thinking about the Hawaii conference next week,” Roger says. “You still planning on going?”

I frown. The conference? What conference?

And then it hits me. I forgot all about ThisTech, one of the biggest tech conferences in the world. I almost always go to it, but I’ve been a little distracted the last couple weeks, and I haven’t thought about it once.

“Uh, maybe,” I say, rubbing my chin. “Will you be there?”

“You know it,” Roger says, and I can hear the excitement in his voice. “It’s going to be a networking goldmine, James. You don’t want to miss it.”

I consider it for a moment. It’s true that I could use a break from work. And maybe a change of scenery would do me some good, get me out of this funk I’ve been in. “All right,” I say, finally making up my mind. “I’ll be there.”

“Awesome,” Roger says. “Later.”

As I end the call, I realize I do feel a little better. Maybe a trip to Hawaii is exactly what I need.

But then I think of Billie again, and my stomach sinks. I need to talk to her, to make things right.

And what better way to do that than a trip to Hawaii?

It won’t be all fun and games. We’ll need to work some, but she should still have time to enjoy herself.

And maybe she’ll forget all about how I shoved my foot in my mouth yesterday.

The door opens, and Billie strides in. She has bags under her eyes, and her hair isn’t as styled as it usually is.

And yet she still looks hot as hell.

I highly doubt anything could make this woman look bad.

“Sorry I’m late,” she mumbles. “Quinn can’t go to school until her fever has been broken for twenty-four hours and I was up half the night looking for a babysitter, and then I found someone but she got stuck in traffic, and then I dropped my phone under my seat in the car and couldn’t call, and...” She trails off, looking defeated.

I can’t stop gazing at her. She also hasn’t put on makeup this morning, and damn she looks amazing.

Delicious. Perfect.

My hands are still in my pockets, and I ball them into fists. I’m an unexpressed mess of needs.

“Quinn?” I ask. “That’s a nice name.”

She looks taken aback. “Really? That’s what you’re telling me after yesterday?”

I feel a pang of guilt as she reminds me of yesterday’s incident. I know I need to make things right, and fast.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” I say, taking a step closer to her. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I was just, you know, caught off guard.”

Her eyes narrow — a bad sign. “You don’t have employees need to leave for family emergencies sometimes?”

“Not... often.”

“They do have families, though. I’m sure they do. They’re just neglecting them in order to work here.”

A chuckle falls from my lips. “You’re ballsy. It’s almost like you’re asking me to fire you.”

Alarm lights up her eyes, and I instantly regret saying it.

“Relax.” I go to my desk, putting some space between the two of us. “I’m not going to fire you. You do things your own way, which is a problem, but you’re also an asset to this company.”

She folds her hands in front of her. “Okay.”

Wow. She really doesn’t give a fuck.

That or she has more pride than is good for her. If it’s the latter, I understand. I’m guilty of the same crime.

As I sit down at my desk, I can’t help but feel bad for hurting her feelings. I know that I need to make things right between us.

“Billie,” I say, turning to face her again. “How do you feel about taking a trip to Hawaii with me? There’s a big tech conference happening next week, and I could use your help. Terri will be holding things down here, and I won’t be able to do everything on my own.”

Billie looks at me, surprised. “Hawaii? That sounds amazing. But isn’t it kind of short notice?”

I shrug. “I have a private jet. We can leave at any time.”

She bites her lip, contemplating. “I don’t know, James. I have Quinn and—”

“You can bring her with us,” I interrupt. “I’ll make sure there’s a nanny to take care of her while we work.”

She looks at me skeptically. “Why are you doing all this? I don’t understand.”

I take a deep breath. “I know I came off as an asshole yesterday, and I’m sorry. I want to make it up to you, and I also need your help at the conference.”

She thinks it over. “Of course I’ll come. But only because it’s part of my job.”

“So you’re not accepting an ‘I’m sorry’ trip?”

“Packaging a work trip as an ‘I’m sorry’ trip is kind of lame, don’t you think?”

I snort. She has me there.

“I usually combine my business and pleasure,” I say.

“I’m sure you do.” She grins, and a heat wave passes between us.

A moment later, and we both get the unintentional suggestion behind the words. Billie clears her throat and looks away.

I can’t help but feel a tingle of excitement. I’m not sure what it is about Billie that makes me feel so alive. Is it her fiery spirit? Her quick wit? Or is it something else entirely?

I shake my head, trying to clear it. “So, Hawaii it is. A few days should be enough to get packed and ready, right?”

Billie nods, still looking away. “Sure thing, boss. Although, I’ll leave Quinn behind.”

“I meant what I said. She can come. I’ll pay for a nanny and—”

“No, no. It’s okay.” She gets busy setting her computer up for the morning. “She has school, plus she gets anxious on planes.”

She’s still not looking at me, and I get the impression that she’s not telling me the full story.

But who am I to call her out on it? What she does with her daughter isn’t my business anyway.

...Even though I’m intensely curious.

What is Billie like as a mom? Who is the girl’s father?

Billie doesn’t wear a wedding ring, but that doesn’t mean the two of them aren’t together.

The thought makes jealousy burn through me. I can’t have her, but I also don’t like the thought of any other man having such a privilege.

Attempting to distract myself, I turn my mind back to the conversation. “We’ll have to bring Quinn a present from Hawaii. What kind of things does she like?”

Again, Billie hesitates. She probably still thinks I’m not being genuine.

“She likes stuffed animals and books,” she finally answers, still focused on

her computer.

“Stuffed animals and books it is,” I say, making a mental note. “And what about you? Any particular requests for the trip?”

Billie looks up at me, her eyes narrowing. “What are you trying to do? Bribe me with gifts?”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “No, no. Just trying to make it an enjoyable trip for you as well. We’ll be working hard at the conference, but there will be downtime too. I want you to have a good time.”

She doesn’t say anything for a few moments, then nods. “Okay. Well, I’ve never been to Hawaii before, so I guess just... enjoy the scenery?”

I grin. “Oh, we will. We can absolutely make time to explore together.” The words come out before I even realize what I’m saying.

Billie arches an eyebrow. “Is that right?” she says, a hint of amusement in her voice. “You plan on working me to the bone and then whisking me away for a romantic getaway?”

I feel my face flush, realizing how it sounds. “No, no, that’s not what I meant. I just meant—”

But Billie cuts me off with a laugh. “Relax, I’m just teasing you. It sounds like it’ll be a fun trip.”

I let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. “Good, I’m glad. It’ll be nice to have someone to explore with.”

Billie nods, and we get back to work. But my mind can’t stop spinning with thoughts of her and the upcoming trip. I can’t wait to see what adventures Hawaii will bring. Nothing romantic can happen between the two of us, but that doesn’t mean we can’t cut loose and have a good time together.

A good, appropriate time.

An appropriate, amazing time.

Grinning to myself, I turn away from her.

CHAPTER 12

BILLIE



“**W**hat about this one?” From my dresser drawer, Monica pulls out a bikini that still has the tags on it.

Even looking at it makes me blush. Red with white tassels, it’s about as tiny as bikinis can be.

Honestly, I don’t know what I was thinking when I bought it. I never wear things that revealing. I must have been drunk on the thought of being the kind of woman who can proudly rock something like that.

“That’s not exactly appropriate for a work trip with my boss.” I fold up some T-shirts and put them in my suitcase.

Monica rolls her eyes. “Come on, live a little. You’re going to Hawaii! And James will probably be working anyway. It’s not like he’ll be at the beach with you, right?”

“I don’t know...” I hesitate, feeling anxious at the thought of it.

Monica comes over and sits next to me on the bed. “Billie, listen to me. You’re beautiful, and you deserve to feel confident and sexy. You don’t have to wear this bikini if you don’t want to, but don’t let your insecurities hold you back from having an amazing time. Who knows, maybe wearing something like this will give you the confidence boost you need.”

I bite my lip, considering her words. She’s right, of course. I shouldn’t be so afraid of showing a little skin. It’s not like I’m going to be walking around in public wearing it.

“Fine,” I finally say, grabbing the bikini from her. “I’ll try it on.”

Monica grins, thrilled that she’s convinced me. I head to the bathroom to change, feeling a little nervous but excited at the same time. As I slip into the bikini, I can’t help but admire how it looks on me. The tassels swish back and forth as I move, and I feel like I could conquer the world in this thing.

I open the bathroom door and step out, feeling self-conscious at first. But Monica’s eyes widen in approval, and I can tell from the way she’s looking at me that I look good.

“Damn, girl. You look smoking hot.” She gives me a high five, and I can’t help but feel a little giddy.

Maybe this trip will be exactly what I need to break out of my shell and embrace my inner confidence. And who knows, maybe James will take notice too...

Wait. No. Did I just think that?

“What?” Monica asks. “You’re red all over.”

“No, I’m not.” I touch my cheeks.

“Are you...” Her jaw drops. “Oh my God. You’re hot for James Garris, aren’t you?”

Shit. How can she tell?

“No!” I shriek.

But her eyes are bugged, and she’s looking at me in that awful, judgmental way. Monica has a sixth sense when it comes to things like this, and I know I’m busted.

“Billie,” she says, “he’s the enemy.”

I feel my face heat up even more, embarrassed that she’s caught me in my stupid crush. “I know, I know,” I mutter.

“I get that he’s hot. Who wouldn’t be into that, right?” She studies me. “But he’s your daughter’s—”

My bedroom door flies open and Quinn bursts into the room. Launching herself on the bed, she bounces up and down.

“I want to go to Hawaii!” She stops bouncing and stares me down with mournful eyes.

My heart nearly cracks in two, but no way am I breaking. “We’ve been over this. You have school.”

Quinn pouts. “But everyone else gets to go on vacation. Why can’t I?”

“Because school is important, Quinn,” I say firmly. “You’ll have plenty of opportunities to travel when you’re older.”

“But I don’t want to wait!” she whines.

I sigh, feeling guilty.

James did offer to hire a nanny for her, and it’s not like missing a week of first grade will derail her education.

But it’s James.

She can’t be around him. She just can’t.

I don’t know what seeing the two of them together would do for me, but I know it wouldn’t be good. I might get so angry that I’d just come out and tell James the truth.

And then he would fire me. And maybe get a restraining order against me too.

I’d never get a chance to learn what I need.

“Look,” I say, kneeling in front of Quinn. “I’ll bring you something special back. How about that?”

Quinn’s face lights up, and she throws her arms around my neck. “Okay!”

I hug her back tightly, feeling the weight of my decision. It’s hard being a single mom, making tough choices and feeling like you’re letting your child down. But I have to do this. For Quinn and for myself.

“I finished my reading,” she says sweetly. “Can I have screen time now?”

“Yes. You go out and...”

But she’s already gone, barreling out of the room even faster than she came in.

Monica gently closes the door behind her, and a couple seconds later we hear cartoons from the living room.

“Thank you for staying here with her while I’m gone,” I tell her packing, hoping we can move on from the conversation about James.

Evidently she’s not done with it yet, though.

“Is it more than how hot he is?” she asks. “Is there another reason you’re into him?”

“No,” I say automatically, then pause. “Well... he is brilliant... and so creative.”

“And evil.” She folds her arms and studies me. “Are you okay, Billie? A couple weeks ago you had so much hatred for this guy. He basically abandoned Quinn.”

“I know.” I sit on the edge of the bed and stare at my hands. “Whenever I remember that, I hate him all over again.”

The mattress sags as Monica sits next to me. “That sounds stressful.”

“It is,” I admit, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “I just want to do right by Quinn. But every time I think about James, I feel like I’m stuck in a nightmare. I hate feeling this way.”

Monica puts a comforting arm around me. “It’s okay to feel angry and confused. But you don’t have to keep it all bottled up, you know?”

I nod, grateful for her support. “I just wish it was easier. I wish I didn’t have to deal with all of this.”

“I know,” Monica murmurs. “But sometimes the things that are the hardest are the things that are the most worth it.”

I lean my head against her shoulder, feeling a sense of peace wash over me. Maybe she's right. Maybe this is just a bump in the road. Maybe there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

But for now, I need to focus on the task at hand. Hawaii could be the opportunity I need. Maybe James will be drinking. Maybe he will drop his guard and I can go through his wallet or phone. Find some info on his family. Take those names and look them up.

Or maybe he'll talk more. Stop deflecting my questions.

"You do look really hot in that," Monica says. "Maybe you'll meet another guy on the island."

I shake my head and laugh. "I doubt it. I'm not really in the mood for anything like that."

Monica grins. "Well, you never know. Hawaii can be a magical place. It's where I lost my virginity."

"I didn't know that!" I bump my shoulder against hers.

"Yep. Maybe it will happen for you too." She grins wickedly.

"Ha-ha. Very funny."

Inevitably, the mention of virginity makes me think about James. Being with him would probably be nothing like my first time was.

It would be wild and passionate, with an intensity that would leave me breathless.

I can't deny that the thought of being with him sends shivers down my spine.

But I can't let myself get lost in those fantasies. I have a job to do, a mission to complete.

I stand up, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. "I should finish packing," I say. "We have an early flight tomorrow."

Monica nods, giving me a knowing look. "Don't worry, girl. You're gonna have some fun in Hawaii. And once you quit that job you'll forget all about James."

But I know that's not true. James is already living rent-free in my head. And as much as I hate to admit it, I can't wait to see him again.

CHAPTER 13

JAMES



“Sir. We’re here.”

I look up from my phone to see rain splattering the windshield. My driver looks at me in the rearview mirror.

“I’ll go get her, Mr. Garris.”

“No.” I put away my phone — and the emails I was trying to catch up on before our flight — and open the back door. “I’ll get her.”

Stepping out into the drizzle, I make my way up to Billie’s apartment. The front area is friendly and warm, with a welcome mat and a few potted plants. I start to ring the doorbell before but before I can even touch it the door opens and Billie is there, her suitcase in tow.

“Hi!” She hustles out the door, quickly closing it behind herself.

“Hey.” I swallow hard, trying to not be affected by how great she looks.

Her hair is in loose waves that cascade down her back, and she’s wearing a dress that hugs her curves in all the right places. I can feel the heat rising inside of me, and I try to keep my cool.

“Let me get that for you.” I reach for the suitcase, but she’s already pushing past me, headed for the car.

I glance back at her apartment, with its drawn blinds. For a second, I think I see a blind move, like someone is peeking out of them.

But then I look again, and nothing is there. Maybe I imagined it.

I follow behind Billie, who is already at the car. “Ready for Hawaii?”

She nods, a small smile playing at the edges of her lips. “I’m so ready. I can’t believe we’re actually going.”

My driver is already at the trunk, where he helps Billie with her luggage before opening the back door for her.

I slide into the car next to her, careful to keep a comfortable distance between us.

“Is Quinn home?” I ask. “I thought I saw the blinds move.”

It takes her a second to answer. “Yes. My friend is staying with her all week.”

“I would have loved to meet her.”

She studies me. “I thought you didn’t like kids.”

I shrug, trying to keep my expression neutral. “It’s not that I dislike them. I just don’t know what to do with them.”

“They’re not that complicated. They’re regular people, just smaller. They have needs too.” There’s an edge to her voice, which is weird.

Maybe she’s nervous about flying.

Or maybe she’s still pissed about what I said about children being a burden.

If so, I deserve it. That was unfair, and I said it in a moment of heat.

Honestly, I don’t know whether children are a burden or not. I’ve never had the opportunity to find out.

“My friend Carlos has two kids,” I say.

“Are they are burden too?”

Right. So she is still pissed about that.

“He’s never talked about them in that way.” I pause. “In fact, they’ve got him

wrapped around their little fingers.” I chuckle.

Billie nods, her eyes trained on her lap. “Yeah, kids do have a way of doing that.”

There’s a moment of silence between us, and I can feel the tension growing thicker by the second. I don’t know what to say to make things better, so I opt to change the subject.

“This will be your first time in Hawaii, right?” I say, trying to sound casual.

She nods. “That’s right. But I’ve always wanted to go.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat,” I say. “The beaches are beautiful, the food is amazing, and the weather is perfect.”

“I can’t wait,” she says, her voice softening. “Thank you for bringing me along.”

“Of course,” I reply.

Billie nods, and we fall into a comfortable silence as we make our way to the airport. The rain continues to pour down, but inside the car, it’s warm and dry.

As we approach the airport, I can feel my nerves starting to build. I’m going to be spending a week alone with Billie, and I don’t know how I’m going to handle it.

As we go through the airport gates and drive directly onto the tarmac, she leans forward and gasps. “That’s your plane?”

I nod, “Yes, that’s the one.”

“Wow, I’ve never flown on a private jet before.”

I grin. “It’s a perk of the job. Come on, let’s go.”

As we step out of the car, I take her hand to help her onto the jet. Her hand is small and delicate in mine, and I feel a jolt of electricity shoot up my arm.

I quickly let go, trying to shake off the feeling. This is a business trip, nothing more.

Once we're settled in our seats, I can't help but steal glances at Billie. She's gorgeous, reminding me of Snow White. I can only imagine what her lips taste like.

As the plane takes off, I try to distract myself by focusing on the work I need to do once we arrive in Hawaii. But it's no use. My mind is consumed by thoughts of Billie and the desire burning within me.

I glance over at her and our eyes meet. There's a moment where everything seems to stop, and then she looks away, breaking the spell.

"So." She fiddles with her seat belt. "Tell me more about this conference."

The question yanks me back to reality and I take a deep breath, grateful for the change of subject. "ThisTech is a major event in the tech industry, and we're going to take the opportunity to showcase our new AI product. It's still in development right now, but the prototype has the potential to revolutionize the way we interact with technology."

Billie nods, listening intently. "That sounds amazing. I can't wait to see it in action."

I smile at her enthusiasm. "You'll have a front-row seat." I pause, then add, "Plus, it'll give us a chance to explore Hawaii and have some fun."

Billie smiles back at me, and I feel my heart skip a beat. Maybe this won't be such a difficult trip after all. Maybe we can just focus on work and enjoy each other's company as colleagues.

But as the flight progresses, I find myself unable to shake the feeling of attraction towards her. Every time our eyes meet, I feel a shockwave run through my body. I can tell she feels it too, by the way she bites her bottom lip and looks away.

As the plane begins its descent, Billie tenses. There's a bump, and she yelps and grabs at my knee.

I feel her nails digging into my skin, but the pain is nothing compared to the way her touch sets me on fire. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

"It's okay. Just a little turbulence," I say, trying to hide the way her touch

affects me.

But Billie doesn't let go. She squeezes my knee harder, and I feel the heat of her body radiating towards me.

I turn my head to look at her, and her eyes meet mine.

"Oh, God." She withdraws her hand just as the wheels meet the ground. "I'm so sorry."

I try to ignore the disappointment I feel as she pulls away from me. It's for the best, I tell myself. We're colleagues, nothing more.

But as we make our way to the hotel, I find myself struggling to keep my thoughts and desires in check. Billie seems to sense my tension, and she stays quiet as we walk.

Once we arrive at the hotel, we're greeted with stunning views of the ocean and the lush landscape of Oahu. The beauty of the place is breathtaking.

"Wow," Billie says, looking around with wonder. "This place is incredible."

I nod, barely able to focus on anything but her. "It's amazing."

A smiling woman comes forward. "Mr. Garris, it's so wonderful to have you here. I hope your flight was a pleasant one."

"Yes, thank you..." I glance at her name tag. "Kiana."

One of the perks of being so well-known is that hotels bend over backwards to accommodate you. I haven't had to check in at a front desk in years, as Terri makes sure everything is covered before I even reach my destination.

"May I get you and Ms. Hackett anything before I show you to your room?" Kiana asks.

"Room?" Billie's voice pitches, and we glance at each other.

Kiana's smile flickers. "Yes. We have the captain's suite all set up for you."

"Oh, no." Billie blushes furiously, and I feel myself turning warm.

"There must have been a misunderstanding," I say. "We need two rooms."

Kiana's face falls, and her eyes flicker between us. "I'm sorry, Mr. Garris. We're fully booked this week. The only available accommodation we have is the captain's suite."

I can't even force myself to look at Billie. What if she thinks I did this on purpose? That I invited her to Hawaii in an attempt to bed her?

That would be... well, exactly something I would do. Once I see something I like, there's very little that can stand in my way.

Except for when it comes to this woman. This time there are important boundaries in place — which is why we really need at least one solid wall between us.

"You're sure there isn't anything?" I raise my eyebrows.

Kiana shakes her head apologetically. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Garris. What with the conference and all, we're completely booked."

I take a deep breath, trying to think of a solution. "Is there any way we could have some kind of partition or screen put up in the suite? Just something to separate the main room from the sleeping area."

Kiana considers this for a moment, then nods. "I can certainly see what we can do. If you wouldn't mind bearing with me for a few moments."

"Thank you," I say. "That would be much appreciated."

After a short phone call, Kiana leads us to the elevator. I can feel Billie's eyes on me the entire way up. I can't blame her for being cautious; I know how I can come across sometimes. But I'm determined to show her that this trip is strictly business.

When we reach the captain's suite, I can see why it's so highly coveted.

The decor is sleek and modern, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. A plush sofa and armchair are arranged in front of a large flat-screen TV, and a kitchenette is tucked away in the corner of the room.

Kiana gestures towards the divider standing in the middle of the room, which must have been put in place with record timing. "We were able to find this to separate the sleeping area from the living space. I hope it's to your liking."

I nod my approval. “It’s perfect. Thank you, Kiana.”

As soon as Kiana leaves, Billie lets out a nervous laugh. “Well, this is... cozy.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll have Terri see if any other hotels have something available.”

“No, it’s fine.” She sits on the couch. “We’re already here, so let’s just make the best of it.”

I smile at her, feeling a thrill of excitement at the thought of spending the next few days with her. “It’s not so bad. We’ll have plenty of privacy.”

Billie nods, still looking uncertain. “Yeah, I guess so.”

I take a seat next to her on the couch, determined to put her at ease. “Listen, Billie. I know this might be awkward, but I assure you that I have no ulterior motives here. This trip is strictly business.”

She turns to look at me, her eyes searching mine. “I trust that, James. It’s just... I don’t usually mix business with pleasure.”

I lean in closer, my voice low and intimate. “Who said anything about pleasure? We’re here to work, remember?”

Billie flushes, and I can see the effect my proximity is having on her. I’m not immune to her either; I can feel my pulse racing at the thought of what could happen between us.

But I’ve made a promise to myself to keep things professional. At least for now.

Clearing my throat, I stand up and head towards the kitchenette. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Sure,” she says, following me. “What do we have?”

I open the fridge, scanning the contents. “Just some water and soda, I’m afraid. It’s not exactly a fully stocked bar.”

Billie laughs, a tinkling sound that makes my heart skip a beat. “Water is fine, thanks.”

As I hand her the bottle, our fingers brush, the fleeting contact lighting me up inside. I quickly pull back, trying to act nonchalant.

“So,” I say, trying to steer the conversation back to business. “As I said before, we’ll need to keep working while here.”

She nods. “Of course. Let me grab my laptop and we can go over the bullet points for the week.”

She sets her water bottle on the table and zips open her suitcase. Two small pieces of red fabric fall out.

I freeze, unable to stop staring at the itchy-bitsy bikini on the carpet.

Billie looks up and follows my gaze. Her face turns a deep shade of red as she quickly bends down to pick it up. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I must have packed it by mistake.”

I clear my throat, trying to keep my composure. “It’s okay. No need to apologize.”

She gives me a sheepish smile and sets the bikini aside. “I swear I didn’t mean to bring that. It’s just that I tried it on and was considering bringing it and—”

“It’s fine,” I repeat, trying not to sound too affected by the tiny piece of clothing. “You don’t have to apologize for a bathing suit. You can wear whatever you want. You’re a grown woman.”

Billie nods, but I can tell she’s still flustered. I decide to give her some space and head back to the couch, grabbing my laptop from the coffee table. “Let’s get started on work.”

We sit down at the table and start going over our plans for the week. But my mind keeps wandering back to the bikini. I can’t help but wonder what Billie would look like wearing it.

Would her body look as good as it does in her clothes? Would I be able to resist her if she were wearing that skimpy little thing?

I know I’ve already crossed the line by having Billie stay in my room, even though the mix-up was completely unintentional.

I just can't help myself. I'm already picturing what it would be like to peel that bikini off her toned body.

Groaning quietly to myself, I try to focus on the work in front of me. Billie's not going to be a distraction, I tell myself.

She's here for one reason only, and as long as I keep that in mind, everything will be okay. I just need to remember that.

CHAPTER 14

BILLIE



“Another drink, ma’am?” the waiter asks.

“Huh?” I look at my empty cocktail glass. When did I finish it?

A light wind blows across the hotel’s outdoor patio, lifting my hair. “I’m fine, thank you. I’ll just take the check.”

“It’s all taken care of. Everything will be billed to GarrisTech, courtesy of Mr. Garris.”

“Oh.” I blink. “Okay. Thank you.”

The waiter walks away, and my gaze turns to the amazing sunset. It’s probably the most romantic setting I’ve ever been in, and I’m here all alone.

It briefly occurred to me to ask James to join me for dinner, but that thought didn’t last more than a second or two.

But as I sit here, watching the beautiful hues of orange and red blend together in the sky, I can’t help but feel a little sad.

I’ve had barely any alone time since the day I brought Quinn home. Any vacations we’ve taken have involved a lot of bags and a fair share of tears — traveling with little kids can be messy.

I haven’t had a quiet, sensual moment like this in... well, over six years.

It makes me feel lonely. Makes me think of the days when I had a man to go out with.

Of course, my ex was a total loser. I haven't heard from him in years, and good riddance.

Sighing, I push my chair back. Enough of the pity party.

My heart heavy, I walk back into the hotel and to the suite I have to share with James. He's offered me the bed while he takes a cot on the floor, and I didn't even think of turning him down.

Pausing at the door, I knock, just to let him know I'm coming in. I don't want to walk in on him with half his clothes off.

Or do I?

"Ugh. Come on, Billie," I mutter to myself.

There's no answer, and I start to turn the door handle when suddenly the door flies open.

James stands there, a look of alarm on his face.

My stomach drops. "What is it?"

"The presentation for tomorrow is gone. I must have deleted it somehow and it's not in the cloud. That account ran out of storage and I didn't see the notification."

"Oh, no," I murmur.

James is pacing now, and I can tell he's in a state of panic. Which is crazy. I've never seen him freak out like this before.

"It's okay," I say, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We'll figure it out. We'll stay up all night if we have to, but we'll get it done."

He looks at me, his eyes filled with gratitude. "Thanks, Billie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

I can feel my cheeks flush at the sincerity in his voice. I know he doesn't mean anything by it, but it still feels nice to be appreciated.

I clear my throat. "Sure thing. Um, so what time is the presentation?"

“Ten a.m.”

I suck in a sharp breath. “Right. And just how long does it need to be?”

“About forty-five minutes,” James replies, his eyes flickering with worry. “We can split up the work and cover all the important points. I’ll work on the financial projections and you can handle the marketing strategies.”

We spend the next few hours going through old files and piecing them together for the presentation. I don’t know anything about the AI technology, so that makes for even slower going.

Around midnight, James stands up and stretches. “I’ll order us some dinner before room service closes.”

I let out a deep breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Sounds good to me.”

“What would you like?”

I shrug. “Whatever you’re getting is fine.”

As James calls in our order, I stare down at the laptop screen, my eyes starting to blur. It’s been a long day, and it’s about to be an even longer night.

But at least I’m not alone.

I glance over at James, who’s still on the phone, his voice low as he orders our food. In the dim light of the hotel room, he looks different than he does in the office. More relaxed.

I can’t help but let my eyes wander over his body. He’s tall and lean, with broad shoulders. He’s not the type I usually go for, but there’s something about the way he moves that makes me feel things I haven’t felt in a long time.

As if sensing my gaze, James turns to look at me. For a moment, our eyes meet and there’s a jolt of electricity between us. I can’t explain it, but it’s there.

Clearing his throat, James turns back to the phone. “Yeah, can we get two orders of the steak?”

I look away, ashamed to have been caught staring at him.

He hangs up and puts the phone down.

“Food will be here in twenty,” he says, rubbing his hands together. “In the meantime, I think it’s time for a break.”

I nod, grateful for the suggestion. A part of me wants to curl up in bed and sleep until the presentation, but that’s not an option. We need to finish this tonight.

James walks over to the mini fridge and pulls out a bottle of champagne. “I know it’s not the best time, but I figured we could use a little pick-me-up.”

“You had the fridge stocked,” I comment.

He shrugs. “Just in case.”

He pops the cork, and the room is filled with a loud pop and a spray of bubbles.

A small smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. “I guess we deserve it.”

He pours us each a glass, and we clink them together in a toast. “To getting this presentation done,” he says, his eyes locked onto mine.

The warm bubbly liquid goes down smoothly, and I feel a sudden burst of energy. Maybe it’s the alcohol, or maybe it’s just the fact that we’re finally making progress. Either way, I’m grateful for it.

“I’m sorry for this whole mess,” James says. “I know it wasn’t expected. I promised you some free time to explore during this trip.”

I wave a hand and take another sip of champagne. “It’s okay. I’ll be able to make the most of it tomorrow.”

He clears his throat and unbuttons the top button on his dress shirt. My pulse picks up.

“The hotel has guided tours, you know,” he says. “Maybe you can go on one of them.”

“Maybe.” I run my finger up and down my glass. “Honestly, if I’m not working or taking care of Quinn, I don’t really know what to do. It’s been years since I’ve even been on a date.”

I press my lips back together. Damn it. Did I just say that?

I must sound so pathetic.

There's a knock on the door, which saves me at just the right time. "Room service," someone says.

James walks over to the door and lets the room service in. The smell of steak fills the air as the table is set up for us. James pulls out a chair for me, and I take a seat.

Without even mentioning it, the waiter sets a white candle in the middle of the table and lights it.

"Oh." I stare at the candle. This isn't the romantic dinner he thinks it is, but me saying anything would make the situation so much worse.

James tips the waiter, who leaves with a smile, and then the two of us are left in the room with dinner, champagne, and a flickering candle.

I clear my throat. "Thank you for dinner."

"Certainly." He smiles, but it's tight. He looks just as uncomfortable as I feel.

He takes a seat across from me, and we eat in silence for a couple minutes. Finally, I can't stand it anymore. I need to talk, even if it's the smallest small talk that ever existed.

"So, how did you get into the tech world?" I ask, taking a bite of steak.

James looks up at me, surprised. "Well, I always had an interest in technology growing up, and I majored in computer science at college. I got a job at a startup before I founded my own company, and I've been in the industry ever since."

"That's interesting," I say. "I never would have guessed you had a background in engineering."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I suppose I don't exactly fit the stereotype. What about you? Did you always want to be a graphic designer?"

I take a sip of champagne, feeling the alcohol slowly taking its effect. "Actually, no. I wanted to be a painter, but my parents weren't supportive of

that career choice. They thought it wasn't practical, so I went into graphic design instead."

James nods, his eyes staring into mine. "That must have been difficult," he says gently.

"It was," I reply, feeling a lump form in my throat. "But hey, I'm still doing what I love, even if it's not exactly what I set out wanting to do. I still love painting, and I don't feel a need to work at it full-time. Maybe one day I'll be able to do it more."

"That's admirable," James says, his voice softening. "I wish I had that kind of courage to pursue what truly makes me happy."

I raise an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Don't you enjoy working in tech?"

"I do," he says, his eyes flickering with uncertainty. "But sometimes, I feel like there's something missing. Like there's more to life than just work and success."

I lean forward, intrigued. "What do you think is missing?"

He hesitates for a moment before speaking. "Passion. I feel like I've lost that spark, that fire in my belly that used to drive me forward. Now, it's just routine and monotony."

I nod, understanding where he's coming from. "I think everyone goes through that at some point in their life. But it's never too late to find your passion again."

He smiles, a genuine expression that lights up his face. "You're right. Maybe I just need to take some time to figure out what that passion is."

I smile. This feels normal. Natural.

And, shamefully, like a date.

Monica's words come back to haunt me. James is the enemy. I need to watch my back when it comes to him.

But then there's that helpful adage — keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

“Do you have family close by?” I focus on cutting my steak, trying to make the question sound as innocuous as possible.

There’s a pause. “No. I don’t.”

His tone of voice speaks volumes. Putting my fork and knife down, I look up at him.

“I’m not close to my family either,” I say.

His eyes sparkle in the candlelight. It seems there’s something else he wants to say.

But then he pivots. “What about Quinn’s father? Is he close by?”

My skin warms. *You’re Quinn’s father.*

Of course, I don’t say this. I’m at least semi-decent at keeping my cool.

I take a deep breath before answering. “She doesn’t have a father. When my ex and I learned we couldn’t have children, we started the adoption process. We weren’t married yet. We were engaged.”

Saying the words reopens that old wound. But it’s like I can’t stop talking. I never speak about this, and it feels good to let it all out.

“He said he wanted kids.” I stare into my champagne. “Said he wanted to be with me. I guess when things became real, he freaked out and realized that wasn’t what he really wanted. So he left in the middle of the adoption process, and I haven’t heard from him since. I reapplied as a single parent, though, and I was lucky enough to get Quinn when she was three months old.”

My chest burns with the memories — both painful and ecstatic. Coming home and finding Kevin’s bags packed. Seeing Quinn for the first time.

“You adopted Quinn?” James says slowly.

I look up, and there’s an odd look in his eyes. Almost like he’s shocked.

“Yes.” I cocked my head. “Does that surprise you?”

He shakes his head. “No, not at all. It’s just... I had no idea. That’s really

amazing of you.”

I can feel my cheeks heating up. No one’s ever called me amazing before. “Thanks. She’s my world.”

James looks down at his plate, picking at a piece of asparagus. “I can’t even imagine what that must’ve been like. Going through all of that alone.”

I shrug, trying to play it off. “She was my dream come true. I made it work.”

“But all on your own,” he says quietly. “No partner.”

“No. No partner.” It feels like a weight in my chest. Like something I failed at. Something I missed out on.

James’s expression softens, and I can see the sympathy in his eyes. “I’m sorry your ex did that,” he says quietly.

I shake my head, trying to push away the pain that still lingers. “It’s fine. We’re better off without him.”

Anyway, what my ex did wasn’t half as bad as what James did. Kevin left before we even had a child. James abandoned Quinn knowing full well that she existed.

So why is he showing so much concern for my situation?

Is it guilt over leaving his pregnant ex? Is he trying to make up for that mistake?

Or is there something else going on here?

I can feel my mind spinning, trying to figure out what James is really thinking. But before I can come up with anything, he speaks again.

“I can’t even imagine being a single parent,” he says, his voice low and serious. “It must be so hard.”

“It has its challenges,” I admit. “But it’s worth it.”

“You’re doing something really amazing,” he says, “by giving that little girl a loving home.”

His words take my breath away. They're so genuine. So heartfelt.

It's probably the realest I've ever seen him.

A second later, though, and it's over.

James puts his napkin on his plate. "Ready to get back to work?"

I sit there frozen for a second, my mind still reeling from the sudden switch. We were having a moment, right?

Yep. And then he realized we were, and he ended it.

Which is fine. I shouldn't be swept up in intimate conversations with him anyway.

I push my plate to the side and join James at the coffee table, where we dive back into work.

Except... my head isn't fully in it. It's back at the dining table, back with the conversation we just had.

Is there more to James than meets the eye? How could a man who shows such concern about my life peace out on his own child?

The further I get into this situation, the more confusing it all becomes. And the more I worry that I'm getting pulled into his magnetic aura — and that I'll never escape from it.

CHAPTER 15

JAMES



“**A**nd we are... done!” I backup the presentation to a second location, just to make sure we don’t lose it.

“Just in time for the sunrise.” Billie rubs her eyes and gestures at the windows.

I glance up and notice that the sky is beginning to turn a soft shade of pink. “Wow, we really worked through the night, didn’t we?”

Billie nods, and I can’t help but notice how beautiful she looks in the soft morning light. Her hair is slightly tousled, and there are dark circles under her eyes, but she still manages to look radiant.

“You know,” I say, unable to resist teasing her a bit, “I think you might actually be a morning person.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles all the same. “Don’t get too excited. I’m still a night owl at heart.”

I chuckle, feeling a sense of ease wash over me. It’s strange but being around Billie makes everything feel okay. Even the mess I’ve made of my personal life.

“So, what now?” she asks, stretching her arms above her head.

“Now?” I repeat, feeling my heart rate pick up slightly. “You deserve to sleep. For as long as you want. I’m going to stay up, though. I’ll just power through until the presentation is done.”

Billie shakes her head. “There’s no way I’ll be able to sleep after all the caffeine I’ve had. How about a walk on the beach?”

I glance at my watch, knowing that the presentation is in a few hours. But then again, when was the last time I did something spontaneous?

“Sure,” I say, and before I can change my mind, I grab two cups of coffee and head out with Billie towards the beach.

The sand is cold beneath my feet as we walk along the shore, the waves crashing against the shore in a soothing rhythm. I take a sip of the coffee, enjoying the taste as it warms my insides.

“Thank you,” Billie says suddenly, breaking the silence.

I glance at her, surprised. “For what?”

“For... everything.” She gestures around us, indicating the beautiful scenery. “For bringing me here. For believing in me.”

I feel a sudden weight in my chest, but I push it away. “You don’t have to thank me. You’re doing great.”

“I believe you, and thank you.” She walks slowly, digging her toes into the sand as she goes.

“You really are one of the best employees I’ve ever had.”

A lump forms in my throat. She’s more than that. She’s the one thing I haven’t been able to get off my mind in weeks. The person who keeps me up late at night. The woman on my mind every morning.

Compared to her, everyone else seems lifeless.

It’s been years since I’ve even entertained the idea of a relationship, but with Billie it feels different. I could never be happy with just a few nights with her.

I know I would want more. I would need more.

She’s so close, and yet I can’t seem to find the courage to tell her how I feel. It’s complicated. There are rules against dating employees, and I don’t want to jeopardize our professional relationship. But then again, she’s not just any employee.

She's one in a million.

"What?" she asks.

Shit. I must have been staring at her.

"Nothing." I quickly look away and sip my coffee.

She narrows her eyes at me, sensing something is off. "Don't give me that. You were thinking about something."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Just work stuff. You know how it is."

Billie snorts. "I know you didn't become the mogul you are without some amount of obsessiveness." She shakes her head. "God, my parents would die of happiness if you were their son."

I chuckle at her remark. "I doubt that," I say. "And anyway, you've done well for yourself."

"I have." Her nose scrunches up. "What about you? Do your..." She trails off. "I'm sorry. We don't need to talk about family if you don't, uh..."

"No. It's all right." I smile, even though there's a weight in my chest. "I never knew my parents. I grew up in the foster system and then in a group home."

"What?" Her eyes widen in surprise. "I had no idea."

I shrug. "It's fine. It's made me who I am today."

"But it must have been difficult," she says softly.

"It was. But I don't let it define me."

She's quiet for a moment, and it feels like there's a whole conversation sitting between us, just waiting to be given breath to.

"So you really understand," she says. "About Quinn."

I nod, my mind drifting back to the present. "I do. Quinn is lucky to have you as her mother."

Billie smiles, and I feel my heart stir in my chest. "I hope so. Sometimes it

feels like parenting is just a constant stream of questioning yourself.”

I chuckle. “Sometimes running a company feels the same way.”

She smiles. “Can I ask... and you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to...”

“Shoot.”

“What was it like? Foster care? And the group home?”

I take a deep breath, knowing that this is a conversation that I don’t often have. “It was tough,” I begin. “I mean, I was lucky enough to have some good people looking after me, but it was still hard. There were times when I felt like nobody cared about me, like I was just a number in the system. But I also learned to be tough, to fend for myself, you know?”

Billie nods, her eyes fixed on me intently. “I can imagine. But it must have been lonely.”

“It was.” I hesitate for a moment. “But I also made some good friends. People who were in the same boat as me, who understood what it was like. And in some ways, that made us a family.”

Billie nods again, and I can see the sympathy in her eyes. “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s not like I had a choice. And... it led me to where I am now, you know? I don’t think I’d be the person I am today if I hadn’t gone through those experiences.”

She looks thoughtful. “And what kind of person are you?”

The words aren’t unkind, but it must be my own conscience punching me in the gut. I know what people say and write about me. I’ve done a lot that others would call unmoral, and I haven’t been afraid to go after what I want.

I turn to face her more fully, taking in her thoughtful expression as the wind tosses her hair around her face.

“Do you think I’m a bad person?” I ask.

Billie hesitates.

“That’s a yes,” I say. “Not that I can blame you.”

She purses her lips. “James... I don’t think anyone is purely good or bad. We all have our flaws, our past mistakes. But what matters is how we choose to move forward and grow from those experiences. So the question is... are you learning from those mistakes?”

Her words had hit me harder than I expected. “I like to think so,” I say, my eyes locked onto hers. “But sometimes it’s hard to know if you’re making the right decisions.”

Billie nods, her eyes probing mine. “You have regrets?”

I think about that. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“Yes.” She starts walking again, kicking up bits of sand with each step.

“I’ll tell you what... I’ve always credited my tough start in life as the reason for my success. It gave me drive, pushed me to never take no for an answer and to make something out of myself, because I sure as hell knew there was nowhere there to catch me if I fell.”

“I get that.”

I remember how she said she’s not close with her parents. “Do you mom and dad even know your daughter?”

Billie’s eyes darken slightly, and I know I’ve hit a nerve. “No,” she says softly. “I left home when I was eighteen, and I’ve barely spoken to them since. It’s complicated.”

“So you know something about what it’s like to be alone in the world.”

I’ve struck a chord. She looks so sad, I wish I could take the statement back.

I clear my throat, looking to change the subject. “I don’t want anyone feeling sorry for how I grew up, and it’s made me who I am, but as I get older I’m starting to wonder if, had someone given me a loving home, my life today might look very different.”

She tilts her head. “Different how?”

I look at her, trying to choose my words carefully. “Maybe I wouldn’t have

had to resort to some of the things I did to survive. Maybe I would have had a better foundation to build upon, instead of having to claw my way up from nothing.”

She nods, understanding in her eyes. “I can see how that would be hard. But James, don’t forget that you did survive. You made something out of yourself even with the odds stacked against you. That’s impressive.”

I smile faintly. “Thanks. It hasn’t been easy, but I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished.”

We walk in silence for a few moments, the waves crashing against the shore. Then Billie speaks up again. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the biggest regret you have?”

The question catches me off guard. I’ve never really thought about it before, at least not in those terms. But as I consider her question, a huge wave crashes into us.

Billie shrieks, and we both get soaked head to toe.

Laughing, I shake my head, water droplets flying everywhere. “Well, that’s one way to interrupt a serious conversation.”

Billie joins in, her laughter matching mine. “I guess so.”

“You’re wet all over,” I laugh.

“You are too.” She points at me.

For a few seconds, we just grin at each other. A softness enters her eyes, and her smile slips away.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“For what?” My heart is beating so hard, I worry that she can hear it.

“For talking to me. I really liked this.”

I swallow hard. “Me, too.”

“You didn’t have to share all of that, but you did, and... well, thank you.”
Tears fill her eyes.

My chest tightens at seeing her on the verge of crying. “Hey, don’t feel sorry for me.”

She sighs. “I’m not. I just...” She wipes away a rogue tear. “Thank you.”

Before I can even process what she’s doing, she’s stepped forward and entered my space. Her arms go around me, and she tilts her face to mine.

And the whole world turns upside down.

Before I can stop myself, I press my lips to hers.

CHAPTER 16

BILLIE



This was not the plan.

I meant to hug James, but he must have misread my intentions. And then, suddenly, his lips were on mine and it was like tasting heaven.

And now here we are, bursting through the door of our hotel room, kissing like our lives depend on it.

My hands roam over his chest, feeling the hard planes of his muscles beneath his shirt. I can't get enough of him, can't get close enough to him. I want to crawl inside him, to be as close as two people can possibly be.

James breaks the kiss, gasping for breath. We stare at each other, our chests heaving.

"Billie," he says, his voice rough with emotion. "Are you sure about this? I don't want to pressure you into anything."

I nod, my heart pounding in my chest. "I'm sure. I've never been surer of anything in my life."

And then we're kissing again, our hands pulling at each other's clothes, desperate for more. We fall onto the bed, our bodies tangled together. James's hands move over my skin, igniting every nerve ending.

I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. He groans, his lips trailing down my neck.

“Billie,” he murmurs against my skin. “You’re so beautiful.”

“James,” I whisper. “Please. I need you.”

Everything else seems to fall away. The fact that I’m his employee. The medical questions — which I now know I’ll never have answers to, since James doesn’t know who his birth parents are.

It all slips away, until there’s nothing but the two of us left.

James kisses me with such tenderness. I whimper, needing him so badly it’s like a fever.

And then his fingers slide into my underwear, and it’s like he’s lighting the fuse on a bomb. I can feel my body reacting to his touch. He rubs his thumb against me, and I’m so close to coming it almost hurts.

“James,” I moan.

He kisses me again, his tongue sliding into my mouth. I can taste myself there. I’m so turned on right now, it’s like I’m living out a fantasy.

He rubs my clit, and it’s all it takes. I come apart, crying out his name.

James kisses me with more passion than before, his tongue exploring my mouth. He groans, pulling his hand away, and I whimper, feeling empty without him touching me.

“I want you,” he growls, ripping my underwear off.

He stands, quickly removing his clothes. His body is muscles upon muscles, sculpted to perfection.

I stare at him in awe, and he smiles again, coming down to kneel on the bed next to me. He kisses me again, his hands running over my body.

I undo his belt and unzip his pants, taking his cock out. He’s huge and hard, and my body thrums with need.

He kisses me hard, and then pulls my underwear off. We’re both completely naked now, and he stares at my body.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs.

I shake my head. "I'm not..."

"You are," he whispers, gently cupping my face. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

I stare into his eyes, and believe it.

James leans over me, kissing me again, his body pressing down on mine. I feel his cock brushing against my hip, leaving a trail of wetness.

"Please," I moan. I need him inside me now.

"I'll be gentle," he whispers, picking up his pants and pulling a condom from his wallet.

I take the condom from him and roll it onto his length as we kiss. Somehow, it's the most erotic part of our time together so far.

He lifts my leg, slowly entering me. I can feel my body stretching around him. He's so big and thick, I can barely take him all in.

He slowly pushes into me, and I whimper, pain and pleasure mixed together. He's burying himself deeper and deeper into me, and I moan.

We're moving together, our bodies locked in place, his mouth on mine. I can feel his muscles tense under my hands, and I know he's close. We're both so close.

I'm feeling something I've never felt before, so intense that it scares me. My senses are on overload, and I'm wrapped up in all of it. His scent, his taste, his touch. Everything about James is overwhelming, and I don't ever want to be free of it.

And then everything bursts into a million pieces, and I'm flying.

I cling to James, taking everything he has to give me. His arms wrap around me, holding me in place. I'm safe and warm in his embrace, and I never want this to end.

"You feel so good," James whispers, his voice hoarse. "So fucking good."

I bite my lip, curling my fingers into the sheets as he begins to move. He's taking me higher, faster, my body reacting to him as if it knows him. This is

more than just fucking; it isn't just sex. This is passion.

He's gentle with me, and I can tell that he cares. He doesn't just want to fuck me; he wants me to feel good.

James pulls back, staring into my eyes. Wrapping my legs around him, I pull him deeper inside me. I can feel his body shuddering, and I know that he's close to the edge. We're both right there, so close.

I can feel my orgasm building, my body tightening, my muscles coiling. I'm heading into the darkness, and I'm afraid.

But I hold still, waiting for James to come.

Keeping himself buried in me, James grabs my face, staring into my eyes. He breathes out, and I feel him throb inside me, and then he releases.

I come with him, our bodies joined. It's like I'm melting into him, the two of us becoming one and the same.

We collapse flat on the mattress, his arms around me and my face pressed against his chest.

He's buried inside me, and I can feel our heartbeats, the rhythm matching as we move together.

"I've never felt anything like that," James whispers, tracing my face with his fingertips.

He wraps his arms tighter around my body, holding me in place.

"I can't believe that just happened," I whisper. "What are we doing?"

"I don't know," he says, pulling me close and holding me as I drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER 17

BILLIE



I awake with a start, sitting up straight in bed. “What time is it?” I gasp.
But James is nowhere to be seen. I’m alone in our room.

The alarm clock on the bedside table reads a few past eight. Okay, not too bad.

Yet I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck. Staying up all night does not agree with me.

At least there was a cherry on top.

I bite my lip, memories of being with James flooding my vision.

I can’t believe that actually happened, that I let myself go with him. I never let myself go with anyone.

I’ve been cautious my whole life, but with James, I didn’t care. He makes me feel wonderful, and I don’t care what happens next.

Which is bad. Very bad.

What if things with James and I progress? What if we start dating?

For how long am I going to keep the secret about Quinn from him?

I shake my head. “What am I thinking?” I mutter.

I have more sympathy for him after hearing his story, but James is still the man who ran out on Quinn.

Getting out of bed, I hurry into the bathroom and jump into the shower. The cold spray soothes my headache.

As I'm turning off the shower, I hear a door close. I walk into the bedroom with a towel around myself, water dripping from my hair and body.

James is fully dressed and in the middle of putting on his watch. At the sight of me, his face lights up.

And my heart flips.

Oh, no.

I thought my head and my heart were at war before, but I really had no clue. How will I ever get over this guy?

"Good morning." He crosses the room, pulls me into his arms, and kisses me recklessly.

My head has no idea what to do. My heart is singing.

When he pulls back, I'm breathless, lips parted. "Good morning."

"I ordered you breakfast. The presentation isn't for a little while, but I need to head downstairs and schmooze with early crowd. I hope you understand."

I nod, my tongue feeling heavy. I need to tell him about Quinn.

I need to see what he says. I need his explanation for why he abandoned her and her birth mom.

But I can't. The words are stuck in my throat.

"I have to go." He gives me a regretful look. "I'm sorry."

"But..." I start to speak.

"I'll see you down there." He runs his fingers through my damp hair.

"Okay." I lean into him, taking comfort in his strong arms.

I don't want to let him go.

James disappears through the door, leaving me alone in the room. I have to

move. I have to do my hair and get dressed.

I have to get my head together.

I don't know what's wrong with me. My head is spinning.

I'm in love with James. What am I doing?

And this isn't just any sort of love. It's the forever kind, the kind that doesn't go away.

"I don't want a forever love. Not with him." I put my clothes on slowly, thinking about what my next move should be.

James is Quinn's father, after all. I have to tell him what's happened, and then he'll tell me about his side of the story.

I will listen to what he has to say, but I don't know if I'll believe it.

It's icky and wrong that he abandoned her. But I can't help but admire him for turning his life around.

Maybe he's different than he was six years ago.

Or maybe not.

Frustrated, I pull out my phone and call Monica. I'm not even thinking about what time it is back home, and realizing that I almost hang up.

But then a second later she answers.

"Hey. What's going on?"

"I slept with him," I blurt out, then shut my eyes tight with shame.

"What?!"

"No, it's not like that. I mean, it was like that, but it was more than that too." I realize how crazy I must sound.

"So did you have sex with him, or did you not?"

"I did." Moaning, I fall against the sheets.

The sheets that smell like James. The sheets that make me want him all over

again.

“Oh my God, Billie,” Monica breathes. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m in love with him.” I bite my lip, both hating and loving the fact.

“What?! How?”

I can hear the judgment in her voice, and it’s not helping my displeasure with myself any.

“I don’t know. I just am. And I think he’s in love with me too.” I sit up on the bed, feeling miserable. “Maybe.”

“Good God, Billie. This is crazy.”

“I know. I’m being so stupid.”

“No, you’re not being stupid. If you feel this way about him, there must be something special about the guy.”

For a second, I think maybe I’ve misheard. “You told me to remember that he’s the enemy.”

“Yeah, I did. But, also, you’ve barely spoken to men since I met you. If you’re all gaga for James, there must be a good reason.”

I groan. “I know. I want him to be a good guy. I really do. I’m just so confused.”

“About what, exactly? Just ask him about Quinn.”

“I plan on it. He had to run downstairs to get to the conference, but I will. As soon as I see him.”

My stomach twists at the thought. I’m afraid that telling him will mean losing him, but if he walks out on my daughter twice he’s definitely not someone I want in my life.

“What about the medical information?” Monica prods. “Have you found out anything?”

“James grew up in foster care. He doesn’t have any information about his family.”

“Damn,” she hisses.

“It’s a lot to process.” I sigh. “And I really, really have to tell him about Quinn. I have to tell him, but I don’t think he’ll believe me.”

“He will.”

“He wouldn’t even acknowledge her existence before.”

“He’ll listen now.”

I shake my head, but I’m a little more hopeful after talking to Monica.

“You’ll get through this, Billie. I know you will.”

“Thanks for listening.”

“It’s what I’m here for.” She pauses. “Listen, I’m about to go into a meeting, but let me know how it goes with him.”

“I will. Bye.”

I hang up, feeling slightly better. Standing up, I face myself in the mirror.

“You can do this,” I say, smoothing my blouse.

I’ll come clean about why I applied to the GarrisTech job. I’ll find out how James feels about Quinn now.

And then, whatever the outcome is, I’ll accept it.

I just might not like it.

CHAPTER 18

JAMES



The elevator doors slide open and I step inside, catch sight of my reflection, and stop.

I barely recognize the guy staring back at me. He's grinning from ear to ear, looking like he's on cloud nine.

I don't know when I've ever been this happy.

It's like something clicked into place the moment mine and Billie's lips met for the first time.

She doesn't care about the tech billionaire James Garris. That guy she made it abundantly clear she dislikes.

But then I took off that persona and showed her the man underneath. The former orphan who's had to fight for everything he has.

And that's when something changed between us.

She likes who I am. She just wants to be with *me*.

And I want her.

More than anything in the world, I want her.

I don't want to think about anything but her for the rest of my life.

My heart sings her name.

I can't wait to see her again.

I chuckle and shake my head as the elevator descends to the main floor. My phone pings with a text and I eagerly pull it out, hoping that it's Billie.

But it's Rose, a woman I've gone out with a couple times.

I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should even read it, but curiosity gets the better of me.

Hey James, I'm back in town. I was wondering if you wanted to grab dinner sometime this week?

I stare at the message, feeling a sense of disgust bubble up inside me. I don't want to think about anyone else but Billie. I don't want to be with anyone else but Billie.

I type out a quick response, *Sorry, Rose, I'm not interested in seeing anyone right now.*

Almost immediately, little dots appear. Rose is typing back.

The elevator doors open, and I step outside and into the busy lobby, waiting to see what Rose has to say.

But then the dots disappear. She hasn't responded.

Which is probably for the best. I'm ready to cut off all ties from the past and move forward.

I've never seen myself in a committed relationship, but after the time spent with Billie I'm feeling different.

I stride across the lobby and into the part of the hotel where the conference is happening. I hated leaving her in the hotel room, but soon enough all this schmoozing will be over and we'll have some time to ourselves once more.

"Hey, James!" Stephen Leigh, CEO of one of the biggest tech companies in the world, calls out to me from across the room.

I force a smile, not really in the mood for small talk. "Hey, Stephen. How's the conference treating you?" I ask, trying to sound interested.

Stephen launches into a ten-minute long speech about the conference and how important it is for the future of tech. I nod along, not really paying

attention to what he's saying.

All I can think about is Billie's smile, her laugh, and the way she makes me feel.

Finally, Stephen finishes his speech and excuses himself to go mingle with some other tech giants.

There are more people waiting to talk to me, though. I see their eyes glistening with excitement and can nearly hear the pitches they're mentally running over.

"Mr. Garris." An eager young man approaches me. "It's such an honor, sir. I've been following your work for years and I just wanted to say—"

"That's very kind of you," I say, cutting him off. "But I'm afraid I'm pressed for time. Is there something specific you wanted to discuss with me?"

The young man's face falls, but he quickly recovers and launches into his pitch. I listen half-heartedly, nodding along without really hearing what he's saying.

Finally, the young man finishes. I'm about to step away when I'm approached by someone else.

Then someone else.

This is what conferences are about, and I expected it, but I've never disliked the whole matter this much.

I excuse myself from the fifth conversation and take a step back — and bump right into someone.

"Oh! Excuse me!" I turn around to face the person I've hit.

It's a man who looks oddly familiar, but I can't quite place him.

"James Garris." He smiles broadly at me.

I nod at him and smile back, but I still don't know if we've met before or if he merely recognizes me.

"Richard Sims," he says, offering his hand for a shake.

The light turns on in my brain. That's right — Richard Sims. I invested in his DNA app a few years back.

“Richard.” I shake his hand. “How are things?”

His smile turns into a smirk. “Well, they're about to get a lot better now that I'm talking to the one and only James Garris.”

I laugh. “What can I do for you, Richard?”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about my latest project.” He gestures towards his smartwatch. “We've been working on integrating some new features into this, and I think you'd be interested in investing.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh really? Tell me more.”

As he launches into his pitch, I can't help but feel grateful for the break in the monotony of the conference. Unlike the other people I've talked to, Richard is genuinely passionate about his project. His excitement is contagious and I find myself getting pulled into the conversation.

“And how about the other app?” I ask. “How is that going?”

I should already be in the know on this, but I invest in so many businesses it's impossible to keep up with each individual one.

His face lights up. “Wonderful. We're making great strides with it. Hey, why don't I send you a link to the latest version, so you can check it out?”

I smile. “That would be great. Still got my email?”

“Of course,” Richard says as he pulls out his phone. “I'll send that over to you right now.”

As Richard types on his phone, I can't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. This is what it's all about — investing in people and ideas that have the potential to change the world. It's why I work so hard, why I come to conferences like this one. Not for the shallow conversations, but for the chance to find the next big thing.

“Done,” Richard says as he puts his phone away. “All the info on the smartwatch project is in there too.”

“Great.” I nod at him. “Talk soon.”

I turn to walk away just as a woman with a clipboard approaches me. “Mr. Garris, are you ready for your presentation?”

I nod. “Yep.”

Thanks to Billie, I’m ready. If she hadn’t stayed up all night to help me prepare, I would just be winging it up on the stage today.

I make my way to the stage, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement. This is what I love — being able to share my vision with the world, to inspire others to take risks and make a difference.

As I begin my presentation, I can feel the energy in the room shift. People lean forward, their eyes intent on mine, as I outline GarrisTech’s game-changing venture into the AI sphere. My words flow effortlessly as I draw on my passion and expertise, and when I finally finish, the applause is thunderous.

But amidst the cheers and whistles, I can’t help but feel a sense of emptiness. I’ve accomplished so much, but at what cost? I’ve spent countless hours poring over spreadsheets and projections, meeting with investors and strategizing with my team. But what about the people in my life who matter?

I search the crowd, and then I see her. She’s pressed against the wall in the very back of the room, looking like an angel among the mortals.

Billie.

Will she have me, another mere mortal?

Or will I be left in her dust, looking like a fool?

I clear my throat and gather my wits. People come across the stage to shake my hand, to kiss my ass, but none of it really matters right now.

I’ve taken a thousand risks in my career, but none of them felt as scary as what I’m about to do.

Crazy, right? All I’m doing is asking a woman to be my girlfriend — all my work policies about not dating be damned.

And yet... it feels like I'm on the edge of a cliff, preparing to jump without a parachute.

It's exhilarating. Terrifying.

And it feels one-hundred percent right.

CHAPTER 19

BILLIE



Standing in the back of the room, I twist my hands. James looks so confident at the podium, the whole crowd hanging on his every word.

The pride filling my chest is immeasurable.

I know how much hard work he has put into this project, and to see it come to life like this is a true accomplishment.

But as he scans the crowd, his eyes eventually find me. I freeze like a deer caught in headlights.

James excuses himself from the crowd of people surrounding him and starts making his way towards me.

I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks as he approaches me.

“Hey,” he says, his gaze intense. “What do you think?”

I smile. “It was incredible. You did so well.”

“It’s all thanks to you. If you hadn’t stayed up all night, helping me—”

“It was nothing.” I shake my head.

“No. It was everything.” He touches my elbow, and heat rushes through me.

We’re standing in a crowded room, and there’s nothing inappropriate about the touch, but it feels just as intimate as our time together in bed.

Maybe it’s the way he’s looking at me.

Maybe it's the way his eyes seem to be searching mine, as if he's trying to read my thoughts.

Whatever it is, I can feel my heart beating faster, and I know that something is different between us.

James takes a deep breath. "I know we've been tiptoeing around this for a while, but I can't ignore it anymore."

I feel my breath catch in my throat, wondering what he could possibly mean.

He takes another step closer to me, and I can feel the warmth radiating off of him.

"I can't stop thinking about you, Billie. I promised myself I wouldn't get involved because we work together, but I can't help the way I feel."

All the air seems to leave the room, and I'm left standing there, staring at him in shock.

Did he just say what I think he said?

He looks down at me, his eyes searching for any trace of what I'm feeling. "I understand if you don't feel the same way, if last night was just a one-time thing for you, but I had to tell you. I can't keep it inside anymore."

My mind is racing with a million thoughts at once. On one hand, I've been hoping for this moment for what feels like forever — even though I never even admitted that to myself. On the other hand, the thought of what this means when it comes to Quinn is terrifying.

And then there are all my doubts about James. Is he the callous jerk I've always read about?

Or is he the strong, kind man who clawed his way from the bottom to the top? The man who sees me, who appreciates me for what I bring to the table?

I swallow hard. "Everyone says you're an asshole, you know."

"I've made some mistakes." His face grows serious. "A lot that I would take back if I could. Being around you, Billie, it's helped me see that there are other ways... that the world isn't always against me. That it's full of good

things.”

My breath catches in my throat. How am I supposed to respond to that?

This man has me twisted around his little fingers, and he has no idea because I haven't let it show.

But I hear what he's saying. And I believe him.

“Do you care about my past?” he asks softly.

Good question. I care about some of it. I care about what he did to Quinn and Quinn's birth mother.

I swallow hard. “I'm here. With you. And I'm not running away.”

“But are you falling for me?”

My heart skips a beat, and I look into his eyes, hoping he can see it in mine. “Yeah.”

The corners of his mouth turn up, and he invades my space, backing me up against the wall. People mill around us, but James is acting like they aren't even there.

“Good,” he murmurs.

As I look up at him, I know that I can't resist any longer.

“I do feel the same way,” I say, my voice barely audible above the noise of the crowd.

Relief floods his face, and he pulls me into a tight embrace.

As his arms wrap around me, I feel like I'm finally home.

Everything else fades away, and all that's left is James and me, wrapped up in each other's arms.

We pull back from the embrace, and James looks at me with a newfound intensity. “I want you, Billie,” he says, his voice low and husky. “I want you like I've never wanted anything before.”

My body responds instantly, my heart racing as desire courses through me. I

can feel the heat pooling between my legs, and I know that I want him just as much as he wants me.

Without another word, he takes my hand and leads me out of the crowded ballroom and into a quiet corner of the hotel hallway.

As soon as we're alone, he pulls me in for a searing kiss, his lips claiming mine with a hunger I've never experienced before. I moan into his mouth, my arms wrapping around his neck as I melt into him.

He breaks the kiss, his eyes dark with lust. "I need you," he whispers, his breath hot against my skin.

And I know that I need him too. For lack of a better word, though, it's complicated.

Really, really complicated.

He clears his throat and reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone. "Billie, there's something I want to ask you."

My heart is pounding in my chest, my mind going a mile a minute.

He licks his lips. "Actually, wait. Before I do that, let's get out of here. We should celebrate."

"What about the rest of the conference?" I glance over his shoulder, at the other end of the hall where people continue to spill out from the conference room.

"To hell with the conference. The presentation is done. The rest is just decoration."

I nod and trail my fingers over his chest. I need to tell him about Quinn. I need to hear his explanation for leaving her.

I also feel like I need to throw up.

Once the truth comes out, there will be no going back. The potential James and I are walking into could be completely shattered.

I need to be okay with that. I started this journey to protect Quinn, and I will end it with the same goal in mind.

“I need... I need to talk to you about something, too,” I croak.

He frowns slightly. “What?”

“About...”

Oh, God. Why can't I get the words out?

“You know what?” I laugh, but it sounds high-pitched and fake. “Give me just a couple minutes, will you? I need to run to the ladies' room.”

“Of course.” His hand slips out of mine. “I'll wait here for you.”

I nod, my vision spinning. “Be right back.”

I begin walking as fast as I can manage without running, and I push through the door into the women's room.

The door swings closed behind me with a thump, and I sink to the floor in the corner, pressing my back against the wall.

I'm the first to admit that I'm not the bravest person in the world. I'm also the first to admit that I'm not the smartest either.

But we're talking about something different.

This is something completely out of my comfort zone.

My hand flies up to my mouth, and I take a deep breath.

I could walk out there right now and tell him. I could let the chips fall where they may.

As I glance up at the ceiling, I can feel the heat rising in my face. The pressure in my chest is like an elephant sitting on my chest, and I'm sure I'm turning redder by the second.

I take my phone out of my purse and call Monica.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“What happened?” Monica answers.

“I need your help,” I whisper.

“What’s going on?” she asks, concern lacing her voice.

“I need to tell James about Quinn. I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know if I can do it,” I admit, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

There’s a moment of silence on the other end of the line before Monica speaks. “You could not tell him. The medical information you wanted isn’t there, Billie. Your mission is over. You can walk away now.”

I shake my head, even though she can’t see me. “I can’t. Quinn deserves to know the truth, and James deserves to know why I’m doing all of this.”

“But what about you? What do you deserve?” Monica asks softly.

I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I just want to do the right thing. For everyone involved.”

There’s a rustling on the other end of the line, and then Monica’s voice comes back, resolute. “There’s more to it than that, though.”

She’s trying to get me to admit something, and I know it. And she knows that I know it.

I bite my lip and close my eyes. “I love him.”

Monica doesn’t respond immediately, and I can sense the weight of her silence on the other end of the phone. I feel exposed, like I’ve said too much, but at the same time, it’s a relief to finally say it out loud.

“I know you do,” Monica finally says, her voice soft. “But you have to ask yourself if telling him is worth the risk. It could change everything.”

“I know,” I say. “But I can’t keep hiding it. Not anymore.”

There’s another pause before Monica speaks again. “Okay. Then there’s your answer.”

I feel a surge of gratitude for my best friend, and I wipe away the tears that have fallen down my face. “Thank you, Monica. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Anytime. You can do this, Billie. Now get back out there and face the music. And remember, you’re doing this for Quinn.”

I hang up the phone and take another deep breath before standing up.

At the sink, I splash some cold water on my face and stare at my reflection.

Monica's right. I can do this. I need to do this.

For Quinn.

For James.

For myself.

I'm in too deep now to walk away. I need to know what comes next. Even if that means castles crumbling, I'll face it.

Because when it comes down to it, a person can only live a lie for so long. Sooner or later, it eats you up from the inside out, and my sooner has come.

CHAPTER 20

JAMES



As Billie vanishes into the women's room, I'm grinning from ear to ear. This is the best day of my life, hands down.

People stream in and out of the conference room, every other person trying to catch my attention. I wave and nod my hellos, but I don't want to talk to anyone right now.

Not unless that someone is Billie.

Needing to look busy so people don't approach me, I pull my phone out and find a text from Carlos.

Hey, man. How's Hawaii? All good at the conference?

I type back quickly.

It's amazing. Things are going well with Billie and me too.

Less than a minute later, my phone buzzes with a response. *Haha, I knew something was going on with you! Well, I hope it's fun.*

I shake my head at my friend's comment. *No, Carlos, it's not like that.*

He writes back. *What do you mean?*

I type out an answer, hesitate, then hit send before I can change my mind. Because I'm sure about this.

I'm sure about her.

I'm in love with Billie.

My friend's next text is full of enough emojis you would think a preteen sent it, not a grown adult. *Congrats, man! You better bring this girl around soon. Jen will be stoked.*

Feeling like I'm on cloud nine, I close out the messages app. Billie still isn't back from the restroom, so I check my email while I think about where I'd like to take her for dinner tonight.

At the top of my inbox is a message from Richard Sims.

It's at least three years since I invested in his first app, DNAU, and I didn't just get involved in the business sense. I was actually one of the first people to send a saliva sample in.

The app was still in its early development back then. I meant to follow up months later to see if there were any results, but it always fell to the bottom of my to-do list.

Now I see that there was more to it. It wasn't that I was too busy to check with the app creators. I was too afraid.

DNAU focuses on collecting genetic information, but it's also a way to connect family trees. For someone like me, who doesn't know who his birth parents are, that can be a loaded situation.

All I know about my parents is either that they didn't want me or couldn't take care of me. I've always figured there's no point in finding out anything else about them.

But now, standing in this hallway, I feel a new sense of life.

A new curiosity. Billie has woken something up in me. Hearing about the good life she's given her daughter, I can't help but wonder about my family.

What if there's more to my story than I know? What if I have siblings out there somewhere? What if my birth parents are still alive and want to connect with me?

Before I can talk myself out of it, I click on the link Richard sent and download the latest version of DNAU. Once in the app, I enter my login

information and navigate to the family tree section.

My heart races as I click through the pages, looking for any hint of a match.

But then I see it. A match. Someone in the DNAU database is a relative of mine.

I feel a surge of emotions — fear, excitement, and curiosity all mixed together. I wonder who this person is and what they could tell me about my family.

There's something else: a small green leaf next to a blank spot that reads "Possible Child Match".

I freeze, struggling to process what I'm seeing. What does that mean? That I... that I have...

My mind races as I try to make sense of the situation. Could it be possible that I have a child out there somewhere?

How is this even possible? What woman in my past would have hidden her pregnancy from me? What woman would have hidden my own child from me?

It's there, though. Clear as day. There's no name listed, since the child must be a minor, but he or she is right under my own name.

I slump against the wall, my heart and mind racing.

I'm a father.

CHAPTER 21

BILLIE



My shoulders back and my head held high, I walk down the hallway, searching for James.

He's not where I left him, and my stomach drops. Has he taken off without me? Decided this is a bad idea after all?

But then I spot him. He's in an armchair between two potted plants, staring at his clasped hands.

I freeze. From his body language, it's clear something is the matter.

"James?" I call out softly, approaching him. "What's wrong?"

He looks up at me, his eyes wide and filled with disbelief. "I have a child," he says, his voice barely above a whisper.

My heart drops as I understand the weight of his words.

"I didn't know," he says, his voice shaking. "I don't know who... I don't know anything."

Oh my God. He doesn't know. He has no idea about Quinn.

It makes so much sense now. I could never understand why he abandoned her. Him not knowing about her existence is a whole different matter.

My gaze drops to the floor, and I feel queasy. Where do we go from here? How will I tell him about Quinn?

I sit down next to him, wanting to touch him but feeling like I don't have the right. I've kept this secret from him, and now he's found out on his own.

And I look like a vile person.

He blinks, still looking dazed. "I don't even know if it's a boy or a girl... how old they are... who their mother is."

I take a deep breath. "James. Remember I said I needed to talk to you about something?"

He looks at me like I'm speaking a different language. "Huh? When?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Right before I went to the bathroom." I lick my lips. There's no easy way to say this, so I should just come out with it.

"Um. Yeah." He frowns in confusion. "But I'm sorry, Billie. I'm kind of preoccupied right now—"

"I know you have a child," I blurt out. "A girl. Six years old."

His eyes widen? "What? How do you know that?"

I swallow hard, feeling the weight of my secret crushing me. "Because I'm her mother, James. I adopted Quinn when she was three months old."

He stares at me for a long moment, and I feel a crushing weight pushing down on me.

And then he starts laughing.

I blink, taken aback. Is he laughing at me? At Quinn?

"What's so funny?" I ask, anger rising in my chest.

He shakes his head, still chuckling. "I'm sorry, Billie. It's just... You're kidding. You have to be..."

"I'm not kidding," I say quietly. "I signed up for a DNAU account to see if I could find out any medical information for Quinn. She had an asthma attack and I was freaking out. I wanted to see if there was anything else I should watch out for. And then you showed up as a match. As her father. I couldn't ask you directly about her health, and so—"

“Wait, wait.” He holds his hands up, his voice rising. “Why couldn’t you directly ask me?”

“Because Sara said you wanted nothing to do with her.”

James drops his hands, looking shellshocked. “Sara who?”

“Sara Ford.”

He looks at me like he’s never heard the name, but a moment later recognition takes over.

“Wait, Sara Ford? As in the Sara Ford I hooked up with a few times years ago?”

I nod, feeling a pang of jealousy at the thought, even though it was years ago.

“I haven’t seen or heard from Sara in years,” he says, his voice low. “I had no idea she got pregnant.”

I let out a sigh, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. He really didn’t know. He wasn’t just playing dumb to get out of responsibility.

James stares at me, and I can see the conflicting emotions flickering behind his eyes. He’s angry, but I can also see a hint of fear. He’s scared of what this means for him. And I can’t say that I blame him.

I’m scared too. Terrified.

“Sara didn’t tell me,” he says to the floor. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. And we can’t ask her.”

His eyes shine for a moment before he scrubs his face. “Okay, so is this why you applied to work at GarrisTech? You were, what? Going to spy on me to get information? Get money out of me?”

I feel my blood boil at the suggestion. “No,” I say firmly. “I would never do that. I just wanted to be as informed as possible about any medical challenges Quinn might face, and I thought you might be a valuable source of information.”

James stands and starts pacing. I watch him move back and forth, frustrated

and helpless.

“I can’t believe this,” he mutters. “How am I supposed to react to this? What am I supposed to do?”

Then he whirls around to face me. “You lied to me.”

“I...” My words trail away. As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right. “I did it for Quinn,” I lamely finish.

James’s eyes narrow, and I can feel his anger radiating towards me. “You didn’t think to tell me the truth from the beginning? You just assumed that I wouldn’t want anything to do with my own daughter?”

My own anger rises. “I didn’t assume anything,” I snap. “You weren’t on the birth certificate, and before she died, Sara told everyone that the father — you — wanted nothing to do with her or the baby.”

His face falls. It’s not a low blow, though. It’s the truth.

“So,” I hiss, “speaking of protecting daughters, that’s exactly what I was doing.”

His gaze falls to the ground. I could add more — about how he’s never even met Quinn so it’s ridiculous for him to make it sound like he has more of a right to her than I do, about how Sara must have had a good reason to keep Quinn a secret from him — but I don’t need to add these things.

He already knows them. We can both feel these heavy truths sitting between us.

I sigh and unfold my arms. This isn’t how I imagined this going down. Twenty minutes ago we were locked in an embrace, the future looking bright and promising.

And now it’s all crumbling to pieces.

“James...”

“Don’t.” He holds up a hand, still not looking at me. “I need to get out of here.”

He lifts his face and looks around, looking like a caged animal. “Don’t follow

me.”

The words are a punch to the gut. They nearly knock me over.

I watch as he turns and storms away, his footsteps echoing down the hallway. Tears prick at my eyes, but I blink them away. This isn't the time to break down.

I take a deep breath and run a hand through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. James has a right to be angry, but I had to do what I thought was best for Quinn.

How do I make him see that? How do I make him understand that I wasn't trying to deceive him, but to protect my daughter?

Or is there even any point in trying?

Maybe this is all for the best. It was stupid to think James and I would work out anyway.

But even as I think it, my chest fills with a ragged, awful pain. Last night was probably the best night of my life.

A night that I never wanted to end, but already it feels like a distant memory. The weight of my actions and the possibility of never seeing James again is almost too much to bear.

I watch him disappear down the hallway and feel like a part of me is going with him. I don't know what to do or say to make things right between us. I don't even know if things can be made right.

But I have to try. I can't let him walk out of my life without a fight.

I quickly run after him, calling his name. He doesn't turn around, but I can see his shoulders tense up.

“James, please,” I plead, catching up to him. “We need to talk about this. We can figure something out.”

He stops abruptly and spins around, his eyes blazing with anger. “Figure something out? What is there to figure out, huh? You came into my life and kept Quinn from me. How am I supposed to trust you after that?”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” I say softly, reaching out to touch his arm. “I did it to protect her.”

Hurt fills his eyes. “From me.”

“I…” I trail off. Yes. From him.

I gulp. “You must know what people say about you.”

His eyes flash. “And you believe them? You think I would put Quinn in danger?”

“No!” I shake my head vigorously. “Of course not. But I had to make sure, for her sake.”

He studies me for a long moment, and for a second, I think I see a hint of softness in his eyes. But it’s quickly replaced with ice.

“I can’t believe you would do this,” he says finally, his voice low and dangerous. “I trusted you, and you betrayed me.”

I take a step back. What am I doing?

Am I really asking him to stay in my life? To enter Quinn’s life?

Sara didn’t want James in Quinn’s world; how do I know he’s any different now?

Last night could have been a temporary thing — a wonderful period before he reverted back to his asshole, grumpy self.

Tears fill my eyes. It feels like this is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But I’m doing it. I’m letting him go.

“Goodbye, James,” I say.

For the briefest moment, something flickers in his eyes. Regret?

As quickly as it’s there, though, it’s also gone, and then he turns and stalks away, vanishing into the crowd.

CHAPTER 22

BILLIE



I take a look at my desk, making sure I haven't forgotten anything. Though it's not like I had anything precious here, anyway.

Since before even my first day at GarrisTech, I saw my time here as temporary. A means to an end. I never intended to put down roots, and now I'm glad that I didn't.

"What happened?" David comes up. "You're leaving?"

I nod, swallowing hard. "Yeah. I am."

David looks at me, his expression softening. "Is it about James?"

There must be rumors circulating about us. Who knows what people are saying?

Even before we got back from Hawaii — me on a commercial flight I booked myself — I put in my resignation at GarrisTech.

I didn't know whether James intended to fire me or not, but I figured there was no point in waiting around to find out.

I shake my head, but I can't help the tears that are starting to fall. "It's about everything. It's about me, and my choices, and where I want to go from here."

David doesn't say anything for a moment, just standing there with his hand on my shoulder. I appreciate the silent support.

Finally, he speaks. “I’m going to miss you, Billie.”

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

David sighs and pulls me into a hug. “Wherever you go, you’re going to do great things. I know it.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, feeling a mix of gratitude and sadness wash over me.

“Is it true?” David drops his voice. “What people are saying about you and James?”

“I don’t know what they’re saying,” I answer quietly, also glad I haven’t heard any rumors. That would be added heartache that I don’t need.

“Some people say you two were together in Hawaii,” David says hesitantly. “That it was more than a work trip.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. “My leaving the company doesn’t have anything to do with that. I’ve just seen that it wasn’t a good match.”

David studies me for a moment before nodding. “Okay. Whatever you say, Billie. Just remember that we’re here for you, no matter what.”

I give him a small smile, grateful for his support. “Thanks, David. I really appreciate it.”

As I grab my last box and head out of the office, I can’t help but feel a sense of relief. I’m leaving behind the memories of James and all the pain he’s caused me.

But at the same time, my heart aches with the knowledge that I’m also leaving behind a part of myself. A part that I had found in him.

As I step outside, the warm sunshine envelopes me, and I know that it’s time for a fresh start. I take a deep breath, inhaling the salty ocean breeze as it ruffles my hair.

I close my eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation, before heading towards my car parked on the curb.

As I drive away from the office, I can’t help but think about what my future

holds. I'm back to working for myself. Back to the single mom life.

It hurts like hell, thinking about what could have been between me and James. But it's okay. Obviously it wasn't meant to be.

And who knows, maybe somewhere along the way, I'll find someone who truly appreciates me for who I am. Someone who won't break my heart.

But for now, I'm content with my little home with just myself and my daughter.

I park outside mine and Monica's office, and as I climb the stairs to the old building's second floor, I hear Quinn running around.

I open the door to our shared office space, greeted by the sound of Quinn's laughter and Monica's voice. They're both sitting on the floor, surrounded by crumpled paper and markers.

"Mommy!" Quinn exclaims, running over to me and wrapping her arms around my legs. "Did you bring me a treat?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "Sorry, kiddo. No treats today."

"That's okay. I like that you're back early." She takes my hand and smiles up at me, and there's a pang in my chest.

She looks so much like James.

I haven't seen him since Hawaii, and we haven't exchanged so much as one text. Even when I went back to our shared room to grab my things, he wasn't there.

So this is it. I'll likely never see him again. Quinn will never meet her father.

The emotions crashing through me are powerful and conflicting. There's a strong possibility that if Quinn weren't in the room I would sit on the floor and bawl.

Monica stands up and gives me a warm smile. "How was the last day at work?"

"It was good," I say, putting down my box and taking a seat on the floor next to Quinn. "A bit sad, but it's time for a change."

Monica nods in understanding. “Well, I have some good news.”

Quinn plops onto my lap, and I have to lean around her head to get a look at Monica. “What?”

“Remember the client I was telling you about? The one who wanted a complete rebrand and website redesign along with the tutorial videos for the site?”

I frown, racking my brain. “Yeah, but wasn’t that months ago?”

“Yes, but they got back to me just yesterday.” Monica’s grin widens. “They loved our proposal and they want to move forward with us! We get to work together!”

My heart lifts at the news. “That’s amazing, Mon!”

Quinn claps her hands and giggles. “Yay, Mommy and Auntie Mon!”

Monica’s excitement is palpable as she starts to go over the details of the project. I listen intently, feeling hopeful about our future. Maybe with this new project, we can really make a name for ourselves in the design world. Maybe it’s the fresh start I need.

As we discuss ideas and timelines, I can feel Quinn nodding off on my lap. I smile down at her and gently shift her to the couch, tucking her in with a soft blanket.

Monica flits around the office, tidying up the arts and crafts she and Quinn were doing. “You know, I think this is the start of something great for us,” she says, turning to me with a smile.

I nod in agreement, feeling a new sense of hope and purpose. “Yeah, it really could be.”

Monica reaches out and squeezes my shoulder in a gesture of support. “And who knows, maybe this could bring some closure for you too.”

I freeze at her words, my mind flashing back to James and the hurt I still feel. Monica must sense my discomfort because she quickly backtracks. “I mean, not that you should rely on work to fix everything, but it could be a positive distraction.”

I force a smile, trying to push away the pain. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s just hard, you know?”

Monica nods in sympathy. “Of course. But we’ll get through this together. And you never know, something even better might be waiting for you around the corner.”

I take a deep breath, feeling grateful for my friend’s unwavering support. She’s been there for me through thick and thin, and I don’t know what I’d do without her. As she finishes tidying up, I start to feel a sense of calm wash over me. Maybe this new project really is the start of something great. Maybe it’s time to let go of the past and focus on the future.

“Mommy?” Quinn has gotten up from the couch and is now messing with the potted plant in the corner.

“Please be gentle with that,” I tell her. “The soil will go everywhere.”

“Why don’t I have a daddy?”

I swear, I stop breathing.

Monica and I find each other’s gaze across the room, and she looks just as freaked out as I do.

Talk about timing.

I clear my throat, trying to figure out how best to approach this topic. Quinn knows she’s adopted, but beyond that she’s never asked any questions about her birth family.

“Well, sweetie, not all families have a daddy,” I say gently, hoping to avoid any further questions.

“But why not?” Quinn persists.

I exchange a meaningful look with Monica, silently asking for her help.

“Families look all kinds of ways, you know,” Monica chimes in, crouching down next to Quinn. “And you know what? That’s okay. All families are unique and special in their own way.”

Quinn seems to accept this answer for now, rummaging around in her

backpack and pulling out a pot of slime. I know this won't be the end of her questions, though. I make a mental note to have a more in-depth conversation with her about her adoption soon.

"I wish I had a daddy," Quinn says softly.

Her words are a knife right through my heart.

She does have a father. He's just not here.

She'll never know him.

...Unless he decides to get in touch and meet her.

Would I even want that, though? Would it even be good for Quinn?

This whole situation is so messed up. I don't even know how I feel about it anymore. The only thing that I understand for sure is that I'm heartbroken.

Monica clears her throat. "Hey, Billie. Can you help me get something from the hall closet?"

I nod, grateful for the distraction. Monica follows me to the hall and closes the door behind us.

"Are you okay?" she whispers, placing a hand on my arm.

"I don't know," I admit. "I mean, I thought Hawaii would be the end of all this. And now Quinn's asking about him."

"What are you going to tell her?" Monica asks, her voice soft and concerned.

"I don't know," I repeat. "I've always told her the truth about being adopted, but I never thought she'd ask about her birth father. At least... not this soon."

"And James didn't say anything about wanting to meet her?"

"No." I lean against the wall.

Monica gives my arm a squeeze. "That's probably for the best. This situation is really complicated, and a six-year-old wouldn't be able to process it."

I nod. "I just wish it didn't have to be so complicated. I wish Quinn could have a happy, normal family."

Monica's eyes soften. "She does have a happy family. And a normal one, too. It just looks a little different than some others."

I let out a small sigh. "Thanks, Mon. I guess I'm just feeling a little overwhelmed."

"You're doing great," Monica says, giving me a reassuring smile. "And Quinn is lucky to have you."

I smile gratefully at her, feeling a sense of comfort knowing that she's on my side.

As we make our way back into the office, Quinn looks up and grins. "Look, Mommy! I made a slime monster!"

I kneel down to look at her creation and can't help but smile. Quinn has always had a vivid imagination.

"That's amazing, Quinn!" I say with genuine enthusiasm. "You're so creative, baby."

Quinn beams under the praise, and Monica claps her hands. "That's so cool! Can I touch it?"

Quinn nods eagerly, and Monica reaches out to poke the slime monster.

Quinn giggles excitedly, and the next thing I know I'm smiling.

Would it be great if Quinn had two parents? Absolutely. Just like it would be great if I had a partner to weather each day with, to enjoy the highs with, and to cry through the lows with.

And it would be doubly great if that person were James.

I can't help it. He still takes up residence in my heart, and there's probably a part of me that will always mourn losing him. I didn't expect to fall for him, and I certainly didn't expect to fall harder than I ever have before in my life.

Losing him is real. It's brutal. Sharp and unforgiving.

But there's no point in focusing on what we don't have. Our life is abundant. We're happy.

And in my mind, that's more than good enough.

CHAPTER 23

JAMES



Pushing myself harder, I sprint the last few yards to my front door and collapse on the porch steps. It's sunset, and though it's rush hour it's quiet up here in my neighborhood.

Grabbing my water bottle, I take a sip and then towel my face off. I don't usually spend nights at my Olympus City house — typically I stay in the penthouse a few blocks from GarrisTech — but coming back from Hawaii I felt like I needed a change of pace.

Exhausted from the run, I lean against the steps and watch the orange sky deepen into purple.

Inevitably, my thoughts turn to her.

To them.

Billie and Quinn.

I still can't believe I have a daughter.

Closing my eyes, I try to push back the surge of emotions, but it's no good. The anger, hurt, and confusion haven't gone anywhere in the last week.

And neither has the excitement.

I have a daughter!

I never wanted kids before, but hearing that I already have one changes the game completely. It makes me want to show up, makes me want to get to

know my daughter and makes sure she has the best life possible. Make sure she has all the things I never had.

But there's still a part of me that's angry at Sara for not telling me about Quinn. I can't shake the feeling that I've missed out on so much, that I don't know who my daughter is. I don't know what it's like to watch her grow up, to be there for her when she needs me, to be her father.

And then there's Billie.

How could she keep such a big secret from me for so long? I loved that woman, and she crushed me.

Hell, let's be honest. I still love her.

Groaning, I drop my head into my hands.

When I look up, Carlos's car is coming up the driveway.

I frown. What's he doing here? Did we have plans?

Not that I'm not happy to see him. I welcome any kind of distraction these days.

He comes to a stop in front of me and gets out with a bottle of bourbon. And then I remember: it's our monthly poker night.

In about half an hour, six other guys will be here ready to play.

I never forget about poker night. Ever.

But tonight, I'm not sure I'm up for it.

"Hey man," Carlos says, handing me the bottle. "You look like you could use a drink."

I take it, uncapping it and taking a swig. The warmth of the bourbon spreads through me, easing some of the tension in my body.

"Thanks," I say, leaning my head back against the steps. "I don't know if I'm in the mood for poker tonight, though."

Carlos sits down next to me. "What's going on?"

I hesitate, not sure if I want to open up to him about everything that's been going on. But the bourbon loosens my tongue, and before I know it, I'm spilling everything.

"Billie told me something in Hawaii. Her daughter, Quinn, is adopted, and... she's my daughter. My biological daughter."

Carlos stares at me like I've lost my mind. "You're shitting me."

"Nope." I take another swig and pass the bottle to him so he can do the same. "She started working at GarrisTech so she could get medical information on me." I snort. "She didn't want to tell me about Quinn. She figured she would just be a sleuth and uncover the information she wanted."

"Dude..."

"...and now I have a daughter," I finish, feeling drained just from talking about it.

"What sort of medical information? Is the girl okay?"

I swallow against a knot in my throat. "Billie said she has asthma, and she wants to find out if there's anything else lurking."

My chest tightens. Is there anything else in Quinn's genetics the doctors should know about?

I hate thinking about her going through asthma — going through anything — without me.

I've never even seen a photo of Quinn, and yet I can't stop thinking about her.

Has she ever wondered about me?

Carlos takes a deep breath, contemplating what I've told him. "That's a lot to take in, man."

I nod. "I know."

"But you have a daughter now," he says, clapping me on the back. "That's amazing."

I can't help but chuckle at his enthusiasm. "Yeah, it is."

Silence falls between us, broken only by the sound of crickets chirping in the distance. The wind rustles through the trees, and I realize for the first time how peaceful it is out here.

This house is great, with a massive yard and big trees that are perfect for climbing. A kid would love this place.

"So." Carlos studies me. "Billie adopted Quinn... so who is Quinn's birth mom?"

I stare at the bottle in my hand. "Sara Ford. We went out a bit. Apparently she died about six and a half years ago."

I'd looked Sara up before even getting back on the plane to Olympus City. There wasn't much other than a defunct social media page and an obituary.

"I just don't get it." I rub my eyes. "Sara kept Quinn from me. Then Billie kept Quinn from me. Why?"

There's a long silence.

"I have an answer," Carlos says, "but I'm not sure you'll like it."

"Nothing could possibly hurt worse than this last week." I give him a blank stare.

"For a woman to choose to have a kid on her own, with all the struggle that comes with," Carlos says, "she must have really not wanted you involved. So the question is, what did you do wrong?"

The words hit me hard, and for a moment, I'm not sure how to respond. What did I do wrong? The question echoes in my mind, and I feel a sudden surge of anger.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I growl, fixing Carlos with a hard stare. "I didn't do anything wrong. Sara made the decision to keep Quinn from me, and Billie just went along with it. What could I possibly have done to deserve that?"

Carlos raises his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm just saying... it's

something to think about. Maybe there's more to this than you realize.”

I take another swig of bourbon, trying to calm myself down. Carlos is my friend, but he doesn't know the whole story. He doesn't know what Sara was like, how she stopped returning my calls after a few dates. How she made it clear that she didn't need me in her life.

But as I sit there in silence, staring into the darkness, I can't help but wonder if Carlos is right. Was there something I could have done differently? Something that would have made Sara want me in her life?

Or something that I did wrong?

Carlos is right. Why would Sara choose to be a single mother? She would have only gone down that path if she felt it was the only way.

And she felt it was the only way because she didn't want me anywhere near her or Quinn.

It hits me like a pile of bricks. “God. I'm a terrible person.”

“I wouldn't go so far as to say that, man. My kids love you. You're—”

I shake my head. “I was terrible to Sara. Of course she didn't want to have anything to do with me. Of course she didn't want me to know about Quinn.”

I look Carlos in the eye. It's all coming back now. “The third night we went out, I was texting another woman during dinner, right in front of Sara. She saw it, and I tried to play it off like it was nothing. I didn't even apologize. And then when someone who knew us both asked about her I said...”

I suck in a sharp breath, hating myself.

“You said what?” Carlos prompts.

“I said that she was clingy and desperate, that she was way too into me,” I admit, feeling the bile rise in my throat. “I said that she was probably already planning our wedding in her head, and that I was just trying to let her down easy. I made her out to be this pathetic woman who couldn't handle being single. And now I realize how wrong I was.”

I close my eyes against the disappointment. It wasn't just Sara. I used to

trash-talk most people once I was done with them. Not once did I consider doing anything different.

Carlos nods, understanding now. “Yeah, that would do it. But we all make mistakes. You fucked up, but that doesn’t mean you’re a terrible person. What matters is what you do now.”

“It’s too late to apologize to Sara.” Knowing she’s gone is a weight in my chest. Poor Quinn. She never got to know her birth mother.

Carlos sighs. “Look, man, all you can do now is try to make it right in any way you can. Reach out to Billie, apologize, be there for Quinn however you can.”

I nod, feeling grateful for Carlos’s words. He’s right. I can’t change the past, but I can try to make things right with Billie.

“I need to talk to her,” I say firmly. “I need to apologize.”

Carlos nods, offering me a small smile. “I think that’s a good idea, man. But remember, it’s not about making yourself feel better. It’s about making things right with her and Quinn.”

I nod in agreement. “I know. I just hope she’ll be willing to talk to me.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Carlos says, clapping me on the back. “Good luck, man.”

I take a deep breath, feeling a sense of determination wash over me. I need to do this for Sara. I fucked up big time before, and there’s no going back.

But I can do better.

Maybe I can even seize an opportunity to be there for our child.

...If Billie will let me.

How do I even begin to reconcile with her? How do I make things right after I rejected her and abandoned her in her time of need?

I can’t stop thinking about the last time I saw her, when she told me about Quinn and I left without saying a word. How could I have been so heartless?

I know I messed up. And now I have to fix it.

“How about we call off poker night?” Carlos takes out his phone. “You’ve got a lot on your plate. I’ll text the others.”

I nod, grateful. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

Carlos gives me a small smile. “No problem, bro. Just take care of yourself, okay?”

I nod again, feeling like I have a lot of work to do. “I will.”

With that, Carlos leaves, and I’m left alone with my thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to stand up and head inside. As I walk through the empty house, I can’t help but feel a sense of loneliness. It’s not just because I’m single, but because I haven’t let anyone in. Not really.

But maybe that can change.

Maybe.

Or maybe I’ll say my piece to Billie and that will be that. She’ll never want to see me again.

I’ll never get the chance to meet my daughter.

Leaning against the wall, I close my eyes. The worst-case scenario is now a real possibility, and if it comes down to it, I’ll just need to live with it. Whatever will be, will be.

I sowed my oats.

Time to reap them.

CHAPTER 24

BILLIE



Quinn sits on the exam table, fidgeting with the thin paper covering. “Can we go now?”

“Not yet,” I tell her. “We need to hear your results.”

She sighs and kicks her feet. “But I haven’t had any asthma. I’m fine.”

“I know you are, sweetie.” I stroke her hair. “They’re checking other things today. It’s called a wellness visit, and it’s just for your general health. I have them done too.”

Quinn groans. “But I’m not sick.”

“I know, but it’s important to make sure you stay healthy.” I give her a small smile, trying to ease her nerves. “Maybe we can get ice cream after, hmm?”

Her eyes light up at the mention of ice cream. “Really?”

I nod. “We’ll make it a treat.”

Quinn grins and goes back to fidgeting with the paper.

There’s a knock on the door, and my heart leaps. Dr. Reynolds returns and smiles at us.

“Everything’s looking good,” she tells us. “Quinn is in tip-top shape.”

“Yay!” Quinn looks at me. “Now we can go?”

But I still don’t feel satisfied. “What about her asthma?”

“Her lungs are clear. You have the inhaler if you need it?”

I nod. “Yes, and she has one at school.”

“Good.” Dr. Reynolds nods. “She very well could grow out of it. Even if she doesn’t, there’s no reason she can’t live an active life.”

I nod, some of the tension in my chest uncoiling.

“Thank you, doctor.”

As we leave the office and head to the car, I can’t help but feel grateful for Quinn’s good health. It’s a small comfort in the midst of the chaos that has become my life.

But as we drive to get ice cream, my thoughts inevitably turn to James.

Has he thought of me at all since Hawaii? Has he thought about Quinn?

It’s been over a week, and I’ve been busy with my life. In between this new work contract and Quinn and caring for the house, there isn’t much time to think about anything else.

When those free moments emerge, though, James is there. Always invading my inner peace.

No one has ever shaken up my world like he has. It feels like there’s been an earthquake and now I keep waiting for the plates to shift back together.

My life is good, but there’s something missing. Try as hard as I do, I can’t shake that feeling.

At the ice cream shop down the street from our apartment, I park out front and Quinn runs to the door.

I follow her inside, mind still whirring. The shop is cool and dim, the air heavy with the scent of sugar and vanilla. Quinn is already at the counter, her nose pressed against the glass case as she studies the different flavors.

“What do you want, sweetie?” I ask her.

She turns to me with a grin. “Mint chocolate chip!”

I nod and turn to the man behind the counter wearing a bright green apron with the shop's logo on it.

"Two scoops of mint chocolate chip, please," I tell him.

He nods and starts scooping the ice cream into a waffle cone. Quinn hops from one foot to the other, eyes sparkling with excitement. I can't help but smile.

As the man hands me the cone, I notice someone walking into the shop out of the corner of my eye. I turn and my heart skips a beat. James.

But then I blink and realize it's not him, just a man who's about the same height and build.

Shaking my head, I pay for the ice cream.

"Mom?" Quinn tugs on my arm. "I want to go outside."

"Sure thing, sweetie," I reply, following her out of the shop and into the warm sunshine of the backyard. We settle on a bench, Quinn licking her ice cream cone with reckless abandon.

As I watch her, my mind wanders back to James. It's like he's haunting me. I wonder what he's doing, where he is. Is he thinking about me, too?

"There's Aurora!" Quinn waves at her friend, who is by the sandbox, then takes off to join her.

I stay on the bench, soaking up the sun. It's a good day. A great day. Quinn is in wonderful health, and we have all our needs taken care of.

I just wish this hole in my heart would heal.

A movement catches my eye and I turn to see a man walking past us on the sidewalk. Just like before, he reminds me of James.

I close my eyes, hating how I'm seeing him everywhere.

"Billie," a familiar voice says.

Hold on.

I open my eyes a little, wondering if I'm going crazy. But I'm not.
James is standing on the sidewalk, staring at me.

CHAPTER 25

JAMES



Billie looks just as surprised to see me as I am her. I thought that I had at least five more minutes to figure out my speech before I arrived at her apartment.

But here she is, sitting on a bench in a sunny yard, looking at me like I'm a ghost.

"What... what are you doing here?" she finally asks.

I inhale deeply, but it still feels like it's not enough air. "I was actually walking to your place. To, uh, to talk to you. I know I could have called, but it just... it didn't feel right. I wanted to talk to you in person."

My pulse is racing, and I feel lightheaded. I don't think I've ever felt this nervous in my life.

Billie looks like she's about to say something, but then she shakes her head, her expression unreadable.

"Okay," she finally says.

Okay? That's all?

And yet, I know I shouldn't expect anything else. I'm the one who screwed up here.

"I know this is probably the last thing you want to hear," I begin. "But I've been thinking about you constantly. And I know I screwed up. And I'm

sorry.”

Billie’s eyes remain fixed on me, but I can’t decipher if she’s moved by my words or simply waiting for me to leave. My heart pounds in my chest, and I find myself wishing that I could go back in time and fix everything I broke.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” Billie finally responds, breaking the silence. “I’ve been trying to move on from everything that happened, and now you’re just showing up out of the blue. You told me to leave you alone, so I’ve left you alone.”

“I know,” I reply, my voice heavy with regret. “And I’m sorry for that. But I had to see you. I had to tell you how I feel.”

“How do you feel?” she asks, her expression guarded.

“Like I’ve made the biggest mistake of my life,” I say, my voice trembling. “I let my anger and bitterness consume me, and I lost sight of what really mattered.”

I struggle to find the right words. Usually I’m eloquent, but Billie has a way of turning me into a bumbling fool.

“When you told me about Sara and Quinn, my first response was to blame everyone. You. Sara. I was furious you two kept my daughter from me. But then I realized that I’m the one at fault. I was awful to Sara. Of course she didn’t want me to be in Quinn’s life.”

I lick my lips, needing to get this out. “And I’m sorry I took that anger out on you, too. I shouldn’t have left you alone to deal with it all by yourself.”

Billie looks at me with a mix of emotions — anger, sadness, and maybe even a little bit of hope.

“You don’t have to say anything,” I tell her. “I just want you to know that I take responsibility for how everything has gone down. If I were you, I would have done the same thing. I would have kept Quinn’s existence a secret.”

Billie’s eyes soften as she listens to my apology. I can see her walls starting to come down, and I cling to that hope. I know that I’ve hurt her deeply, but I’m determined to make things right.

“Thank you for saying that,” she finally responds, her voice quiet. “It’s not easy to admit when you’re wrong.”

“I know,” I say, nodding. “But I am. And I want to make things right, if you’ll let me. I’m ready to do whatever it takes to prove to you that I’m worthy of being a part of Quinn’s life.”

“Good,” Billie says, a small smile playing on her lips. “But it’s not just about proving yourself to me. Quinn has been through a lot, and the last thing she needs is instability.”

“I know,” I say, determination coursing through me. “I just want to be there for her. To be the father she deserves.”

Billie looks at me for a long moment, studying me as if she’s trying to read my soul. Finally, she nods.

“Okay,” she says. “We can take it one step at a time, but it’s not going to be easy. You’re going to have to work hard to gain Quinn’s trust.”

“I will,” I promise her. “I’m ready.”

I approach the bench slowly and get down on one knee in front of Billie. Her eyes widen and her breath hitches in her throat.

“There’s more,” I whisper.

“What?” Her voice is barely audible.

“Billie…” I search her eyes. “I’m incredibly in love with you.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. For a moment, neither of us says anything as the weight of my confession hangs in the air between us. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest, and I wonder if I’ve made a mistake by saying too much too soon.

Still. There’s no going back. I’ve already put the truth out there.

Might as well keep rolling with it.

“I realized that all I’ve ever really wanted is a family,” I say, “but I’ve pushed people away because I’ve been afraid of it not working out. I’ve been afraid that I’ll end up in the same situation I was in as a kid. Alone. Moving to yet

another foster home.”

Billie stares at me with a mix of surprise and confusion. “I don’t know what to say,” she murmurs, her voice trembling slightly. “I had no idea that you felt this way.”

“I know,” I reply softly. “And I don’t expect you to feel the same way right away. I just wanted to be honest with you about how I feel. I want this to work, Billie. I want us to be a family. To be there for Quinn together. If you don’t want that, I understand. I hope you’ll still allow me to be a part of her life.”

I wait for what seems like an eternity for Billie to respond. Her eyes are still locked on mine, but I can see her mind working behind them. Finally, she takes a deep breath and speaks.

“You have no idea about how crazy I am for you, do you?”

I feel my heart skip a beat. Did I hear her right?

“I...I didn’t know,” I blurt out, unable to contain my surprise and joy.

Billie lets out a small chuckle and reaches out to place her hand on my cheek. “Well, now you do,” she says, her voice filled with affection. “I’ve been trying to fight it for a long time, but I can’t deny it anymore. I love you too.”

I feel tears prick at the corners of my eyes. This is everything I’ve ever wanted. A family. Love. Stability.

I lean in and press my lips to hers, pouring all of my emotions into the kiss. I can feel her responding, her arms wrapping around me as we deepen the kiss.

Finally, we pull apart, both of us gasping for air.

“I’m sorry for springing all of this on you,” I say, looking into her eyes. “I just couldn’t keep it in any longer.”

“I’m glad you did,” Billie replies, a smile spreading across her face. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I didn’t...” She shakes her head, tears filling her eyes. “I didn’t know how I would go on.”

I brush my thumb across her cheek. “Please don’t go on without me.”

“I won’t,” she whispers. “I can’t imagine being with anyone else.”

We embrace each other tightly, our bodies molded together in a moment of pure joy. It feels like the weight of the world has been lifted off my shoulders, and we can finally be the family I’ve always wanted.

“I love you, Billie,” I whisper into her ear.

“I love you too,” she replies, her voice filled with emotion.

“Mommy?” a little voice says.

We both turn our heads to see a little girl standing in the grass. She blinks her big blue eyes and studies me with curiosity.

I freeze. This is her. This is Quinn.

Sara’s daughter.

Billie’s daughter.

My daughter.

I freeze, not knowing what to say. I’m giving the reins to Billie, waiting for her to take the lead.

Billie gently disentangles herself from me and reaches out to take Quinn’s hand.

“Quinn, this is James.”

I swallow against the knot of emotion in my throat. “Hello, Quinn.”

“Hi,” she says in a small, shy way.

“Remember the other day, when you asked about your father?” Billie asks.

Quinn nods her head, her eyes still locked onto mine.

“Sweetheart, this is your daddy,” Billie says softly.

Quinn’s eyes light up and she looks up at me with a mixture of curiosity and awe.

“Daddy?” she says, the word sounding strange and new on her lips.

I crouch down to her level and nod. “Yes, baby girl. I’m your daddy.”

She takes a step closer to me, her small hand reaching out to touch my face. Immediately, I feel my heart swell with love for this little person.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she says, her voice filled with wonder.

Tears fill my eyes as I gather her into my arms, holding her close.

“I’ve been waiting for you too,” I whisper into her hair, not knowing until this moment that those words have always been true.

CHAPTER 26

BILLIE



“S he’s asleep,” I whisper.

But James stays standing in Quinn’s bedroom doorway, looking in on her. The nightlight casts soft stars around the room, and Quinn is passed out after James’s reading of nearly every book on her shelf. At this rate, she’ll probably expect him to read to her for two hours every night.

And maybe he will. Since the moment he met her earlier today, he’s been enamored.

“I can’t walk away,” he whispers back. “How do you not stand here and stare at her all night?”

I chuckle softly and step closer to him, wrapping my arms around his waist. “I know the feeling. I still stare at her when she’s sleeping sometimes.”

James turns to me, his eyes full of love and wonder. “I can’t believe she’s real. That she’s really mine.”

“She is,” I assure him, standing up on my toes to place a soft kiss on his lips. “And she’s lucky to have you as her father.”

He pulls me close, deepening the kiss. “I love you,” he breathes against my lips, his voice thick with emotion.

“I love you too,” I reply, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

James leans his forehead against mine, his eyes closed in contentment. “I

never thought I could have something like this, a family. But you and Quinn, you're everything I never knew I needed."

I know, deep in my heart, that he means it. That we'll always be a family, no matter what life throws our way. As we stand there, holding each other in the quiet of Quinn's bedroom, I know that this is where I'm meant to be. With James and Quinn by my side, I have everything I'll ever need.

We haven't told Quinn the whole story about why James hasn't been around — just that he and her birth mom lost touch and couldn't find each other.

It's not exactly the truth, but it's what Quinn needs to hear right now. When she's older, and more able to understand the complexities of adult relationships, we'll be able to tell her the full story.

I like to think that Sara would agree with my choice, that she's looking down on us, maybe even guiding some of the decisions I make when it comes to Quinn.

Gently, I close the bedroom door and lead James into the living room.

We sit down on the couch, and I snuggle up next to him. I can feel the warmth emanating from his body, and I lean in to kiss him again. This time, it's not just a soft kiss. It's deep, passionate, and full of love.

As our lips part, James pulls back and looks at me. "Billie, I know we haven't talked about it, and it's all happening so quickly, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

My heart leaps with joy and excitement. "I want that too. I love you, and I've never been happier than when I'm with you and Quinn. But are you sure? We've only known each other for a short time."

"I'm sure," he replies without hesitation. "I know it seems sudden, but I feel like I've known you my whole life. I don't want to waste any more time. I want to make you my wife and spend the rest of my days making you happy."

I feel my eyes welling up with tears of joy. James is the man of my dreams, and I can't imagine spending one more day without him.

“Yes, James,” I say, my voice shaking with emotion. “I will marry you.”

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me deeply. Our bodies entwine, and I feel his love coursing through me. I know that, from this moment on, we’ll be together.

As our kiss deepens, his hands wander over my body. The heat between us is palpable, pulsing through me in waves. I pull back and look into his eyes. “I want you,” I whisper.

He nods, his eyes full of desire. In an instant, we’re up and moving toward the bedroom.

I don’t give him a chance to take charge. Kissing him hungrily, I unzip his pants and push them down.

Our eyes locked, I get on my knees in front of him.

Slowly, I take his hard cock into my mouth and slide it in and out, sucking and licking at the tip. His precum drips onto my tongue, and I moan with delight as I take him deeper and deeper.

James watches me with a smile on his face. I can tell he’s loving the sight of me on my knees before him.

Desire flushes through my body and I rock my hips back and forth as I suck him off. The pressure between my legs is building, and I know I’m dripping wet. I need him, and I need him now.

The moment I feel him throbbing in my mouth, I pull him in deep and swallow. He groans as he lets loose.

I look up at him as I lick him clean. Immediately, his eyes flash with lust, and he pulls me to my feet.

James is like a man possessed, laying me on the bed and sliding my sweatpants and panties off. His eyes drinking me in, he drops to his knees and buries his face between my thighs.

My body responds instantly to his touch. I run my hands through his hair and let out a low moan as heat surges through my veins.

As he works my body with his tongue, I spread my legs as far as they'll go. I'm getting wetter and wetter, a powerful ache coursing through me.

"Don't stop," I moan. "Oh, James, please don't stop."

He continues his delicious assault on my body, pressing hard against my clit with his tongue. There's an orgasm building, stronger and more intense than any I've ever had. I want it so badly, I can feel my whole body tensing up.

I explode, waves of pleasure erupting throughout my body. I arch my back off the bed as pleasure ripples through my body.

James pulls away, but I pull him back to me. I can see the need in his eyes, the desire to have me.

"I want you," I whisper. "I want to feel you inside me."

He doesn't say anything, just stands up and removes his clothes. I pull off my top and bra, my eyes fixed on his.

With the both of us fully naked, he climbs on top of me. The tip of his cock presses against my opening, and I moan with desire.

"Oh, God, James," I whisper, my voice husky with lust.

He teases me with his thickness, sliding it up through my folds and over my clit. I'm so wet now, his cock is slipping and sliding over my swollen parts.

"Please," I moan, my need for him growing and growing.

I can see that he's enjoying this, the sight of me squirming with need. He's getting pleasure from this, just like I am.

He pulls away, and I let out a frustrated groan.

"Not yet," he says, a wicked smile on his face as he leans down and takes one of my nipples into his mouth. My body tenses in pleasure as he sucks on it, his tongue flicking back and forth over my sensitive skin.

"You're so fucking sexy," James says, moving his mouth to the other nipple. "I'm going to fuck you so hard."

But he doesn't. He just keeps teasing my nipples, sucking and twisting them

as I wiggle with pleasure.

Finally, he kisses his way up my throat and to my lips. His dick presses against my opening, and slowly, achingly, he slides himself inside me. I gasp as I feel every inch of him penetrate my most intimate places.

“Yes,” I moan. “Yes, oh yes.”

He moans and begins to thrust deeper. My hips rock up and down as his thickness slides in and out of me, and pleasure surges through my body. I know it won't be long before he pushes me over the edge.

The pleasure throbs through me, and within moments I'm coming so hard that I can't even make a sound. My body trembles, my toes curl, and every muscle in my body seems to clench tight. I'm surrounded by pleasure, and my body is floating away into the sky.

James continues to thrust, his primal groans filling the air. I close my eyes and let it wash over me.

Then, just as I know he's about to come, I open my eyes. I want to see his face as he finishes.

I want to see the moment of ecstasy, when he releases himself inside me.

It doesn't take long. His features are twisted in pleasure, his thrusts becoming frantic, and then he's slamming into me one last time. His body tenses up, and he lets out a deep, guttural groan.

I feel him exploding inside me, filling me up with his warmth before he collapses on top of me, panting and sweating.

Our bodies are still pressed close together, his heartbeat drumming against my chest. His warmth settles around my body, and for a moment, nothing else exists.

“You're fucking amazing,” James whispers breathlessly.

“So are you,” I whisper back.

I bury my face in his shoulder, savoring this moment. Savoring everything that has happened that's led us here.

Savoring this life.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: BILLIE



“Well? What do you think?” Turning around, I spin in my princess wedding dress.

Quinn gasps and claps her hands with delight. “It looks even better than when you tried it on in the store!”

I laugh and spin in a circle again. The dress is big and bouncy, and I certainly feel like a princess in it. A veil covers my face, and my hair flows in waves over my shoulders. The sound of my heels clicking against the marble makes me feel ready to take on the world.

“You’re so beautiful I’m gonna cry.” Monica dabs at her eyes.

I laugh some more. “Don’t, please!”

“I’m just so happy for you, sweetie.”

I take her hands in mine. With Monica as my one bridesmaid and Quinn as the flower girl, it’s a small wedding party, but it’s intimate. Perfect.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Thank you, Mon. For everything. You’ve been there for me when I needed you most, and I couldn’t be happier.”

“Neither could I. Wow. You’re getting married.”

I smile and nod. I can’t believe it either.

A year ago, my life was so different. I was living most days on repeat, working and taking care of Quinn. I never expected for a man like James to enter my life.

But he did, and I can't imagine marrying anyone else.

There's a knock on the door, and the wedding planner pokes her head in. "How is everything in here? We ready to go?"

I take a deep breath. This is it. Showtime.

Everything is about to change.

Not that things haven't already been in motion. Over the past year, James has been working fewer hours and encouraging a better work-life balance for all of his employees. By all accounts, the toxic environment at GarrisTech has shifted to a more harmonious, relaxed one, and the company has even seen increased profits because of it.

Yet despite the paradigm shift at GarrisTech, and the fact that Quinn and I have been living with James for the last six months, today will be the biggest step we take.

We're officially becoming a family, and I couldn't be more excited.

"Ready," I say.

The wedding planner claps her hands and smiles. "Okay, then. Let's get you lovebirds married!"

With that, she marches out, and Quinn, Monica and I follow down the stairs and to the back room of the event space.

Through the windows, I see the garden filled with folding chairs and guests — friends I've known for years and new ones we've made together. All of them are here to support us.

A new life. A new chapter.

And at the front of it all, at the altar, is James.

He looks so handsome in his tuxedo. His hair is combed back, and his smile is so bright it lights up the whole garden.

Quinn clutches her basket full of rose petals tightly. She's been taking her role seriously and practicing throwing flowers around the last few weeks.

"You okay?" I ask her, kneeling next to her in my dress.

"Yeah! I'm... I can't believe this. My daddy and my mommy are getting married!"

I start tearing up. "You're going to make me cry, too."

She looks up at me with big eyes and grins. The look of pride on her face is all I need to know that today is gonna be perfect. The music starts, and I stand.

"Okay, Quinn," the wedding planner says. "You first."

Through a crack in the curtains, I watch as Quinn walks through the open door and into the yard.

She looks like an angel. The perfect flower girl.

She tosses the petals down and they scatter everywhere. She darts to the left and right, smiling and giggling. Of course, everyone thinks she's the cutest thing, and there are plenty of smiles to go around.

"Now you, Monica." The wedding planner ushers her forward.

Monica looks stunning in her purple dress. She's shed a few tears already, but now she's beaming.

She struts through the garden like a model, smiling and waving at the guests. When she reaches the end of the aisle, she takes her place under the altar, across from James and his best man Carlos.

The band starts playing a new song, and all the guests stand. I suck in a deep breath, suddenly lightheaded.

"It's your big moment." The wedding planner hands me my bouquet. "Now, close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and walk forward."

It's like I'm walking through a dream. The music sounds magical and light, and the light breeze caresses my skin.

I feel the curtains brush against my arm, and then I'm outside, in the sun.

I take a deep breath, and after a few seconds, I open my eyes.

The garden is a sea of people, smiling and crying. I scan the crowd but all the faces look blurry. There's only one that's in focus.

His.

James.

Clutching the flowers, I slowly walk towards the man I love. Our gazes are locked the whole time, his eyes misty with tears.

"You look beautiful," he whispers as I approach the altar.

I want to tell him he looks the sexiest he ever has, to tell him that I'm more in love with him now than I ever have been. But the wedding officiate is already speaking.

"We are gathered here today for the union of James and Billie," she says. "They have been through many ups and downs, and they have persevered, and in doing so learned the meaning of love. Today, they take another step forward, as they commit to spend the rest of their lives together. May their union be blessed with love and everything that is good in this world."

James reaches over to take my hands, and I blink up at him. Can this really be happening?

"Billie?" the officiate prompts, looking at me. "Do you have vows you would like to share?"

"Yes," I say, nodding.

I look around at all the people listening. I can't believe we have so many friends here to witness our wedding. And most of them are from GarrisTech!

"James," I start, meeting his gaze. "You are my soulmate. I promise to be there for you no matter what, even when things get tough. I promise to be your partner in life, and to never give up on us. I think you know this already, but I will love you forever."

His eyes fill with tears. He looks like he's trying his hardest to not break

down.

“James?” the officiate asks.

He clears his throat. “I’m not good with speeches, so I’ll just say this. I love you, Billie. You’ve breathed new life into me. You’ve brought Quinn into my life, and I can’t think of anything better than having her as my daughter. Everything in my life has changed for the better because of you. I promise to take care of you, to love you and protect you. I promise to be your rock and your haven, to be there for you and to make you happy. I will be the best husband I can be, and the best father. I will spend the rest of my life showing you how much I love you.”

There are tears in my eyes. I reach for my veil and pull it up. “James,” I whisper. “I love you so much.”

Some more words are said, but I don’t even hear them. I’m too busy drinking in everything about James’s face, doing my best to commit this moment to memory so I can hold onto it for the rest of my life.

Carlos hands James the rings, and we exchange them with trembling fingers.

“Do you, Billie, take James to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer or for poorer?”

“I do,” I say, my voice breaking.

“And do you, James, take Billie to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, for richer or for poorer?”

“I do,” James says.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

James leans in and kisses me tenderly, and I melt into his embrace. I feel so blessed to be here, to be marrying the love of my life in front of all our friends and coworkers.

As we walk back down the aisle, hand in hand, I can’t help but feel like

everything in my life has finally fallen into place. I never thought I would find love, let alone marry the man of my dreams and create a family with him. But here we are, embarking on the adventure of a lifetime together.

The reception is a blur of dancing and laughter, of speeches and toasts, and delicious food and drinks. James and I steal kisses whenever we can, reveling in the fact that we're finally together as husband and wife.

As the evening wears on and the guests start to drift away and Quinn is already at Monica's for the night, James takes my hand and leads me outside. We stand together, looking up at the stars and breathing in the cool night air.

"I can't believe we're married," James says, smiling down at me. "I love you so much, Billie."

"I love you too," I say, leaning up to kiss him. His lips are warm and soft against mine, and I feel my heart flutter with happiness.

He pulls me closer to him, his arms wrapping around me. I rest my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. We stand there for a while, lost in each other's embrace, until he breaks the silence.

"I have a surprise for you," he says, a mischievous glint in his eye.

I look up at him, my curiosity piqued. "What is it?"

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box. My heart races as he opens it, revealing a delicate necklace with a sparkling diamond pendant.

"Oh, James," I breathe. "It's beautiful."

"I wanted to give you something special on our wedding day," he says, taking the necklace out of the box and fastening it around my neck. "Something aside from the ring. So you can always remember this moment, and how much I love you."

I turn around to face him, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him deeply. Every fiber of my being is filled with love for this man, my husband, my soulmate. I never want this moment to end.

We break the kiss, and I look into his eyes, feeling a surge of desire that's been simmering all day. I want him. I need him.

Without a word, I pull him back inside, past the empty dance floor to a storage room. I lock the door behind us and turn to face him, desire filling me.

“I can’t wait.” I smooth my palms over his chest. “I want you now.”

He steps closer, his eyes dark with passion. He cups my face in his hands and kisses me deeply, his tongue exploring my mouth. I moan into the kiss, my hands sliding down his chest and over the fabric of his suit jacket.

He breaks the kiss, and I look up at him, panting.

“Are you sure?” he asks, his voice husky with desire. “Right here?”

I don’t answer with words. Instead, I take his hand and place it on my chest, over my heart. He feels the rapid beating of it and I know he understands. I need him just as much as he needs me.

We kiss hungrily, bodies pressed together with an urgency that borders on desperation. James lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist, wanting to be as close to him as possible. He carries me to a nearby table, laying me down gently and trailing kisses down my neck.

I moan softly as he unzips my wedding dress, his hands and lips teasing my skin.

“We’re married now,” he whispers. “You’re mine.”

I reach down to undo his belt, unzipping his pants and sliding my hands inside the opening. He feels so good in my hands. I inch my way down, feeling his shaft throbbing in my palm. I wrap my fingers around him, stroking him until he’s fully erect.

My head swims as I unbutton my dress, exposing my breasts to his hungry eyes. James slips his boxers off, and my heart skips a beat as I take in his rock-hard cock. He takes my hand and returns it to his shaft, guiding me as I stroke him. He groans, his hips bucking against me.

Suddenly, he picks me up, my heels flying off the floor.

I squeal with delight as he turns me around and presses my back against the wall. Still holding me up, he kisses me fiercely, and I arch my back, silently

begging him to take me completely,

He chuckles against my lips. “Thirsty, aren’t you?” he murmurs.

He teases me with the tip of his cock, sliding it back and forth over my entrance.

I moan softly with need. If he keeps going like this, I’ll lose my mind.

Luckily, I don’t have to wait long. Gently, James lowers me onto his shaft, filling me.

I gasp at the intense pleasure that courses through me, my fingers digging into his back. His breath is hot, teeth raking down my neck.

I wrap my arms tightly around his shoulders, his cock so deep inside of me it’s almost unbearably intense. I rock my hips against him, reveling in the friction.

He pulls out and thrusts back in, and I gasp with pleasure.

“God, Billie,” he moans, his breath hot in my ear. “You feel so good. So tight.”

I buck my hips against him, matching his rhythm. Our bodies move together like a well-oiled machine, completely in sync. His thrusts are deep and strong, and I can’t hold back any longer.

I moan his name as I come, my body shuddering in his grip. His cock throbs deep inside of me, the waves of my orgasm subsiding with each pulse.

We kiss until our lips are raw, our bodies clinging to each other. There is no air between us, just skin.

Love.

The emotion is so powerful it takes my breath away.

“What’s wrong?” Noting my silence, James lowers me to the ground.

I shake my head. “It’s just... the best day of my life has always been when I brought Quinn home. But now I think I have two best days of my life.” I look up at him. “I told you you’re my family, and it’s true. I love you, James.”

He kisses me sweetly. “I love you, too, Billie.”

He pulls me in close, and I feel safe. Secure. Loved. It’s just as simple as that — I’m home.

We both are.

The End

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