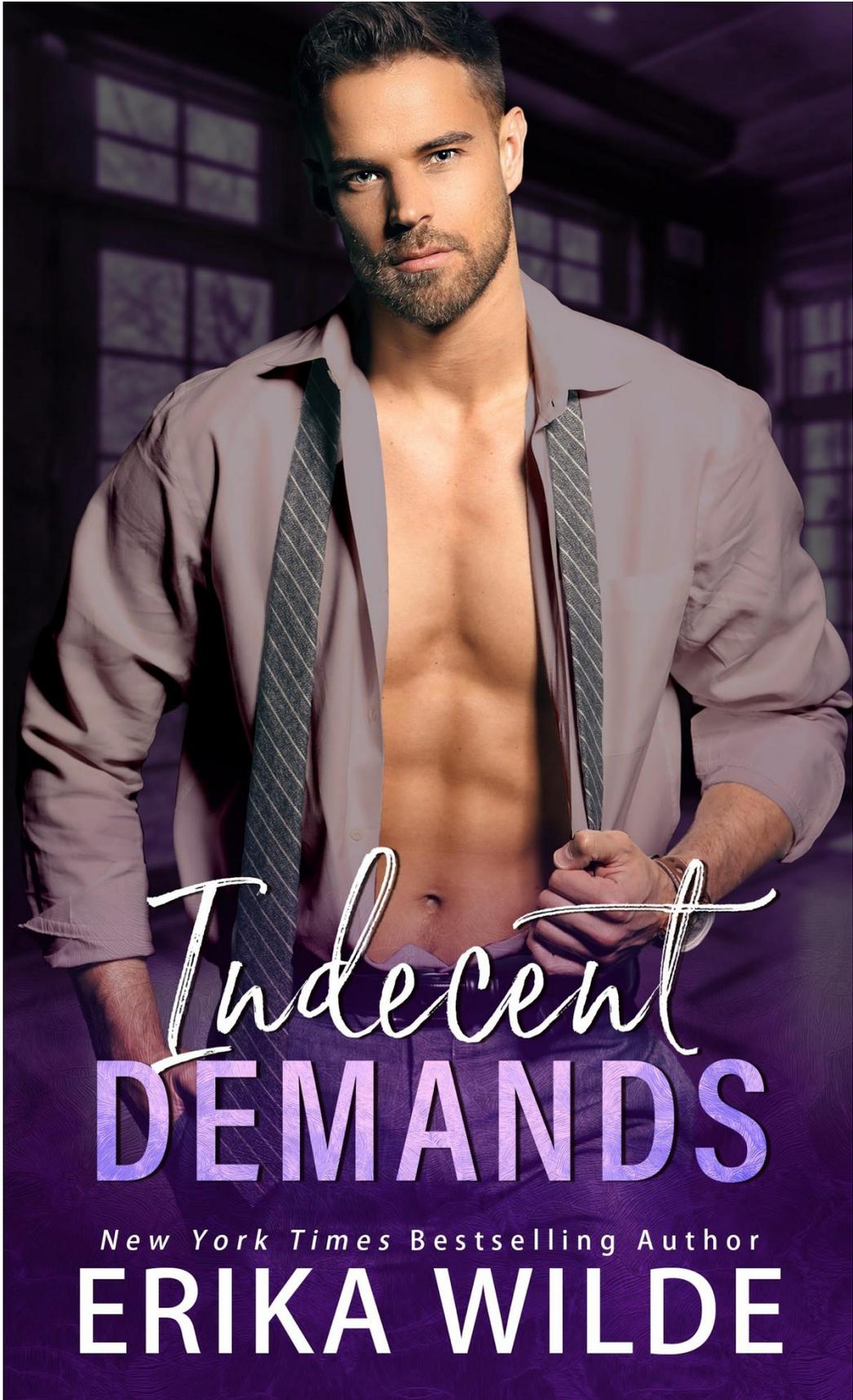


Indecent
DEMANDS

New York Times Bestselling Author

ERIKA WILDE



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INDECENT DEMANDS

THE INDECENT SERIES

BOOK TWO



ERIKA WILDE



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INDECENT DEMANDS

Being a female modern day Robin Hood came with risks—like being caught. Seth Maxwell was too smart for his own good . . . and I was now in the position where I had to make a deal with the devil himself. Get turned over to the authorities, or agree to be this man's plaything for two weeks.

It was an indecent invitation, but one I couldn't resist . . .

CHAPTER 1



Seth

I was in the office holding down the fort when I got the call about the job. Of course I was on my own, since my two partners, Vaughn and Bryce, were on other assignments. They always seemed to get the exciting jobs while I, the man with the hacking abilities, sat behind my desk most of the time using my computer skills in various ways.

My specialty in the military had been technology and I'd been the one to put our IT team together at Elite Protection and Consulting when we founded this security company. I enjoyed what I did, but my hacking skills were low on the list of client requests compared to Bryce and Vaughn's offerings.

Even my time after work had grown more . . . quiet and boring, since both Bryce and Vaughn now had women to occupy their time and preferred their company over mine after hours. Go figure.

Vaughn claimed I just didn't understand because I was single. I hadn't ever been in love. And honestly, that comment was damn rich coming from the man who had claimed he hated people too much to ever want to spend the rest of his life with one. He was almost as bad as Bryce, our perpetual

playboy—at least until Leigh walked into his life and stabbed his heart with one of her stiletto heels. Leigh was terrifying, which was why I liked her. She was good for Bryce, just like Claire was good for Vaughn.

While I rolled my eyes at Vaughn's declarations, I could admit I felt a little... left out. It had been one thing when it was just Vaughn and Claire. But then Bryce fell for Leigh—and that had been fine, especially since Leigh now worked with us and I considered her a friend. But seriously, I was now the odd man out.

Okay, so maybe I *was* wondering when I'd find someone who accepted me the way my friends had. So what? I wasn't going to dwell on it. I told myself the moment I started looking was the moment the game was up.

None of my friends had been searching for love when they'd found it. We were rough men who'd had difficult lives. We killed people when necessary and we weren't always moral or legal in how we went about protecting our clients. It was hard to find a woman who would accept that—the light and the dark within us. But if my friends had gotten lucky, I told myself I would, too. I just couldn't be desperate for it.

The call came in, distracting me, and thank fuck—it was a tech job. Rare, but those requests gave me my own personal boost of adrenaline. Computers were, to me, like how musical instruments were to other people. I loved seeing how they worked and learning every inch of their hardware and software, making them sing for me in their own unique way. Vaughn hated tech jobs, and Bryce had no clue about the finer workings of anything electronic, but we hadn't received a lot of those assignments lately, which had been fine with my partners.

As for me, I'd felt increasingly annoyed, but now my itch would be scratched and I couldn't be happier to relieve my own personal stress by diving into a case that was well suited to my interests and abilities.

I listened patiently to what the potential client—Damien Harcourt, the CEO of the Smirtech company—wanted. Apparently, someone had been

systematically robbing them. Their accounts were out of whack, and Damien's suspicion was that someone high up—someone he otherwise trusted—had been altering the finances and figures.

“The money and expenses just aren't adding up,” he explained on the phone while I paced leisurely back and forth in my office.

Unless I was working with computers, I didn't like to sit still. There were few things that could calm the restless energy inside of me. Diving deep into computers and their inner workings was one of them. The other...well, those distinct and erotic proclivities were another reason I was unsure a woman would ever want to be with me on a long term basis.

“Are you suspicious of anyone in particular?” I asked.

“No. We're a rapidly growing company, especially since we opened our cryptocurrency division, and I've had to rely a lot on my C-level team to handle our growth and development. I trust all of them—or I did until I realized that money was leaving our company and vanishing.” He exhaled a frustrated stream of breath before continuing. “I don't know where it's going, but I know that the expenses listed are simply untenable and they don't make any sense. Someone's trying to make it look like we're spending money on viable expenses, but I know how my company runs, Mr. Maxwell. I know what we do and don't need.”

“Of course, of course,” I soothed. I wasn't anywhere near Bryce when it came to my people skills but at least I was sympathetic, unlike Vaughn who had no patience for coddling. “I think it's very responsible of you to keep such a close eye on everything. Most CEOs let the rapid success get to their heads and next thing you know they're scrambling to find a way out of debt.”

“Will you be able to find the rat?” Damien asked. “I don't think I can trust my internal tech team since I don't know who's responsible, and I don't know enough to trace where the money is disappearing to do it myself. I've made a few attempts, but this person seems to have prepared for an internal investigation and the trail keeps getting stymied.”

That was typical of a professional embezzler—which made me instantly suspect that if it was a C-level executive betraying Damien, then they’d hired someone either from the tech team or from the outside to really put in the dirty work. Most executives barely knew how to update their phones, never mind staying one step ahead in a financial scam. It was why they were so easy to catch. Ponzi schemes, that was all these idiots knew, and even that wasn’t fool proof and eventually collapsed in on itself.

“Of course I’ll do my absolute best, Mr. Harcourt,” I assured him. “However, I think we need to proceed with caution. If the person rerouting these funds is close to you and knows that you’re looking into things, they might cut and run or do something else to wipe away the evidence of what they’ve done. We don’t want that. Perhaps you can bring me on as a consultant, or for another reason? We’re coming up on the time you’ll need to do a quarterly report, so it could be related to that.”

“Yes, yes, good idea.” I could easily imagine Damien nodding eagerly along with my suggestions. “I’ll figure something out so no one thinks twice about why you’re the new guy at the company.”

Perfect. “In the meantime, I’d like you to compile a list of who you think could be skimming off the top, and who in your company would have the access, the ambition, and the selfishness to do something like this. Once you have a list compiled, I can investigate each person independently while I’m also following the digital trail in your system. Sound good?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Excellent.” I stopped pacing and glanced out the window overlooking the city skyline, my mind already on the job. “It will take a few days for us to plan everything and set me up, and then I can come into the office. I’ll have to be on-sight for a lot of the investigation. It’s always best to search the computers themselves rather than trying to hack in to them from a distance. Does that work for you?”

“Yes, that’ll work.” Relief suffused his voice. “I don’t want to lose any

more money than I need to, but I don't want this person to get suspicious. Take the time you need to do this right."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Harcourt." I nodded absently. "You can be assured you'll have my full attention on this case."

I always appreciated it when our clients could actually be reasonable. People came to us scared, upset, and fearing for their lives. They came to us on the verge of losing their companies or their loved ones. That meant—understandably—they could be pretty damn upset and not in the mood when they learned their needs couldn't be met immediately.

Luckily, Damien Harcourt didn't seem the type. Thank fuck.

Privately, I hoped this job would be a bit difficult to solve. I wanted something intellectually stimulating. I wanted an exciting challenge.

If I'd known what was in store for me, I might not have hoped for that quite so hard.

CHAPTER 2



Ariana

*I*t never ceased to amaze me how exceptional filthy rich assholes were at convincing people they were actually good guys, *really*, definitely a philanthropist who earned his wealth and wasn't a corrupt jackass who benefitted from handouts to amass his success.

Maybe it was just that people were so desperate to believe in the myth of a benevolent rich man, a savior, like the kind you saw in comic books—the Batmans and Iron Mans of our fantasies. Maybe it was that the ones struggling hoped with a little luck and hard work that they, too, could be so rich and loved.

Who knew the real reason. All I really cared about at the end of the day was being able to balance the scales a little. Taking back some of what corporate greed owed and redistributing it. Until the day the government got off its ass and actually taxed the rich like they deserved, it was up to people like me to set things right—or at least as right as I could.

That was why I was here, at Smirtech. Balancing those scales, so to speak.

Damien Harcourt was another guy who loved to present himself as the easygoing multi-billionaire with a humble, Zen smile, but I knew that his startup was benefitting from the disenfranchised and slick political pay-outs the same as all the others.

Damien ran Smirtech as a company that had a new way of funding small companies and productions in order to give them a helping start. Real benevolent of him, right? He'd recently expanded into crypto, which had led to massive expansions and investments, all unsupervised by regulations or laws.

Crypto was uncharted territory for many and confusing for a lot of people, and it wasn't regulated or managed properly. With no oversight and most people in the dark as to how it worked, that digital currency was perfect for anyone who wanted to rob people blind.

Damien Harcourt wasn't any different.

It was only a matter of time until the reckless way he played with his clients' funds for his own selfish financial gains sank him and his company completely. But until then, I was going to skim off his portion of all that excess greed myself and give it to people who *really* needed it.

With that money, I was able to actually give people cash in hand, the number one thing they needed to get them out of debt and into better situations. There were so many so-called programs to help those who struggled, but how many of those government agencies gave them the money they needed to fix their problems as they saw fit? Dignity and the ability to make their own choices were important to people. Food stamps and housing were great and necessary, but they didn't get rid of credit card debt or help with uninsured medical expenses that piled up.

I liked to think of myself as a modern day Robin Hood. Skim from the obnoxiously rich and corrupt, and give to those in dire financial situations.

Getting a job at Smirtech had been easy. This wasn't my first rodeo, after all. I had an excellent resume working at both financial firms and handling

cryptocurrency, and Smirtech was in desperate need of people who actually knew what they were doing with the latter, as well as experienced in handling other people's money.

My resume was real, actually. I had never been caught skimming at any of my previous jobs, and I had always gotten out before it was too late. That was something most people who tried to do any kind of thievery, moral or otherwise, didn't realize. You didn't jump ship when the writing was on the wall—you gracefully bowed out while things were still going really well, and before anyone noticed the missing money.

I'd started immediately by setting up a bank account from which I could funnel funds from the company into various GoFundMe campaigns to help people with their medical debt and other necessities. Once that system was automated and I'd set the parameters, I could focus on finding local people who needed cash in hand and convert the crypto personally for them.

It was important to me to set up both an automated system and a manual one. If it was just one or the other, it was more easily detected. But with a combination of the two, the trail was much more difficult to find. I had access to all of the company's accounts—or, well, I did once I wrote myself a computer script that gave me access to them—and I could fudge the books so that it looked like the usual expenses.

In my experience, newer guys like Damien Harcourt were too focused on spending their wealth to realize that some of it was going missing. They were too busy being high on their success. Honestly, a lot of the prior places I'd hit before had gone bankrupt through nothing I'd done, but simply because their founders and C-level execs ran the place into the ground by overextending the company and spoiling themselves with excessive expenditures.

Maybe that was the beginning of my downfall—I had grown complacent. I had decided somewhere in the back of my mind that I would never be caught, and I had acted accordingly.

Or maybe it was just that I hadn't gotten laid in far too long.

I came into work on Monday and immediately knew something was up when Tony, my supervisor, waylaid me. He looked like he hadn't slept, which was normal when it came to Tony, but he had an extremely manic look in his eyes, which was very different from his general sense that he was sleepwalking through the day.

"There's some kind of inspector here, from a security company," he said in a panicked tone as he dragged me by my arm through the office. "I need you to talk to him."

A new security company? I frowned as I tried to process what this might mean, while also hoping it wasn't going to be a problem for my extra-curricular activities. "Why me?"

"Because you're more articulate than I am, and you're prettier than I am, and I haven't had my coffee yet," Tony said, then added in a lower tone, "Also, he's incredibly handsome and I know I'll just make an idiot of myself the moment I open my mouth to speak."

I laughed. "Tony, you have a boyfriend."

"That doesn't mean I can no longer be an idiot around handsome men." He let go of my arm but put his hand at my back instead, pushing me forward into the conference room on our tech floor.

I was going to roll my eyes, but then I saw the man standing at the head of the conference table frowning down at a laptop, and instead I nearly tripped over my own two feet.

Okay, so the guy was very handsome. Gorgeous and incredibly hot, actually. He had neatly trimmed dark blond hair and a square jaw, with attractive features that could grace a men's magazine. He was tall and lean, but his arms beneath the crisp white shirt he wore looked strong enough to pick me up with just one hand.

And this guy was in *tech*? He looked the complete opposite of all the nerdy geeks I worked with on a daily basis.

Regaining my composure, I swallowed hard and walked up to him,

sticking out my hand in a professional manner. “Hi, I’m Adriana Kent. I work in the IT department here at Smirtech. How can I help you?”

The man looked up at me, then his breathtaking blue gaze scanned me from head to toe, as if assessing every inch of me. “Miss Kent,” he acknowledged with a nod.

He slipped his hand into mine, giving it a firm shake. Jesus, even his hands were large and strong, and I felt an undeniable rush of desire flow through my bloodstream. Even my knees went a little weak.

I quickly shook off my reaction. What was wrong with me? I hadn’t swooned over a man in ages . . . even if everything about this man was completely swoon-worthy.

“I’m Seth Maxwell,” he said, his voice a smooth, deep rumble made me shiver in reaction. “I’ve been asked to take a look at your security systems. Now that Smirtech is dealing so much in crypto, Mr. Harcourt wants to see if there’s any need to strengthen the firewalls. As you probably know, once a transaction in crypt is made it’s nearly impossible to undo it, which means scammers can get away with robbing you blind.”

I nodded, and now my throat went a little dry, even though it wasn’t possible that he was aware of my covert activities. “Of course. That’s why I was hired. I have experience in crypto and worked for several companies that integrated the digital currency into their workforce before it became mainstream. I can’t say that mistakes weren’t ever made, but I can say that I have a lot more experience from those mistakes than most people do in the world of crypto.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Seth smiled at me, and I could feel my stomach turning into a flock of butterflies, which I immediately tried to squash. This wasn’t my first encounter with a guy who could possibly gum up my system. But it was my first time with someone who distracted me so easily. I told myself I could handle the temptation, but being attracted to the man who could possibly

bring me down was dangerous.

Seth tipped his head toward the laptop that was set up in front of him, the one he'd been perusing when I'd entered the room. "Why don't you walk me through the system?"

"Sure thing." I grabbed an extra chair and pulled it up to the head of the conference table to give him a rundown of everything, focusing on the techy stuff instead of how amazing he smelled standing next to me. "As you know, Smirtech wanted to give small businesses and other lower-level productions a way to handle their portfolios when they can't yet afford the big firms and want to start building up savings. It's vital that companies and startups build up their savings for a rainy day and don't rely solely on their cash on hand."

What I didn't tell Seth was about all the illegal funds that Harcourt, himself, was siphoning *into* the company for his own gain and to avoid taxes as he converted that money into cryptocurrency, essentially laundering his money, because blowing the whistle on that would defeat my purpose of skimming those illegitimate deposits. I never touched a client's money, interest, or investments . . . it was all about sticking it to those who were already corrupt to begin with.

I opened up our various accounts to show him how our systems worked. "I'll give you a basic tour and then you can ask me any specific questions you have and I'll be happy to answer them and show you anything else you'd like to see."

Seth took a seat next to me, close enough that his hard muscular thigh brushed mine, and gestured for me to begin. "Go ahead."

I wasn't sure how much this guy knew and what level of an expert he was, so I decided to just give him a walkthrough of all our systems, like I would anyone else. There was no reason for me to hide anything. If he could find my network piggybacking on top of Smirtech's, then he'd have to do it on his own. I wasn't going to help him out with that, clearly, and a simple tour of our software wouldn't be enough to give it away. No, he'd have to

hack into the nexus itself down in our computer room to find any evidence of what I was doing.

In the meantime, I made a mental note to fortify my own network—perhaps disable the automatic one and strip things down a bit and mix up the coding. It never hurt to be too careful.

Besides, who knew how good this guy really was at actual computer tech? He was security, so he was probably used to cameras and real-life problems. Built like he was? This Seth was most likely a body builder who didn't know as much about computers as he should.

“So.” I logged in with my credentials. “As you can see, I have a level three clearance as a member of our tech team. Most employees have a level two clearance, and then Mr. Harcourt and a few of his trusted C-level execs have level four, which is the highest level but generally reserved for sensitive documents rather than actual hardware like we techies have to deal with. People like the cleaning crew, temps, and receptionists have level one clearance—just enough to get them things like emails, into and out of the building, that sort of thing.”

Seth nodded. “Who can give me level four clearance?”

My eyebrows shot up as I stared at him. “You'd only need level three clearance in order to access everything in our security system, Mr. Maxwell.”

Why would he need to get into the documents of our C-level executives? Did he need to look at something from the legal department? But what would that have to do with network security? My gut was telling me that there was more to his presence here at the company than simple security protocols.

His gaze held mine, direct and undeterred. “As I told Mr. Harcourt, I need access to absolutely everything in order to properly investigate and make a thorough evaluation of the system. I don't want to have my progress impeded because I ran into a brick wall.”

I just barely restrained myself from rolling my eyes. Okay, he might be handsome, but he was a stubborn jerk who clearly liked to feel powerful just

for the hell of it, same as the rest of them. Pity. “All right, my boss, Tony, will be the one who can get you that clearance. I’ll have him talk to you.”

“Any reason you’re the one talking to me if another person is your boss?”

I bristled in annoyance. “Tony’s job is more about handling the members of our team and delegating. I’m the person who knows this system inside and out, so I’m the person you want to talk to if you want an expert.”

Seth gave me his full attention, and I once again got the impression that he was looking right through me. Then he turned back to the computer. “Could you get level four clearance if you wanted?”

“I have no reason for it.” Despite the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of my stomach, I said, “I suppose I could ask Tony to give it to me. He trusts me.”

“Good.” Seth nodded. “I might need to use your account to look into things. See if you can get that clearance.”

I took a deep, slow breath. *Yeah, not good. Not good at all.* “Why would you need my account, specifically? Can’t you just create your own?”

He casually drummed his fingers on the conference tabletop. “Of course that’s what I’d prefer, but if people in the company can follow my trail back to me, they’ll get nervous when they see an outsider looking at things and poking around. But if it’s a high level employee doing it, it’ll seem like business as usual.”

Okay, that was it. I straightened in my chair and called him out on my suspicions. “Mr. Maxwell. I hope I’m not overstepping here, but this sounds to me like more than just a simple security check.”

He arched a brow at my accusation. “Don’t you think I should know what any tech employee could get access to so I know the potential pitfalls of the system?”

“If you’re really a security agent, you’ll know that there’s only so much computers can do. There’s a human element that you can’t eliminate. We’ve tried to eliminate it, but it’s impossible. In fact it makes the system worse. So

if you're trying to get in as an employee and keep people from being spooked, that means you think there's someone who needs spooking."

Seth glanced over my shoulder, like he was checking to make sure there was nobody listening in, then slid his gaze back to mine. "If there *is* someone who needs spooking, then I'd like to keep it as under wraps as possible. So how about we just get you level four clearance, and you keep going about your job as usual."

I desperately tried to push down the panic trying to find its way to the surface. "What if your investigation lands me in hot water?"

"I won't let that happen," he said, looking and sounding sincere.

If I was a law-abiding employee maybe that would be less of a concern or problem, but I wasn't. If my account got flagged because someone thought I was the one snooping where I shouldn't be, they might look deeper into it and see what I'd really been up to all this time.

"You say that, but I can't afford to get fired." I was definitely going to have to look into my system after this and cover some tracks. Maybe even put in a dummy network to throw this guy off the scent.

"You won't get fired. Trust me." Seth smiled warmly at me, and I suddenly felt like my spine was melting. He just had to be charming and have a panty-dropping smile, didn't he? Damn it.

I sighed, knowing he wasn't going to change his mind. "Well, I'll talk to Tony. Let me finish giving you a tour of what I can do with my level three clearance, first, and then we'll see if you really want or need access to level four documents. Sound good?"

Seth nodded, a pleased look in his eyes. "Sounds good."

Great. This was just what I needed.

CHAPTER 3



Seth

*A*riana Kent was gorgeous.

The moment she appeared in the doorway of the conference room I knew I was in trouble. She had creamy, porcelain skin and big brown eyes with long, sweeping lashes, and a lush mouth that put dirty thoughts into my head, as did those long, slender legs of hers extending from the tight pencil skirt she wore. Her rich chestnut hair fell to her shoulders in soft waves, and the way she held her shoulders back drew my gaze to her full breasts and spectacular cleavage, along with the peek of lace where the first button on her blouse had been left undone.

She also didn't trust me. That could be a good thing or a bad thing. On the one hand it showed that she was smart and knew something was up, more than just a basic security check on the system. On the other hand, it could mean that everyone else would figure out my real purpose for being here—or that she had a reason to be on edge and suspicious. Could be anything at this stage.

Tony—the department manager—had assured me she was the best in the

department, and I needed her. I planned to figure this system out on my own, but having access through an employee's account would be helpful to double-check things. You always had to have a double blind. You couldn't take any chances when dealing with a computer system or a complicated network. It was like a labyrinth where people could feasibly block up the pathway behind you.

Ariana seemed suspicious of me from the start, though. I might have to come clean with her, which would be a hell of a problem if she was part of the scheme somehow, which I hoped wasn't the case. But I wouldn't put it past whoever was stealing the money to rope an actual tech expert into it with promises to share part of the wealth. And then, when they inevitably got caught, the perpetrator would make the techie the fall guy, and try to walk away clean.

Which meant I needed to tread very carefully during my "inspection", and keep my own cards close to my chest.

Ariana gave me a tour of the entire system, and she leaned closer when I navigated parts of the network myself, so she could see what I was doing. She was warm against my side and smelled like vanilla musk, and it was more distracting than I'd thought it would be. I hadn't been distracted by a woman in... well, ever. I trained in the military and always kept my focus on the job. Until now.

Ariana was right, though—Smirtech seemed as equipped to deal with crypto as any company could be at this juncture with so much still uncharted territory for the new form of currency. I would have to look at the numbers for the accounts to see what Damien had dug up when he realized that someone was stealing from him, but I suspected that part of why he'd been targeted was what I'd mentioned to Ariana earlier—a crypto transaction was insanely difficult to undo, thanks to the blockchain technology on which it was built.

Which was perfect for a thief. The money would be theirs and

unretrievable by Smirtech the moment that the crypto dropped into their wallet, and from there into a traditional bank account and converted to cash.

“Could you show me the code that tracks transactions within the company?” I asked.

“Sure, but you’d have to talk to accounting if you want to see things like the budget,” Ariana replied. She easily maneuvered back into the system and pulled up the information I’d requested. “You can see various transactions from company accounts here, but unless you want to figure out the budget yourself transaction by transaction, you’ll want to talk to accounting. They’ll have already done all that for the various reports to the shareholders.”

They would, but how accurate were those accounts? It would be easy for someone in accounting to adjust the books, or for a C-level executive to get the real report, then fudge the numbers in a fake report, and turn that in to everyone else. It was going to be a mind-numbing process, but I would have to go transaction by transaction as Ariana said, and compare that with the reports to see if it added up.

I scrubbed a hand along my jaw and stifled a groan. I had a lot of work ahead of me.

Ariana glanced at me as I scrolled through the code and accounts, getting a feel for things. “Do you need any assistance?”

That surprised me. “You want to help? That would be an additional workload on you.”

She shrugged. “I’ll be honest, I don’t have to do too much. I’m on call for software glitches and other issues but I don’t build the code myself. I’m familiar with it though,” she added quickly. “I’m just more of the fix-it guy.” She grimaced. “And the ‘explain why we can’t make the site do what you want it to do’ guy.”

I knew all about that. Executives wanted their brilliant new idea realized without thinking about if it was actually logical or feasible. “Well, if you really do have the time, I’d appreciate having someone who knows this

system from the ground up to lend another pair of eyes. And I'll make sure that any trouble that might arise from using your login will fall back on me. I don't want you to get in trouble because I was the one poking around."

She bit her bottom lip for a moment, then said, "I, uh, I hope you're able to strengthen whatever weak spots you find in the system."

I nodded, playing along with my reason for being at Smirtech, even though I knew she had her suspicions about me. I hoped I could go all the way and trust her with the truth—it would make my job a lot easier, but for now I held back. "I'll be in touch. Perhaps I could get your phone number so I can contact you directly?"

"Sure thing." Ariana dug out her phone.

"I promise, I'll only contact you about work." I didn't want her to feel that I was one of those guys who would make it personal. Even if there was a part of me who wanted to make it personal—I had a job to do first and foremost. That was what I had to focus on. And I wasn't in the business of making women uncomfortable.

At least not without her permission.

Ariana blushed a little, and handed me her phone with a blank contact page open for me to put in my name and number. I inserted both, then handed it back. My phone chimed with a text a moment later from a new number: *Guess who.*

"I'll ask Tony to up your clearance and get me mine." I stood up. "It was nice meeting you, Miss Kent."

"Nice meeting you, too, Mr. Maxwell."

Ariana suddenly smiled brightly at me and I suddenly wondered what it would take to make her feel shy, to knock her off her game and have her blushing from head to toe. Or getting on her knees and submitting to my indecent, filthy demands. . .

Dangerous thoughts. I ignored them and went to track down Tony. Sure, it had been a while since I'd had sex, but that didn't mean I was going to get

distracted from my assignment by a pretty face, long, sexy legs, and great tits.

Tony was happy to give both Ariana and me access, accepting my story that I needed to analyze things on two accounts in order to ensure that coding and software actually worked, and to conduct certain tests. From there, I locked myself in an unoccupied office and pulled open a spare company laptop to get to work.

For the first part, I just did some exploring. I wanted to know this system inside and out the way the coders did. Unfortunately, it didn't give me any definite answers about whether the person stealing needed a good knowledge of the system or not. I would have to look into the financial statements for that, but in the meantime I set up a few alerts within the code to ping me on my phone if someone tried to mess with something.

When that was finished, I went up to the accounting department and retrieved copies of the financial reports to compare them to the individual entries in the electronic database. That was going to take hours of not-so-fun busy work and I wasn't looking forward to it, but the comparison needed to be done.

I left the room, locking it behind me, and went to grab a coffee from the break room. When I entered, I found Ariana in the break room as well, grimacing as she sipped some coffee and scrolled through her phone.

"Hard at work, huh?" I teased, grabbing a mug. There was a box of donuts on the table—I grabbed one of those, too.

"Hard at work the same way you're eating a healthy lunch," Ariana replied, gesturing with her mug at the donut in my hand.

I shrugged. "Nothing wrong with a little treat."

"Nothing wrong with a little work break," she said back with a smirk.

I chuckled, enjoying our banter. "Touché."

Ariana went back to her phone and I watched her. It was stupid of me, but... it wasn't like the thief was going to disappear in the one hour it would take me to have a proper lunch.

“Actually,” I said, putting the donut on a paper plate for later, “would you like to grab something to eat with me? I’m sure you know what’s good around here.”

Ariana fumbled her phone, nearly dropping it. “I—what?”

I tipped my head in amusement. “I’m asking if you’d like to grab lunch.”

“Right, no, I get that.” She blushed again, intriguing me. “I just—are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I replied, wondering why she was so hesitant. “Any reason I shouldn’t?”

“I’m a terrible conversationalist,” she blurted out.

“You haven’t met my friend Vaughn,” I said with a grin. “One time our other friend Bryce dared him to stay quiet for a week and didn’t realize that would actually be easy for him and he was happy to do so. Vaughn won the bet.”

Ariana laughed. “Well, all right. I suppose I could take the time. But if there’s an emergency and I get an alert on my phone I’ll have to head back immediately.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “I get that. I worked in coding in the military, so trust me, I understand that when it’s an emergency, it’s an *emergency*.”

“The military? Wow.” Ariana’s smile looked different than it had before.

She wasn’t one of those people who got weirdly... fetish-y about war vets was she? No, she didn’t have that particular gleam in her eyes. She looked more . . . impressed.

I was proud of the work I’d done, but war wasn’t sexy. It was bloody and terrifying and bitter, and not exactly something I wanted to talk about while flirting with someone over the entrees.

Not that we would necessarily be flirting. But I kind of hoped that we would.

“Well.” Ariana shoved her phone into her purse and dumped her coffee

into the sink. “Shall we? I know a great Mexican place around the corner. Burritos the size of your head.”

My stomach growled as if on cue. “I’m in.”

I followed her through the office and down to the lobby, where she directed me toward the restaurant she’d been talking about. When we stepped outside and the sun hit her, it lit her up—her skin, her hair, her smile—and my stomach clenched with heat.

Jesus. My attraction to her was overwhelming and I needed to get a grip. It was a real pity I’d met her on a job instead of in a BDSM club. I hadn’t frequented one of those in forever. I just hadn’t had the time—and frankly after seeing my friends find a woman to share their life with, satisfying myself with just a night of sex and nothing else hadn’t quite felt like enough for me. I didn’t just want the kink, as great as that might be. I wanted something more intimate than that. I wanted someone to wake up to in the morning.

We arrived at the restaurant, were immediately seated, and ordered. Ariana opted for tacos then grinned when I asked for my burrito to be extra spicy.

“Are you sure you can handle that?” she asked, handing the waitress her menu.

I did the same. “If I start crying, you’re welcome to tease me about it.”

She shrugged, causing her breasts to shift beneath her blouse. “Your funeral.”

The server walked away from our table, which gave me the opportunity to flirt a bit. “Maybe I like a little pain, what about that?”

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. “Then I’d say there are easier and far more fun ways to go about that.” Her tone had dropped, turning husky and sensual.

Our eyes held longer than was wise. “Are you into pain?” I found myself asking.

Ariana didn't look away. "Maybe."

My cock twitched in my slacks. That was promising . . . except there would be no seducing this woman. Not so long as she was a work colleague as I continued my investigation.

Time to switch subjects to something less . . . arousing. "So, how'd you get into coding and computers?"

"I wasn't super popular when I was growing up," she said, picking up her napkin and spreading it on her lap. "I had a father who worked in tech, too, and he would bring home computers for his job, and I'd practice on them. It wasn't like I had any friends to hang out with. We didn't have a lot of money, either, and so when I heard what a lucrative field tech and computers were... it felt like a way to go to college with a good return on my investment and I could take care of my aging parents."

"I think you picked a good field—we can definitely use more women in STEM in general but especially in coding and technology. The way men continue to behave in those areas is bullshit."

Ariana blinked rapidly in surprise. "I... thank you. Most men don't pay attention to that kind of thing."

"To what, respecting women?"

"Sure, we could call it that."

"I believe in calling a spade a spade," I said with a shrug, then allowed a wicked smile to curve my lips. "And the only time I disrespect a woman is if she asks me to."

Ariana laughed and I could see her faintly blushing again. She wasn't someone who went beet red, but it was just enough that I could see the flush of pink sweep across her skin if I paid attention. I wondered if other people noticed. I found myself hoping I was the only one.

"Well, the only time I want to be disrespected is when I ask for it," she replied cheekily. "So it looks like we'll get along well."

I discussed cryptocurrency and coding with her while we ate, and found

she was as knowledgeable about both as she'd claimed to be. I wasn't into crypto myself but I kept up on the news in case it became relevant to a job, as it had now. I also discovered she was passionate about medical and student loan debt and worked in a soup kitchen during the holidays, as well as helped the homeless and downtrodden when she could.

What a uniquely selfless woman. I found myself impressed and intrigued.

"Honestly, I didn't mean to make working in a soup kitchen during the holidays a tradition," Ariana said as she finished off her last taco. "But I lost both my parents recently and I didn't know what else to do for the holidays so I decided... why not help others and give back? I thought it would distract me from my own pain to help others—I had a warm home and a steady job, after all—and maybe we could lesson our pain by sharing and supporting each other."

"Community is important," I agreed. "I definitely wouldn't be where I am now without the support of my best friends. They're like brothers to me."

She smiled. "Tell me about them."

I explained more about Vaughn and Bryce—our anti-social misanthrope, and our playboy charmer respectively. "He's less of a playboy nowadays, though, now that he's got Leigh. And Vaughn is less of a grump with Claire because she doesn't put up with his bullshit."

"Sounds like they both have an amazing woman at their side."

"They do. I'm really happy for them."

She placed her napkin on her plate and leaned back in her chair. "What about you?"

I snorted. "I haven't had time for a bar hookup much less a relationship. You?" It didn't escape my notice that talking to her, even about personal things, was incredibly easy.

Ariana looked into the distance and for the first time she seemed... pained. "I... I was never sure that I would meet someone who I could really let into my life."

That piqued my interest. “How so?”

She cleared her throat. “I—well I work in a very demanding environment. My work is everything to me. I’m not sure someone would understand that.”

It was a problem I’d heard a lot of the women in my field complain about. I was sure it was the same in other professions too. “Well, anyone who doesn’t understand your dedication is an idiot.”

Ariana smiled, and I told myself that I didn’t feel that small kick in my stomach, or that stirring of desire that was getting more and more difficult to ignore.

I had a job to focus on and a thief to find, and I couldn’t afford to get distracted. It was just the loneliness getting to me. It would be fine in a bit. It would pass. It always did.

CHAPTER 4



Ariana

Oh no. I really *liked* Seth.

I wasn't supposed to crush on the guy who was at Smirtech to investigate our network, and potentially, *me*.

Oh, sure, he was still half-heartedly keeping up the act that he was only looking into the general security of the system and finding improvements, but it didn't take a genius to figure out he was here for another reason. He was looking for something specific and he seemed to suspect someone on the C-level, perhaps a board member.

That had to be why he wanted level four clearance. Why else would he need it? All the tech stuff to check actual security would be handled through his level three clearance. No, he wanted access to the documents that only C-level executives could obtain, and for that he needed level four clearance to get into those documents without the individual password the executive who owned the document had put on it.

That also could mean he was investigating something that had nothing to do with me. It was possible there was another crime of some kind going on

here that I didn't know about. But it was just as likely that he was onto me—or onto what I was doing, rather—and thought that someone at the top was responsible.

It was a natural assumption. When people stole from a company it wasn't usually someone like me. It was the men in power who skimmed from the top. Unless we were talking about something like a bartender or a retail worker taking from the cash register, it was almost always someone who had unfettered access to the accounts, and that was people like the CEO, the board members, the men who could just gift themselves whatever money they wanted and most people wouldn't think anything of it, or couldn't say anything against it.

That assumption would give me time while Seth went after the various men at the top, but it wouldn't protect me forever. I would have to start cleaning up my footprints.

I couldn't just quit, though. That would be suspicious. And too much obvious fiddling with the computer software or system would be sure to put Seth on alert.

What was I supposed to do?

I couldn't just keep going business as usual. If he found my network, and he would if he was actually any good at his job, then he'd trace it back to me in time.

What was that saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?

If I could keep Seth close and help him on his investigation, or at least pretend that I was, then I could know what he was doing and I could counteract him before he found my trail. I could work right under his nose, but to do that I had to know what his plans were.

And you'd get to keep spending time with him, a coy little voice in the back of my head noted.

Okay, maybe that voice was right, but that didn't mean I was going to let myself get careless. Seth was handsome, yes, but there were plenty of

handsome men out there, right? I shouldn't let his good looks—or his charm—throw me off balance.

It was just that our lunch had been really nice, that's all. He listened, *really listened*, to me when I complained about the struggles of being a woman working in a STEM field, especially computers. So few men actually took the time to listen to me. I could always tell when they were just sitting there waiting for their turn to speak or making smug comments in their heads in response to everything I said, dismissing me.

And Seth was undeniably charming. Not how I'd imagine a former military man and security expert to be. If you'd told me Seth's credentials I would've expected someone like that to be taciturn and serious. Seth smiled, he was engaging and a little flirty—or at least he seemed flirty. Maybe I was reading it wrong? It wouldn't be the first time.

But if he was flirting... I could use that to my advantage, too. It would be a way to keep him preoccupied and keep him close. I might be able to get away with asking questions I might not otherwise.

We finished lunch and headed back to the office where Seth resumed his work alone in the conference room on our floor. I tried not to look over at him too often and focused on my own work. I had to make a roadmap for disabling my network without Seth catching on to the fact that something had changed.

He really was annoyingly big. I watched as he stayed hunched over the computer—or, well, not really hunched. Unlike us mere mortals, Seth kept his back ramrod straight. Probably all that military training. But when you talked about a security expert, you expected a meathead. And when you talked about a computer expert, you expected some scrawny nerd. Seth was neither, and it was disconcerting. He could've gone into modeling if he wanted. Underwear ads would've gone crazy for him.

And now I was thinking about him in his underwear, which was a dangerous line of thought. The idea of seeing the bulge of his cock

underneath the fabric... outlined and thick and...

Hands landed on my shoulders and I yelped in surprise. Tony took a step back, palms in the air, laughing. "Whoa, didn't realize you were daydreaming *that* hard."

"I wasn't daydreaming," I muttered irritably, because I'd been doing just that. "I was just thinking about something."

"Right," he drawled knowingly. "And you definitely weren't staring at the six feet plus of annoying hotness in the conference room."

"Annoying?" I replied.

"Well, *I* don't think so. I'm happy to have some eye candy around here, but he's going to distract people in the office and you know it. In fact, you're an example of it."

I frowned. "I'm not distracted."

"Ariana. Please. I *know* you," he said, his tone amused. "You don't let anything divert your attention from work and now you keep looking over at that guy."

Damn. I'd been caught. "Well. Keep it to yourself," I grumbled. "He's not sticking around and I don't have time to date."

Tony snorted. "That's what I once said—that I didn't have time to date. And then I met Justin and now I have a great boyfriend. You gotta take opportunities when they present themselves, Ariana, trust me. You never know what good thing might come your way. And if that guy's worth your time, then he'll make space for himself in your life and give you the time you need, just like Justin does for me."

It was good advice, if I was actually hoping that Seth would ask me out. But I sure couldn't afford that. "I'll think about it."

Tony patted me on the shoulder. "Good. Because he seems like a really nice guy."

Yeah, that was the problem.

I tried not to let out a sigh of relief when Tony left me alone. Now, how

to get close to Seth without causing too much suspicion?

I stood up and went to the break room and made a cup of coffee, then grabbed a couple sugar packets and one of those mini creamers and went over to the conference room door. “Knock, knock.”

Seth looked up from whatever he’d been doing on the laptop as I entered.

I smiled. “Hey, thought you might want this for a little afternoon pick me up. I don’t know how you take it, so…”

His eyes warmed appreciatively. “Thanks, Miss Kent, this is really sweet.”

I set the coffee, sugar, and creamer on the table beside his laptop. “We had lunch, I think you can call me Ariana.”

“Ariana.” He smiled. “Call me Seth.”

My stomach flipped over, and I did my best to ignore my attraction. “I hope that everything’s going well?”

He nodded. “I think I’m just about finished for the day, but I’ll enjoy this coffee and then head up to speak to some of the C-level people. Tomorrow I’ll be using your login to double-check some things, so if you have a weird activity log or get odd questions about things, that’s me.”

“Good to know, thanks,” I said, then added, “But I’m not sure what you’ll find under my credentials that you won’t under your own. The system is the same for everyone.”

If this was about finding a thief, though... he would need my credentials. Nosing around as an established employee would help him stay under the radar of suspicious executives. Of course, *if* it was an executive who wasn’t stealing instead of me.

At least he’d told me when he would start using my credentials. I had until tomorrow morning to get everything rerouted and covered up.

“Well, I’ll let you get to it. Don’t let me keep you.” I turned to go.

“I don’t mind you keeping me,” Seth replied, his voice light and teasing.

I looked back at him, my face heating up—something that seemed to

happen way too frequently around him. I smiled, and I could tell it was a bit more embarrassed than I would've liked it to be. I wished I could flirt easily and professionally, but there was one true thing in what I'd told Seth: I was a massive nerd and always had been.

The rest had only been half true.

“Good to know,” I said, trying to make my tone sultry. I wasn't sure how well I succeeded. I was pretty sure I sounded more like a schoolgirl who'd never gone on a date before.

I made my escape before I could make more of an idiot of myself. He probably had women throwing themselves at him all the time, with his gorgeous, good looks and muscles like that. How was I supposed to make his head spin and earn his trust if I couldn't keep up with him in the flirting department? I doubted he wanted a blushing moron who was easily tripped up.

I went back to my desk and made myself busy until I saw Seth close his laptop and head out. Then I got to work.

I had to erase my automated system before he could get deep enough in the software to find it.

Setting up my network had taken time alone in the room where we stored all the computers and hardware—I had to get back down there to disable it all quickly. I packed up my things like I was leaving and logged out of my account, then headed down to the computer room, waving goodbye to Tony as I went.

Once I got there, I plugged into the computer directly and connected the system to my personal laptop. All right. Time to erase it all.

I worked carefully. I didn't want to rush things and risk doing a hack job. I had to eliminate every trace of myself from the system. I kept an eye on the clock while I did it. Seth would be interviewing people, but I didn't know how long that would take. An hour? Two hours?

He couldn't see me leave the building. Thank God we didn't need to use

our keycards to leave the building so there was no way that Seth could tell I hadn't left the building when Tony thought I did.

I stayed sitting on the floor with my back to the servers, working diligently on my laptop. I hated deleting all of my hard work. So many people were being helped with this, and now... what about the dozens or even hundreds of people I could've freed from medical debt, or actual death, who now wouldn't get what they needed?

There was no way I could stop completely. What I did wasn't about me. This was about helping other people in desperate need the way my family hadn't been able to get help. I would still do my work. I'd just limit it to manual withdrawals for now. But I had to be careful—if I went to jail then there went any chance of helping anymore people. However, I wasn't going to let one security guy, no matter how nice or handsome or sexy, stand in my way.

This wasn't for me. This was for everyone the system had failed. The people who suffered while men like Damien Harcourt received political and corporate handouts and made billions while doing absolutely nothing to truly earn it. Harcourt was the real criminal, the kind of guy who professed to doing things "legally" but through a broken system that supported the rich and left the rest of us struggling.

Nobody was going to get in the way of my justice.

Nobody.

CHAPTER 5



Seth

*T*here was definitely thievery going on.

The accounting department's numbers were the same as the individual entries in the computer system, but in the accounting department some of them were lumped together. Still, all the numbers checked out.

It wasn't until I spoke to the actual people who handled the numbers that I saw what the problem was.

"There is no way that it cost this much for the office supplies," one of the managers told me. "When you've been in the business as long as I have, you start to learn the cost of things like paper and staplers and how much you get when you buy in bulk. This is definitely too much, if someone tried to charge us this price for that stuff I'd say we were being robbed blind and I'd tell them to take a hike. We'd pick a different supplier."

When I spoke to the different department heads, it was the same thing. Yes, those were the numbers entered into the system and that had been tallied up by accounting for the reports, but those were not the individual prices they themselves had paid when handling their business for the company.

Whoever this thief was, they were good. They had set things up in such a way that unless you actually talked to each manager you wouldn't realize there was a theft happening. I was surprised—and a little impressed—that Damien Harcourt had caught it.

How *had* he caught it?

That was a question that tugged at my gut, and I resolved to look into him, too. It could be that he'd hired us to catch his accomplice, if he had one, because he knew the game was about to be up and he wanted to get ahead of it.

I took statements from all of the managers, then compiled that all together and put the information in the file I was assembling and headed down to the server room. I wanted to get a look at the hardware for myself, to see if anyone had been tampering with it. I was more certain than ever that someone higher-up had been fucking around with the network, but in my experience few C-level executives knew how to do it on their own, and in order for someone to go in and mess with the individual entries in the computer system, they had to know their way around coding.

They'd probably plugged directly into the hardware. That would make things easier.

When I got down there, I didn't expect there to be anyone around. It was almost the end of the afternoon and I'd already seen a few employees heading home. But when I arrived, just as the door opened, I thought I heard something.

I paused. My ears strained to pick up on the noise. It was faint, but it sounded like movement.

I stepped silently into the room, closing the door slowly behind me. I stood still, listening intently. There was no noise.

The rows of computer servers in front of me filled the entire space, creating rows high up to the ceiling that turned the space into almost a maze. Someone could be hiding behind any of the rows.

I crept forward. I didn't have any weapons on me, but I was no slouch in the hand-to-hand department and I was usually stronger than most of the people I went up against, so unless this person had a gun I wasn't too worried. And who would have a gun on them at this stage?

The first row yielded nothing. Neither did the second. Or the third. By the time I checked the last row at the end of the room, I had to satisfy myself that there was nothing and no one, and it was just paranoia.

Then I heard the door to the room click shut—for a second time.

I whirled around and raced back to the front of the room, yanking the door open, but there was no one in the hallway. The elevator at the end of the hall was closed and silent. The person must have taken the stairs. They could be on any floor by now. Shit.

Shit.

I leaned my forehead against the wall and took a deep breath. All right. So someone was in here, someone who didn't want to be caught, fucking around with the hardware. That meant I was on the right track. Someone had probably gotten spooked seeing me around and asking questions, so they'd come down here to cover their tracks.

Now I had to find out what it was they'd done.

I examined all the servers, and finally plugged into one that handled the processing for the accounting department. This was going to take a while. I was grateful to Ariana for bringing me that coffee.

What if I asked her down here to help me? It would be nice to have the company even though I didn't really need it. In fact it would be easier for me to focus if I was alone. But I wanted her company.

Damn it, man, focus.

I exhaled a deep breath. If I was correct in my suspicions, then someone in the tech department was probably an accomplice of this thief, and if Ariana knew about it, she might spill the beans somehow. It could even be her manager Tony. He'd seemed like a good guy, but as a manager he could get

into anyone's code or accounts and fiddle with things after hours or behind people's backs.

I had to keep this to myself.

Sitting down with my back against the wall, I pulled out the laptop I'd been working on and plugged it into the server. It took me a minute to get into the network, and from there I started on the actual hacking and exploration.

Everything seemed fine.

That couldn't be right, though. I had heard someone in here. I knew that something was getting fucked with.

I looked at the clock. Damn, it was getting late. Was I willing to spend the entire night on this thing?

Well, it wouldn't be the first all-nighter that I'd spent working through some technological snarl. At least this time there weren't lives at stake or actual weapons involved. I cracked my neck and knuckles, then settled in for the long haul.

The thing was, nothing digital could really be erased. Even if the file itself was deleted, for example, there were still ways the impression or memory of it was left behind. It was like writing on a piece of paper and then erasing what you'd written—the indents from the pencil would still be on the piece of paper. Or, if you ripped the paper up and burned it, the paper underneath would have the impressions from the paper above, and you could possibly make out what had been written.

It was going to take a while, but I was certain I'd be able to find whatever had been done to change the numbers for these various accounts. I could see the log of the manipulations, automated or manual. I suspected manual, since it would take a hell of a lot of coding work and skill to make an automated system, but sometimes people got lazy—especially the rich and powerful like company owners—and they just wanted something that generated it for them and they didn't have to think about it. Passive income. That was why they

were all into ‘investing’ and stocks. It was making money without actually doing any work for it.

I ended up ordering my dinner delivered to the office so I could grab it and keep working one-handed while I ate. I felt like I was back in college trying to pull an all-nighter.

Of course, back then I hadn’t been getting paid for it.

It took me a long time to sort out the changes that had been made. Whoever this person was, they were good. I was more and more certain that whoever had done this had a tech person on their side helping them out. But who?

When I finished my dinner, I set aside the programming and instead pulled up the internet so I could do some background searching on the men in charge of this company, to see what I could scare up.

Harcourt had kept his team small, which made sense since the company was still on the small side and not yet as big as he’d probably like it to be— but it was growing quickly. He’d need to expand the board and possibly wanted to take the company public.

Actually...

I used Ariana’s newly granted level four clearance to log in and pull up some memos and emails that Harcourt had sent. I skimmed through them... and sure enough, my hunch had been right. He wanted to take the company public.

That was going to be a big move. No wonder he was anxious to have this thief discovered. That might even have been how he had figured out that someone was stealing from him—if he’d gone through the financials in preparation for a public offering, organizing everything, he might have realized that something fishy was going on.

Perfectly on the up and up, of course. But I still felt like I should look into him. Something wasn’t quite right, and I always trusted my gut.

When I did my research on the other four people who were in charge at

the company, I got the usuals. Two of them had come up with Damien as a part of the company and he relied on them. They'd been in the same frat house together at college and were tight knit.

The other two people had been brought on when the company had really gotten going, both of them experienced with smaller companies and start-ups. I checked up on the other companies these two had helped to nurture into success. They hadn't worked together before explicitly, although they'd run in the same circles, and while not every company they chose was a success, enough of them were one that I didn't think there was a real pattern of thievery from either of them.

But hey, there was a first time for everything.

It was also possible one of these so-called buddies of Damien's was the thief. The money and power were getting to him, he wasn't as loyal to his friend as he'd felt at first, and now he wanted his own slice of the pie. Resentment towards the 'face' of the company, the wonderkid, could grow quickly.

There was only room for one genius, one visionary, at the top. Just ask the guys who'd helped create the Apple company with Steve Jobs. Were any of them remembered? No.

I placed a call to our office. I knew that most everyone would be home by now, but that was fine. I put in the specific extension for one of our team and left a message asking him to look into the background and finances of the two men that Damien had created the company with. One was the company's COO, and would probably be in charge should anything happen to Damien unexpectedly.

Honestly, if this really was about some kind of bad blood, I wouldn't put it past the guy to make something happen to Damien.

That would get taken care of in the morning. I focused back on the computer system.

All right. Here were the entries made by the accounting employees, and

by the managers when they put in their amounts. Now, those amounts had to have been changed...

I went into the code and examined it. Yes, there were gaps here. Something had been changing the amounts... but it would be difficult for someone to go in and do that manually.

Suspicion took hold of me. I didn't see any signs of a program in the computer code, but there were small holes suggesting that there had been one, once upon a time.

I knew I had heard someone in this room. But someone couldn't erase that much code in such a short time, could they? Whoever it was would've had barely any warning in advance. Whoever the guy in charge was, he probably hurriedly sent the techie down here to erase things when I went up to interview the managers and he caught wind of what was happening. That wouldn't really give someone enough time to erase so much—unless—

I looked at the computers I was plugged into and saw that they did, indeed, have slots for hard drives.

Of course. The program had been stored on a hard drive which was then placed into the computer to infiltrate the software. When the hard drive was removed, so was the program, and then it was just a matter of cleaning up any traces that remained. Clever.

That didn't tell me who had done this, but it did tell me they were damn smart and knew their way around computers. This definitely wasn't just a C-level executive. There was someone in the tech department involved.

And I now had to find out who.

CHAPTER 6



Ariana

*M*y heart raced wildly in my chest. Holy shit, that had been a close one.

I had just finished up my work and was putting my equipment into my bag when I heard the door to the computer room open. I'd frozen in fear for a second, terrified.

If Seth caught me here—or anyone, really, but I suspected it was him—it was game over. I couldn't think of a good lie—I was a terrible liar if I was unprepared.

Silently, I finished closing up my bag and crept to the end of the row, then stood with my back pressed to one of the tall computers. I hoped that would be enough to hide me as the person walked past.

The footsteps were almost silent. I held my breath, listening intently as the person passed my row at the other end of the room, and kept walking.

Moving as quietly as I could—and grateful that I was allowed to wear flats to work instead of being forced to wear heels—there was no way I could be silent in heels—I moved counterpoint to the other person, getting to the

door and easing it open.

If this person turned around and looked, they would see me.

I slipped through the barely-open door and then walked quickly—but still quietly—to the end of the hallway to the exit staircase.

Once I was inside the stairwell, I booked it.

I tore down the stairs and out the door that led into the parking garage. From there I hurried out and to the security guard exit onto the street, where I finally slowed to a regular walk to the bus station down the block.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, that had been way too close.

Thank God I had been right in thinking that I needed to delete my automated network from the hardware and took care of it immediately. I could be wrong and it could've been a random security guard or someone else in that room, but the way they'd walked silently through, searching? No, I had a feeling it was Seth. He must've heard someone in the room somehow.

My heart was still pounding even when I got on the bus and was riding safely home with my computer bag clutched to my chest. You'd think it held diamonds or something far more precious with how I was handling it.

When I got back to my apartment, I nearly collapsed onto the couch as the last of my adrenaline left me. This Seth Maxwell guy was on top of it, and dangerous.

I scrubbed at my face and unpacked my bag. Okay, okay, so Seth was probably going to go through the computer system. Would he be able to find the remnants of my automated program? I was sure I'd scrubbed everything clean but he might see that something had been there and then taken away.

Maybe it was time for me to use some misdirection.

I sat up. That wouldn't hurt, right? If I could make Seth think that it was, say, the COO or someone, then that would buy me time to cover my own tracks. I pulled out my laptop and opened it, then logged into the company system remotely. Sure, that theoretically wasn't possible, but I'd hacked out a bypass long ago so I could monitor my program from anywhere.

Once I was in, I got into the employee documents with my shiny new level four clearance. Interestingly, my history already showed that I'd been looking into some people—including some memos and emails by Damien Harcourt.

That had to be Seth using my clearance to stay under the radar. Why was he looking into Damien? Damien was the one who'd hired him—ostensibly as a 'security consultant' but in reality to find the thief. Why would Seth want to look into him? Did he think that Damien was hiding something?

I looked at the same memos that Seth had and saw they were related to Damien wanting to take the company public. Shit. That must've been how he realized there was a theft in progress—he'd looked at the numbers in preparation for the public offering.

Not sure that explained why Seth was looking at these memos, but it did explain why someone was now onto my activities.

I moved on and did some searching into the memos of the other C-level executives. If I was going to pin this on one of them, I had to make sure I picked the right one. The two professionals that Damien had brought on to give himself more experience and credibility were tempting, but when I checked their resumés, neither of them had worked for the same companies I had, so I couldn't use my prior thefts to paint a picture of this being a pattern for them. They both had good records. Not spotless, nobody batted a thousand every game, but good enough that it would be hard to show they were the thieves, or that they'd done this before.

The two men that Damien had come up with, however...

Brian and Jackson were both in the same fraternity as Damien in college. Brian had convinced his dad to help them out by giving them some seed money to start the company. Both he and Jackson had been Damien's wingmen on this.

But how loyal were they, really? It would be easy for a man to get tired of playing second fiddle. From what I'd seen of Damien, he didn't like to share

the limelight, or the wealth. It would make a lot of sense if one of them was to decide to line his own nest and screw Damien over in the process for various slights either real or imagined.

Hmm. Brian was the COO. It would be easy for him to get into any system he wanted and make changes without anyone questioning him.

But how to shift the suspicion to him, exactly?

I wasn't looking for anything that would really hold up in court. That would take far more than what I could do all by myself. But it should be enough to get him questioned while I made a clean getaway.

Honestly, I should probably start planning my exit strategy, and a name change. Damn it.

I crafted some emails from myself to myself, but made them look like they were a back and forth between Brian and a hired hacker. I didn't want to implicate anyone within the company itself. God forbid Tony or one of my innocent coworkers get in trouble. That wasn't what I wanted.

If Seth was already hot on my trail, he probably knew that there was no way Brian or any C-level executive could pull this off without some serious technological know-how, and so the perpetrator had probably hired someone with that know-how to help them out. Even more damning, I was pretty sure Seth would soon figure out I'd used a program on a hard drive.

Well, it was just like magic. Keep the audience looking at your right hand so they didn't see what you were doing with your left.

I talked about the hard drive in one of the emails in the persona of the hacker, explaining that this hard drive I was giving him would do all the work for him, he just had to insert it into one of the computers, let the program download, and then remove the hard drive again. I also crafted an email of Brian panicking about Seth, and the hacker telling him to just put the hard drive back into the computers, then erase the program from the company's software and remove the hard drive again.

Simple. Easy-peasy.

Once that all was complete, I deleted the account I'd used to create those emails, leaving them up in Brian's Cloud history. Again, an actual tech expert like myself, hired by the defense team, would be able to unravel it all and figure out these emails were really from a different account and that Brian was being framed. But that wasn't my problem. It just had to distract them long enough for me to get away.

When I finished I shoved my laptop away and stared up at the ceiling, breathing slowly and deeply to keep the panic from setting in. I'd been doing this for years. It was only a matter of time until someone got wind of my work. This was something I'd been waiting for in the back of my mind and I'd always known it was a possibility. There was no reason to freak out.

But for all his affable nature and his charm, something about Seth Maxwell terrified me. Maybe it was all just in my head. Maybe I'd heard 'military vet' and was making assumptions. And yet, something in my gut told me that he was dangerous and ruthless and that I had to be careful.

I just hoped that I had been smart enough to get out of this.

The next morning I went into work the same as usual, only I bought a coffee for Seth along with my own.

He was back in the conference room. I waved at Tony as I breezed by, then entered without knocking. "Good morning!" I set the coffee down in front of him.

Seth took the coffee and tipped it towards me with a grateful smile. "You didn't have to do that."

"Well, I wanted to." I sat down across from him. "Um. So I logged in this morning and saw that you've used my credentials to look at some of Damien Harcourt's stuff. You'll... tell him it was you if he finds out and asks, right? I don't want to get in trouble for snooping on my boss when I didn't actually do it."

"Don't worry, if Harcourt gets his panties in a bind, I'll be sure to let him know that it was me." Seth took a drink of his coffee and leaned back in his

seat. “I’m trusted to investigate all the ways that someone could gain access to sensitive files and that includes Harcourt’s things. He’ll understand that.”

I nodded. I had deleted my own snooping from my history on my account, but I’d left the stuff that Seth had done in my name. “Well, I’m going to get to work, unless there’s something you’d like help with?”

Seth drummed his fingers on the table. “I do have a question for you.”

“I have no plans on Friday,” I teased.

His gaze landed on me, hot and intrigued, and I felt my stomach melting.

“Is that so?” he drawled.

I swallowed hard and nodded.

The corner of Seth’s mouth curled upward. “Good to know.”

God, that little murmur, that tone of interest and curiosity, was so hot I nearly squirmed in my seat. I had not been prepared for that. “Um. But seriously, what’s your question?”

Seth stared at me for a second more, his gaze intense like he was already thinking of exactly how he wanted to fuck me—and then he blinked and seemed to snap back to reality. I felt like I was about to start panting and had to focus on my breathing.

I’d never been the subject of such intense scrutiny or blatant lust, and I wanted more of it. It hit me, equal parts terrifying and exhilarating, that if he’d decided to fuck me over the conference table—I would have let him. I’d been completely at his mercy in that moment.

Yes. I’d been right to think there was something to fear under his friendly exterior. But maybe it wasn’t that he was dangerous in general. Maybe it was that he was dangerous *to me*.

And maybe it was that I *wanted* him to be dangerous.

“Right.” Seth looked like he’d just come up to the surface after being underwater, which was almost amusing.

I wasn’t used to being the reason a guy got all... agitated. Sure, being a woman who was into computers made all the other computer men around you

hit on you relentlessly, but that had made me feel like a piece of meat. None of them really liked *me*. I could've looked like the sludge monster for all they cared. They just liked that I was a woman and I knew computers. I had breasts and a vagina, and those were their only requirements. It had made me feel like an object.

Seth, though... he could have any woman he wanted, that was clear from his good looks. He looked at me not like I was just anyone, not like I was just a pair of tits who understood Linux, but like I was beautiful. Like I was special and that was what drove his lust.

I didn't know what to do with that. I'd never felt particularly attractive before. It was a whole new sensation.

"I was wondering," Seth said, his voice low, "what your opinions were about your coworkers. How you felt about them—are they trustworthy?"

"That's a loaded question."

"Tony recommended you to me out of all his employees, for a job involving security. That means you're both good at your job and someone he trusts. But I have to wonder about all the others in this department. You guys are the ones most likely to be able to move through the system and get around security measures. A network—any network—is only as good as the humans running it. I'd like to know what kind of humans are running this system."

"Do you think you'll need to give them some kind of additional training?" I asked.

"Something like that," he responded vaguely.

Dare I take the risk? I decided that yes, it was time to call him out.

"Mr. Maxwell. Seth. You and I both know that you're not here simply to do security. I don't know why you're really here, but the memos you were looking at were Harcourt's discussion of taking the company public. I don't know what he's done that's shady, or if it's someone else, and it's probably better legally if I don't know. But I *do* know that none of my coworkers would do anything that wasn't above-board. They're all good people. Sure,

most of them don't really believe in Harcourt's vision. They're just collecting a paycheck same as I am. But they wouldn't do anything to harm the company or put themselves at risk."

Seth listened to everything I said, his gaze locked onto mine. When I finished, he nodded slowly. "You feel strongly about this. But I have to warn you—in my work, I've found that very few people are actually as worthy of your trust as you think. Not even for malicious reasons. People are focused on themselves, first and foremost. And that means they'll end up doing things that will hurt you or betray you, in order to look after themselves."

"I appreciate the warning, Mr. Cynicism," I replied. "But in my experience, people are good. They want to help each other. They're not going to screw each other over for no reason. Unless we're talking about someone like Mr. Harcourt, in which case all bets are off."

Seth's dark brows rose curiously. "Why do you say that?"

"Because once you reach a certain level of wealth, it corrupts you. It warps your mind and your values and morals."

Seth chuckled and sat back in his chair. "Yes, I've read the studies."

"Then you know what I'm talking about."

"I don't disagree with you. But I will point out that people who *don't* have money—who need that security and support—will do a lot of desperate things to get it."

Maybe that was true, but I wasn't going to lie about my coworkers and throw them under the bus to protect myself. I stole to help people. If I started lying to save my own skin, what did that make me? It betrayed my very philosophy and the reason I did all of this.

"Well, I don't think any of my coworkers are those kinds of people," I said honestly. "They're all hard workers. Sure, some of them annoy me, but I trust them not to abuse their security privileges."

Seth's gaze searched mine. I felt like he was stripping me down, layer by layer, until he reached my raw, beating heart.

He hummed and sat back once again. “All right. If you say so.”

I lifted my chin. “I do say so.”

The corner of his mouth twitched again. “You’re a very opinionated woman.”

“I have to be.” I knew that it wasn’t something that most men liked, at least not in my field and in my experience. They didn’t like it when I knew more than they did, or when I had strong principles and argued about the unethical or immoral implications of new technology, or didn’t care about making money.

“I like it,” Seth assured me.

He sounded genuine. I didn’t know what to do with this man who could be my undoing—and yet was so damn attractive to me.

“I’m going to follow up on some leads,” Seth continued. “But if you’re free this evening, I’d like to take you to dinner.”

I swallowed, not wanting to appear too eager. “You shouldn’t mix business and pleasure, or so I’ve been told.”

Seth immediately put his hands up. “Of course. It would just be a friendly dinner.” Then, he grinned a little wickedly. “At least until I’m finished with this job and there’s no longer a conflict of interest.”

My stomach did that flip-flop thing. Would there even be anything for us after this job was finished? Either he’d catch me, or I’d have to flee in some way and he’d never see me again, or I would go uncaught and I’d have to keep this massive lie from him for as long as we were dating (or hooking up or whatever we ended up doing).

It wasn’t a fun situation, no matter how you sliced it.

But I couldn’t reveal all that to him. Instead I just let myself give in, just for the moment, to the feeling of being wanted. And desired. I felt my face get warm. “Good to know. Friendly dinner it is, then.”

Seth inclined his head towards the door. “I’ll see you later, then.”

I nodded. I knew a dismissal when it was given, even if the way it was

delivered was friendly and charming. “See you later.”

I left the room, my stomach swirling and my heart pounding. I was turned on, and I was also terrified, and I had no idea which one would win out or how I could get out of this mess I’d made for myself.

CHAPTER 7



Seth

*I*t was wildly stupid of me to try and go on a date with Ariana while I was still working with this company, but it wasn't an official date—or at least that's what I was telling myself to feel better. I could hear my friends laughing at me already.

She was pretty, she was smart, I liked her—and there was this way she reacted to me that had heat spiraling up my spine. It could just be wishful thinking, but I had a hunch that maybe, just maybe, she was into the same things in the bedroom that I was.

That high kept me going as I plunged back into research... until I found the emails.

I'd gotten into the Cloud accounts of the C-level executives and was looking through their emails and paperwork. It was pretty much the same as what I'd seen in the computer system, although there were deleted drafts and emails that the Cloud had saved, all small things that weren't a big deal.

Until I got to this one email exchange.

It was between Brian, the COO, and someone only going by the name of

X. The emails discussed the setup of the system using the hard drive, my arrival, and how to use the hard drive with the program on it to delete that program from the computer system so I couldn't find it.

The timestamps matched up with my arrival and when the thefts had started. But would Brian really be stupid enough to communicate with this person on his company email account? True, I had seen plenty of stupid people in my time, but the program I had found traces of in the system had been wildly sophisticated. Why wouldn't the paid hacker insist on a more analogue mode of communication given that they had to know the Cloud would log and save all emails from the company account?

No, this smelled like a setup. I worked on decrypting the email address that Brian had communicated with. It was a good job and it took me a while, but I was able to find out it was a dummy account that had been set up—and was now deleted.

Was it Brian, trying to pull a double-bluff and exonerate himself by accusing himself in a way that would fall apart and prove to be fake? I didn't think he was that smart. Was it Damien or another of the four remaining executives trying to blow smoke up my ass? Or...

I hadn't spoken to the rest of the tech team. Ariana had insisted that they were all in the clear and trustworthy, but on top of her conviction—which could be misplaced—there was the fact that I hadn't actually talked to any of them. I'd talked to the managers of the departments. That meant one of those managers had to be involved in this and had told their tech person after speaking with me, or...

Or it was the very tech person I'd been handed as an ally.

I didn't like the idea, but I subscribed to the principle of: the simplest solution was usually the correct one. Who had I spoken to from the beginning? Ariana. Who had clearly suspected I was doing more than just beefing up security? Ariana. Who was an expert with computers? Ariana.

The idea of her stealing, or possibly being a patsy for someone else's

thievery, angered me to no end. I didn't want to believe it. There had to be another explanation.

That's just your dick talking. Ariana was pretty, and I liked her, but that didn't mean it was impossible for her to be a thief. People—even otherwise good people—were tempted into stealing all the damn time.

I also couldn't allow myself to jump to conclusions. I pulled up her file and began to do research on her.

Turned out that Ariana had gone to MIT, graduated top of her class, but her financial records also showed a mountain of student loan debt. It had been all paid off years ago, though, so that wasn't why she was stealing if that was in fact what she was doing.

Then I found the obituaries.

It listed her mother as having passed away from complications due to injuries sustained in a car crash. The death came a couple of years after the crash—meanwhile her father's death was around the same time but due to cancer. While he'd undergone chemotherapy, it hadn't been enough to slow the steady march of the cancer through his body.

Both of them had struggled to pay for their care and had run up massive medical debts. Once again, Ariana had found herself in debt, taking on loans in order to pay for her parents' care. But then, she also had paid off all those loans a few years ago. I didn't understand. She had no reason to need money, so why would she be skimming or helping someone else to do so?

I braced my elbows on the table and rubbed my temples. I had to find out who was stealing from the company and I really didn't want it to be Ariana. But whoever it was I needed some damn proof. I couldn't come to Damien Harcourt and say that I'd found evidence of stealing but not the actual perpetrator.

The answer was somewhere in the computer code. It always was. No matter how much the bugs in the codes drove me insane, no matter how much someone might erase the evidence, the truth was somewhere in there and I

was going to find it.

I pulled up the transactions again and compared them with the reports from the accounting department. Yes, there were the automatic changes from the program that had been installed by the hacker. It had done a good job—the program, that is—because it hadn't worked on a set dollar amount. Instead, it had worked based on percentages, claiming a one or two percent change in the numbers. That made it harder to track and seemed like purchases were just more expensive.

That was interesting, actually. The dollar amounts that the program had been taking off and siphoning were rather small. Not the kind I'd expect someone to take if they were trying to rip off a multi-billion-dollar company. People stole hundreds of thousands and sent it to the Caymans or Switzerland as fast as they could and then lived high off the hog with it. This was much smaller amounts.

Would the thief really be so patient? Waiting for such small amounts to accumulate? A person couldn't really live the high life on this. It was such a huge risk for so little reward. Why bother stealing at all?

I tried to track down where the money was going to. Without the hard drive showing the program, it was going to be difficult. But maybe...

I switched over to the cryptocurrency system and took a look, trying to find anything—and there, sure enough, was an account registered as a customer of the company who had the same amounts being debited in that were the percentages added to the expense accounts in the reports.

Well, then it probably wasn't Ariana. She had to know that this would be tracked. This person, whoever they were... I was guessing now that they were trying to blame Brian, their close co-worker, and my money was on it being the other so-called 'friend' and former frat brother of Damien—

Huh.

I could see the withdrawals from the cryptocurrency account, and they were all going through a PayPal account, which converted the cryptocurrency

to cash to then be sent to—to pay various medical debts?

That wasn't what I'd expected. But that was what all the PayPal payments showed. All of the money was going into the account as crypto and coming out of it as a debit to completely pay off the Go Fund Me and other fundraising campaigns of people in desperate need of payments for medical reasons. There were also once-a-month payments made to a company that bought up people's medical debt at an insanely low price and forgave them.

As I registered what I was seeing, my jaw nearly dropped. *Holy shit.*

This person wasn't stealing money for themselves. They were stealing money to save people's lives. This was a modern-day Robin Hood. Robbing the obscenely rich company to save the lives of the poor.

The only problem was that this was still illegal.

I sat back in my chair, frowning at the screen of my laptop. The crypto had been to prove that it *wasn't* Ariana, since she'd be too smart to use that. But now that I saw where the money was actually going, I could see why it might actually be her after all. The crypto was practically irreversible. Once it went into the PayPal account, it would be impossible to reverse the transactions. Ariana would know that, which meant that even if she was caught, there was no way to get the money back into the original hands—and that was on top of what murky legal waters crypto was in.

I couldn't see any of these executives going through all this trouble just to donate to charity. They were paid enough and if they donated openly they could get a lot of positive attention for themselves and the company. Why would they hide it? No, it had to be someone who didn't have legal access to a lot of money.

And of all people, Ariana would understand that medical debt could cripple someone. She had found a way to get out of it, probably by working for such high-paying companies like those on her resumé, but others couldn't. She'd have sympathy.

I didn't want to believe it. I didn't want it to be true. I was obligated to do

something if she was the thief.

I placed a call to our company again to see if our team had found anything on anyone else that might come in handy. Surely Ariana wasn't the only bleeding heart in the company. Maybe a department manager or another member of the tech team. Tony, perhaps? He was nervous around me and he had plenty of tech know-how. His background check had shown that he had spent a lot of time in his youth volunteering with the local LGBT+ center's efforts to care for those sick or dying from AIDS. He would understand the painful history of wasting away, unable to pay for medication or expensive care that would make your life comfortable or possibly even suppress your symptoms.

But my gut told me that it was Ariana, and my gut hadn't been wrong yet.
Fuck.

Our people couldn't tell me anything new. Lots of personal details, but... nothing that pinged my radar.

I wasn't going to just accuse her, though. Not without actual evidence. All I had was the proof that someone had hacked into the system and set up a program that would automatically steal money from the company and claim that the money was going into sales, with the money actually going into a crypto account within the company where it was then used to convert into cash and pay for people's medical expenses. I didn't actually have proof that *Ariana* had done any of this.

There had to be some way to prove that. Or to prove that it was someone else. Everyone had a fingerprint, metaphorical or otherwise.

I went back over the numbers again and the changes, trying to find something, anything that would tie this to Ariana or absolve her. I pulled up her own logged-in history with the codes to see if I could find a similarity or discrepancy in the coding style.

Ariana was a skilled coder and knew her shit around computers, I could definitely give her that. What was someone like her doing risking their career

to steal like this? Even if it was to help people? Did she believe in what she was doing that strongly?

As I scrolled through her logged work, something caught my eye. Changes in the crypto system.

I pulled up the code and examined it. Her reports were that she was smoothing over issues with transactions and making the system more accessible to the clients, which were definitely things that needed adjusting, but I saw micro transactions were a part of the changes she'd made, though.

When I pulled up the accounts she'd done the micro transactions from—supposedly *test* transactions that should've been either in amounts too small to matter or should've been reversible—I saw they were the accounts of the executives in charge of the company.

I totaled up the amount that she'd taken from them in crypto and converted that into dollars. Jesus, she'd ended up swiping an additional few hundred thousand from them—taken it right out of their pockets.

This money went into the same account as the other automatic transactions, but instead of going into PayPal to be transferred to someone, the money was withdrawn from the bank as cash. Hmm. Perhaps our Robin Hood wasn't just out for others but for herself as well?

Time to take a little trip.

I went home and dressed up in what I called my FBI suit—the plain black one with the skinny tie that looked like I'd bought it on a government salary—and grabbed my fake badge. Yes, sometimes I had to break the law a little when I didn't want to wait around for our actual friends at the FBI to get to something and when giving someone the real explanation as myself would be too convoluted and possibly result in them turning me down. I needed answers and I needed them *now*, for the sake of my client and for my own peace of mind.

I arrived at the bank just before closing and flashed my badge at the teller. “Can I speak to your manager?”

The teller's face went pale, poor girl. The teller directed me to the manager. I discreetly flashed my badge again and introduced myself.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I've been looking into someone and it seems she might have used your bank to withdraw some cash from her account. I was hoping I could take a look at your security footage?"

"Of course, of course, right away." The manager looked relieved I wasn't after him or his employees. "Is she, uh, dangerous?"

"No, no, just your usual corporate thievery." I waved my hand. "One of those nice and easy cases. We just need to see if there is proof of her withdrawing the funds from her account for cash. That will help us in our case immensely. Right now we can prove transactions were made, but not that she was the one who made them."

"Ah, I see." The manager was practically beaming now, excited that he could help catch a criminal and relieved that he wasn't going to be in any trouble. "Right this way."

He led me into the back room where the security guard was keeping an eye on the cameras. "Stephen? This is Agent Maxwell. He needs to look through some security footage. Could you help him out?"

I nodded respectfully. "Stephen, nice to meet you. I don't want to take up too much of your time, I know you've got a lot to do."

In the face of my surprising respect, Stephen relaxed and smiled. "Of course, sir, I'll show you whatever you need."

"Ah, thank you. Every security system's a little different so if you could show me how this works..."

Flattered, Stephen was happy to pull up the footage on the days I needed and fast-forward until we got to the timestamps of the cash withdrawals from the account.

My stomach plummeted. Because there, hair hidden under a blond bob wig, was Ariana.

She'd put something in her cheeks—rolled up cotton I was guessing, like

the kind a dentist used after an operation—to fill them out and change her appearance a bit, and she'd put something on her nose to change the shape. I would guess some putty that she then covered up with makeup to match her skin tone. It wasn't a crazy change, but it was enough to shift her face shape that theoretically, nobody would recognize her real face if it was shown to the employees. It might even be enough to claim that wasn't her if she was taken to court.

That told me Ariana had been doing this for a long time. This wasn't her first rodeo.

“Thank you so much, Stephen. I appreciate your help.” I requested a download of the video files on the thumb drive I'd brought with me, then headed out.

It was time to look into Ariana's other jobs prior to Smirtech.

I was just about to drive back to my apartment when I checked the time and jolted. *Shit.* Dinner with Ariana.

If I cancelled on her, she might get nervous and disappear. I had to act like I still didn't suspect her. I wasn't quite as good at deception as Bryce, but if I could pull this off, I could possibly get information out of Ariana like what the hell her motive was. Was it about helping people? Was it about helping people in order to excuse getting rich off her stolen gains?

My phone chimed with a text from her: *are we still on for tonight?*

I texted a response: *Sure are. Are you at the office or at home? I can pick you up from either place.*

After I ran by my own apartment to change into something that wasn't a cheap suit like the one I was wearing, of course.

I ran home to change, Ariana texted me. She then sent me her address.

Perfect. I hurried to my place, put on a nice suit—a light gray one that Bryce had insisted I get since it ‘highlighted my blue eyes’, *as if the rest of us cared about our fucking sartorial choices, Bryce*—and then went to Ariana's to grab her.

She was wearing a dress for the first time since I'd met her, something summery with a skirt that swished around her bare thighs, in a bright yellow that looked great against her skin tone. I swallowed. Fuck that dress was short. It was tight around her breasts, too, emphasizing them. Christ.

Focus. I wasn't here to get my dick wet, I was here to figure out what her motivation would be for stealing so much money.

I opened the door for her. Ariana's eyebrows rose when she saw my suit, but I saw that slight blush again. Her pupils went wide and dark. All right, maybe Bryce'd had a point about the suit.

"How fancy is this place we're going to?" she asked, getting into the car.

"Oh, not very. You're dressed just fine. I just wanted to get out of what I was wearing earlier and put on something besides another t-shirt."

The place I took her to was on the nicer side, but nothing that you'd see written up in the Michelin guide. It was an Italian place that the boys and I liked to visit when we were having a good day or had something small to celebrate like a successful job concluded.

As we were led in and sat down, I wondered what I would do with her. She was guilty, no doubt about that—but it was a question of exactly *how* guilty. The men in charge of this company were raking in enough money that they hadn't noticed the thousands of dollars taken from their crypto wallets. They clearly hadn't missed it. And the money she'd taken from the company itself had gone to help those who desperately needed it—those who might die if they hadn't gotten those funds.

Could I really turn her into the police for that? Were any of these men, who no doubt took tons of political and corporate handouts, really suffering for what she'd done?

Of course there was the matter of where that cash she'd withdrawn was going. But the apartment building I'd pulled in front of wasn't fancy. It was decent, but it was probably fully within her actual salary to afford the place.

What was she doing with the cash? Wild spending sprees?

That would really determine what I was going to do with her. I had to know where that other money went. Because it just didn't sit right with me to stick a Robin Hood in jail, even if it was technically against the law. I wasn't the legal system or law enforcement, after all, and there was no doubt that I'd done a few morally gray things in my life . . . so I wanted to tread carefully being judge and jury.

After long quiet moments between us, Ariana looked at me over her menu. "You seem to have something on your mind."

Her leg pressed against mine under the table and my cock practically sat up and begged. Fuck, I wanted to take her home and tie her up. I wanted tears streaming down her face as she pleaded with me to let her come. I wanted to sink my cock inside of her and fuck her until she was—

Focus! For fuck's sake!

"Just the job," I replied casually, then decided to approach the issue to see how it all played out. "Ariana, as you've guessed, I'm not there just for security."

"Yeah." She smiled. "I figured."

"I *am* security, but I'm not really the guy you call to set up your system. I'm the guy you call when something's gone badly wrong and you need it handled."

As I spoke, Ariana put her menu down and leaned on her elbows, leaning in slightly—which showed off her cleavage. I was a patient man, but I didn't appreciate being teased when I couldn't do anything about it. If she was even teasing me. I wasn't sure yet.

"What's gone wrong?" she asked.

"We have someone stealing from the company," I said. And then, to really test her— "Including from the personal crypto wallets of the executives."

Ariana's face paled a little and I felt her leg against mine tremble slightly for a second before stopping. She must have realized I could feel that and

clenched her body.

“The question,” I said, leaning back in my chair, “isn’t whether or not I’ll catch the thief. I’m very close. I know I will. They’re good, of course—I respect that. They even tried to frame the COO and it probably would’ve fooled a lot of people. I admire that kind of skill and misdirection. But I’m closing in.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ariana asked. She tried to keep her tone light and neutral but instead it came out breathy.

“Because you might be able to help me. See, the question isn’t *if* I’ll find out who it is. The question is what I’ll do with them once I get them. How exactly I’ll punish them.” I looked into her eyes, and felt her trembling again. Fuck, it was making me so hard to see her and feel her like this, a mouse caught in a trap. “Thoughts on what that punishment should be, Ariana?”

She stared at me, her breasts rising and falling with each deep breath, and her tongue flicking out nervously to dampen her bottom lip. Heat churned in my gut and filled my cock. It was going to take everything in me not to drag her into the bathroom and have my way with her right here and now.

But I was right. It was Ariana.

Now, we had to see what she would say, and what I was going to do about her.

CHAPTER 8



Ariana

*M*y entire body flooded with adrenaline as Seth spoke to me. I trembled. I was sure he could feel it. I kept trying to make it stop but I couldn't manage it. My face was flushing—*stop it!* He didn't know it was me!

Or did he? His gaze was so intense...

Heat slid down between my legs. What was wrong with me? The man was as good as accusing me of theft. He could take me to jail right the fuck now if he wanted to. And I was getting wet from how he talked about it?

“Thoughts on what that punishment should be, Ariana?” Seth murmured.

His leg pressed hard against mine and moved around to the other side, then pushed, spreading my legs—exposing me beneath the table. I swallowed. His other foot came up and I felt it rest against the edge of my chair between my legs.

I could practically hear him ordering me to grind on the top of his shoe... he could order me to do anything right now to save myself from prison, and I'd have to do it. The thought of him ordering me around and making me

orgasm from it had me so unexpectedly turned on I nearly shoved my hand between my legs to relieve the pressure.

Okay, so it looked like I was discovering some kinks I didn't know about before now. Fine time to figure that out.

"Well. It depends, I suppose, on what this person is doing with the money," I managed to say.

He tipped his head to the side. "Why do you say that?"

"The fact that you're even asking me how they should be punished as opposed to simply calling the police suggests that there's something unusual going on here," I replied in a shockingly calm tone. "Something that's not just a case of simple theft. You want my opinion on what to do with this person—isn't the obvious conclusion to call law enforcement? So, what's going on that makes you hesitate? Why do you want my thoughts on it?"

Maybe he didn't know it was me, but on the chance that he did, I called his bluff. Maybe he really did want my opinion, and the rest of this was him upping the flirtation between us. I had been teasing him—with this dress, with my breasts, with my leg against his—there was no reason for me to give myself away when he probably thought this was all just fun sex.

I had to maintain my cover as long as I could and not balk.

Seth leaned back in his chair as the waiter arrived, his foot disappearing from where it had rested on the chair between my legs. We ordered, I smiled at the waiter, we got our waters refilled and our wine delivered, and then it was just the two of us alone again.

Seth sighed. "You want to know what's going on?"

"You can't let me in halfway," I pointed out. "If you want my advice, you have to tell me everything."

Seth eyed me, almost methodically. I shivered, feeling pinned under the weight and intensity of his gaze.

"This person seems to be stealing to help others," Seth said evenly, still giving nothing away. "They're not stealing for themselves. Or, they might be,

but at least not entirely. I found the program they set up to skim from the company and it's all going to pay off people's medical debts. They're also getting cash in hand through that same account, and I don't know if they're using it for personal gain or for another altruistic reason, but I'd like to find out. Why they're using it could determine what I choose to do about them."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

It took everything in me not to show my terror. He knew about the account and the program—*how*? How had he found it? I had wiped everything from the program. He knew about the people I had helped and now he might tell Harcourt, who could send lawyers after them and demand the money back—and send me to prison for a good long while.

The people I'd helped didn't even know where the money had come from! It was just a gift to them. To ask them to give it back because it had been illegally gained, *by me...* that would be heartbreaking and unconscionable.

"I don't want to punish innocent people who needed that money and had no idea where it was coming from," Seth continued, as if reading my frantic thoughts. "Crypto is still very valuable even though it's fluctuating. A hundred of a percent of a single bitcoin can translate into hundreds of American dollars, and it feels wrong to punish the thousands of people who've been helped and were unaware these were stolen goods."

"If you tell Harcourt," I pointed out, "he'll want that money back. Or his lawyers will."

Seth shrugged. "He could be generous."

It took all my self-control not to burst out into sardonic laughter. I managed to hold it in, but my mouth still twisted and my jaw clenched. "In my experience," I said, struggling to keep my tone neutral, "filthy rich people like Damien Harcourt don't care. They care about morality in a vacuum, and when it works to their favor. He'll want the money back because he's a greedy son of a bitch. He and his lawyers will talk on and on about the

principle of the situation and what's 'technically right' and how they have to follow the law, and in the end those people will suffer."

He arched a brow. "You seem passionate about this."

"I'm always passionate about helping people," I said, a little too heatedly.

"In what ways?" Seth asked, his tone softer now, and dare I say . . . *compassionate?*

I lifted my chin defensively. "I told you my parents died a few years ago. Since then I've dedicated my free time to helping others. It's not like I have a family to spend time with."

"Yes, and I'm sorry to hear about that loss."

"Do you still have yours?" I was desperate to get off this subject.

Seth nodded. "I don't see them as much as I'd like, but we're close. They're always wondering when I'm going to bring a girl home for the holidays."

I laughed. "My mom was meddling the same way." Then I sobered up. "I think it was her way, in the end when she knew she was dying... it was her way of asking if I'd be taken care of when she was gone. Asking if I wouldn't be alone. But it's easier to tease your daughter about not having a boyfriend than it is to talk about... your impending death."

Seth smiled gently at me, and for a second it felt like we were just two people at dinner getting to know each other. "It's amazing, the way parents will protect their kids, in ways we don't appreciate until we're much older."

I nodded. "My parents sacrificed a lot so that I could go to MIT. I was already grateful. But then when my dad got sick and my mother had the accident... it was all I could do to keep our heads above water. I felt like I failed in loving them the way they'd loved me."

"You shouldn't feel that way," he countered. "You did everything you could."

I absently toyed with the stem of my wineglass. "I hope I did."

"So you feel strongly about medical debt," he said matter-of-factly.

“Yes.” My reply was cautious.

“And you feel that if I were to turn this perpetrator into Harcourt, it would be innocent families who would suffer.”

I exhaled a deep breath, not knowing where Seth’s head was at at the moment, or what he knew. “I truly believe that, yes.”

Seth hummed and drummed his fingers on the tabletop, his gaze never leaving mine. “You see, this leaves me with a dilemma. I’ve been told I need to find this thief. It’s what Damien is paying me to do and he’s going to want an answer and results. And I don’t think an impassioned speech about how the person was using the money for good, and we should just let them off with a warning, is going to fly with a man like Damien, as you said.”

I scrambled to think of an answer. “Harcourt wants to take the company public, and I’m surprised he was able to find the thefts when nobody else has noticed them until now, especially in accounting or the tech team. Doesn’t that strike you as suspicious?”

“You think that Harcourt is robbing from himself to donate to people?” Seth snorted in amusement. “Ariana...”

His tone dropped into a growl as he said my name, and a shiver ran up my spine. He was so affable and friendly, to see that switch happen gave me a shot of adrenaline and arousal I never expected.

“When are you going to admit that it’s you?” he finished calmly.

My heart sank into my stomach, and my entire body flashed hot, then cold.

“Here we are!” Our server said cheerfully as she appeared with our plates. “Careful, these dishes are hot...”

We both smiled politely as she served us and checked that we didn’t need anything else. The sommelier came by to refill our glasses of wine, and then our busboy stopped by to refill our waters. I wanted to scream at them to leave us alone, but I also hoped that they never left the table. As long as they were here, I was in limbo—I wasn’t able to escape the accusation, but I was

safe from it as well.

But they did leave us alone, and then it was just Seth facing me down.

I swallowed, still not willing to admit to anything. “You were saying?”

“I’m saying that I have you on video,” Seth said quietly. “I appreciate the disguise. You did some neat tricks that’ll quite possibly fool a jury or confuse a computer facial recognition system. But I knew it was you. What were you doing with that cash, Ariana? Is that for yourself?”

He cut into his food while asking me these questions, his tone casual, his shoulders relaxed. Like this was no big deal to him—or, more like he knew he had all the power here so there was no reason for him to be anything but casual.

My wires were being crossed. On the one hand, I was terrified. On the other hand, I was shockingly turned on. It was almost like the former was feeding the latter. Could it be that the fear was making me even more aroused?

That was a kink I hadn’t known I had, either.

Then the last part of what he said struck me, and I felt my face heat up with anger. “I have *never* taken anything for myself,” I hissed, realizing too late what I’d admitted. But now that I had, I continued on. “Go through my financials and you’ll see. Take a look at my apartment and you’ll see. There’s nothing there. I’m not taking fancy vacations, I’m not buying a bunch of stock, I’m not buying up real estate or investing, I’m not buying fancy things.”

I exhaled a deep breath to try and calm myself. “I take out cash because a lot of people need cash in hand to really help themselves. SNAP, soup kitchens, tax credits—there are programs to help people but those only go so far. At the end of the day people need to be able to make decisions about what they need the most, and that means they need cash. Not other people telling them what they are and aren’t allowed to have.”

“So you take the cash and give it directly to people who need it?”

“I have all the receipts,” I replied, nodding. “I keep track of everything in a notebook—who it was and how much I gave—so that I can check up on them later.”

Seth eyed me for a moment. I started in on my meal and held his gaze. I wasn’t going to let him see how easily he intimidated me.

Finally, he spoke. “I don’t want to turn you in.”

I nearly dropped my fork in shock. “You barely know me.”

“I know that you’re a good person, trying to do a good thing, even if it’s technically illegal.” Seth dug into his food again. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Ever since I realized how unfair the fucking world is,” I quipped. “Ever since I graduated. I started working for these companies where the C-level executives made multi-millions every year while their workers could barely break even. They don’t need this money. They don’t even use most of it. It’s nothing more than corporate greed. They’re cracking a billion dollars and they’re not even doing any work for it.”

“I’m not disagreeing,” he said after taking a drink of his wine. “But you realize you’re breaking the law, right?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “How else am I supposed to get justice? The IRS? The government? They don’t care. They let the rich stay rich and put it all on our shoulders. I’m just evening the playing field out a bit. If Damien hadn’t looked into things for taking the company public Harcourt never would’ve noticed that we were losing money in that way, and I’m still shocked exactly how he figured it out.”

A strange look crossed Seth’s face, as if he was wondering the same thing. *Interesting.*

“I help people who desperately need it. Most of their lives depend on that little bit of money,” I went on staunchly. “And these millionaires and billionaires don’t even notice or care. What’s wrong about that?”

Seth tapped his fingers against the table. This wasn’t the first time I’d

noticed him doing this. It was almost like he was typing something out with his hand, like he imagined himself at a keyboard. I wondered what he was thinking.

“I agree with you,” he said at last. “And I’m not going to turn you into Harcourt or the law—*for now*. But Harcourt’s going to want something.”

“What do you want?” I asked desperately. “What would you do—forget Damien Harcourt. What would *you* do with me?”

Seth’s eyes darkened. “You don’t want to know what I would do to you.”

“I’m asking you, aren’t I?”

His leg pressed against mine again, and a feral-like smile curved his lips. “If it were just up to me? I’d take you home, and tie you up, and do whatever I wanted to you. I’d punish you that way. You’d belong to me, and that would be how you were punished.”

Oh God. Why did that sound so hot? “You want me that badly?”

Seth chuckled incredulously. “Ariana, I’ve wanted you since I saw you. But I don’t think you understand what I want in the way of sex. The way I want to dominate and control.”

“Well, maybe you don’t understand that I’d like to be controlled in the bedroom,” I snapped back, surprising myself with the secret admission.

Seth stared at me for a moment like he wasn’t sure what to make of me. Then he said, “How about this. I won’t turn you in... *yet*. I’ll figure out what I want to do with you. How I want to handle this, and also look a bit more into Harcourt and him taking the company public and see what he’s up to. *But*, in the meantime... in exchange for my silence, you’ll be mine. You’ll belong to me.”

My breath left my lungs. This was a huge ultimatum—and ironically, an unethical one—to give me. But it was this or be turned over to the police. I knew how that would go. Seth had me in between a rock and a hard place.

I should resent him for this. I should be horrified and angry. Instead I found myself shockingly... excited about the prospect of being Seth’s.

Aroused, even.

I thought about his foot against the chair, and about how I had thought he might order me to grind on it, and how hot that had made me. I imagined being tied up, and being dominated by him, and there was no denying how much I wanted that, craved it, even.

When it came down to a choice of being arrested, or being Seth's plaything for a while, it was a no-brainer.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll do it."

Seth's slow grin told me that I was really in for it now.

CHAPTER 9



Seth

This was probably the worst thing I'd ever done.

I knew that I wasn't really giving her much of a choice. Between sex with me and jail, what was the best option?

But listening to her talk about why she'd stolen and her beliefs... I couldn't bring myself to turn her in. I also couldn't just let her go, either. I had to figure out what to do. And in the meantime I couldn't let her just slip away. I had to keep an eye on her and the only reliable way to do that was to have her *with* me.

Her mention of Damien's notice of the theft told me that I wasn't the only one worrying about that interesting fact. I was glad that my gut instinct was being backed up by someone else.

But whatever Damien was or wasn't doing, it still remained that Ariana had stolen from the company. I had to turn her in—or give Damien another answer about the misappropriated funds. He wasn't going to just accept 'they're very sorry and won't do it again' for an answer. That wasn't how things worked.

While I figured out what to do, I figured... why not get something out of it? Why not keep an eye on Ariana and give us both some pleasure along the way considering our attraction was mutual.

It had been way too long since I'd been able to have the kind of filthy sex, the way that I liked it.

To have someone as gorgeous as Ariana in my bed, and at my mercy...

I wanted her to say yes. I wanted her to want me the way that I desired her. I wanted to be able to let loose and indulge my darker instincts. The idea of having her tied up and captive in my bed, having her completely under my control...

My cock thickened in my slacks just thinking about it.

I had been flirting with her a little before, pressing my leg against hers, testing her. And I'd seen how her breath hitched, how her legs spread, the way her face got a bit flushed.

She responded beautifully. If only we weren't in a crowded restaurant... some people were into public sex, but I wasn't one of them. I didn't share and I wasn't an exhibitionist.

There was another angle to this situation, one that I didn't want to voice to Ariana just yet. If I had figured out that she was the thief, it was only a matter of time until Damien or someone else suspected her as well. How she'd managed to get away with this for years at various companies without anyone noticing was impressive, but everyone's luck ran out eventually.

If Damien found out, she could be in danger. I didn't know Damien Harcourt well, and I had no reason to suspect he was a total asshole, but I did know that generally rich men tended to get a skewed idea of what justice was. They would take the law into their own hands when it suited them, using their wealth, no matter how ethically unfair (or illegal) it might be.

I couldn't take the risk of her being in trouble that way. And at least Ariana would be safe with me.

Not that I could pretend that my proposition was entirely altruistic. I

wanted her, and I was pretty sure she wanted me. This would let us have each other. And I could show her exactly what I liked to do in the bedroom.

If she really didn't want to do the same things I did in the bedroom, obviously I wouldn't force her. I wasn't into non-consensual sex, thanks, and I didn't respect anyone who was. Even if I sometimes like the illusion—an illusion, a fantasy, was all that it really was. Just because something was fun to role play in the privacy of your bedroom didn't mean that it was something you wanted to actually be true out in the real world.

However—the feeling of having her at my mercy? The fantasy of her being my captive? Of tying her up and being able to do whatever I wanted to her, watching her beg and cry and eventually go slack in pleasure?

The very thought drove me insane.

Ariana stared at me after I gave her the choice. She had to know what danger she was in now. But I had the feeling if she really didn't want to accept my offer, she'd had no issues telling me I could stuff it and she'd take her chances on her own.

“All right,” she said, her face flushing pink again. “I'll do it.”

I inhaled shakily, my body lighting on fire. I wanted to bend her over the goddamn table and fuck her right there and then, claim her so that she knew she belonged to me now.

Ariana leaned in. “Just for the record, you don't actually own me,” she hissed.

I nearly burst into laughter. I nudged her leg again with mine, and then put my foot back on her chair between her legs, watching with delight as her eyes went wide. “Oh, trust me, I don't think I'm going to do anything that you don't want me to.”

Ariana shivered. “I thought you were a good guy, but you're blackmailing me into being your sex captive. What makes you think that I'll want anything you do to me?”

I leaned in. “So you're telling me that if I told you, right now, to grind

down on my shoe, and be a good girl and come on my foot, nice and quiet, that you wouldn't be into it?"

Ariana's skin darkened further with her blush. Her pupils got wide and dark. I felt her hips scoot forward on the chair, like she was already prepping herself to do as I'd suggested.

"Answer the question, Ariana," I murmured. "Would you be into it? Or not?"

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. "I would . . . be into it," she whispered.

I couldn't hold in the grin that spread across my face. I had her. She was mine, and the elation that pumped through me was dizzying.

"Well, unfortunately for you, I'm not into public sex. Too high of a risk of getting caught, and getting caught isn't my kink. Especially when it's at the restaurant where I eat fairly regularly."

I took my foot down off her chair and straightened up in my seat. Ariana swallowed again, and I saw her face fall a little. "Disappointed?" I asked.

She looked away. "No."

"Liar." I smirked. "You're very good at lying, by the way. How long have you been pulling this little scheme? Ever since you graduated? Your entire adult life? That's a dozen companies you've swindled."

"And thousands of people I've helped," Ariana shot back with a hiss. "You're the first person to catch me. This is the first time anyone's even realized that there's a theft in progress."

I genuinely did admire her skills. "I'm impressed, Ariana. But that doesn't mean I'm going to let you lie to me. Starting now, you belong to me until I figure out what to do, remember? You just agreed to that. So tell me the truth—are you disappointed I just said I wouldn't order you to fuck yourself on my shoe?"

Ariana wouldn't meet my eyes. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I'm disappointed."

“There’s a good girl,” I murmured. She shivered at the praise, and I felt like my teeth were sharpening, turning me into a predator. “You like it when I give you orders, don’t you?”

Ariana froze for a second, then nodded. It was a jerky nod, and I knew it was hard for her to admit.

Had she ever fucked anyone before that wasn’t just standard vanilla sex? Had she ever explored BDSM or stronger kinks? I didn’t want to patronize her, but I wanted to be careful not to treat her as someone who had experience or knowledge she actually lacked.

I ran my foot up and down her bare leg. “Are you turned on right now?”

Ariana nodded again jerkily.

“It’s confusing, isn’t it?” I murmured. “You didn’t expect to be so wet right now, did you?”

Ariana shook her head in agreement.

This was wildly indulgent, and I knew that I probably shouldn’t, but... I couldn’t resist. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so fucking attracted to someone so quickly, and luckily, I knew this place—including the fact that they had gender-neutral single-room restrooms.

“Then let’s begin, shall we, and see how well you follow my orders. Why don’t you get up and go to the restroom?” I suggested. “Take the second one on the right.”

Ariana stared at me for a moment, apparently in shock. Then she stood up, the chair jerking back, her napkin falling from her lap onto the floor. “I’ll be back,” she said a little shakily, like she didn’t quite know how to speak anymore.

Then she turned and walked towards the restrooms.

I leaned back in my chair and indulged in a smirk as I watched the enticing sway of her hips. I had surprised a lot of women in my time when it came to sex. I knew I was friendly and I could be charming. I was an easygoing guy. Nobody expected it when I revealed how dark and depraved I

was in the bedroom—the power I liked to hold and the dominance I liked to display.

People tended to expect a giving lover when they slept with me, someone who would take their time to make them orgasm, giving them something slow and delicious. I was fully capable of that, of course, and had in the past. But it had made me feel like a counterfeit. I didn't want to be that way unless it was someone I was in love with, and that had yet to happen. I didn't want to share that intimate, more vulnerable side of myself with anyone else.

No. In the bedroom, I liked to be in *charge*. To safely let out that darker side of myself, that part that liked to be in *control*.

All of my previous lovers had ended up loving it. I was excited to coax a wilder side out of Ariana.

Once a few minutes had passed, I asked our server to bring along the chocolate lava cake for dessert—I suspected Ariana would want something rich and indulgent afterwards—and then got up to use the restroom myself.

When I got back there, I knocked on the door that was second on the right. “Ariana.”

It opened for me, and there she stood.

I slipped inside and closed the door behind me, but I didn't lock it just yet. “Here's what's going to happen.”

Ariana had her hands clasped in front of her, her face open, her eyes wide.

I stepped in and strolled around her in a slow circle. “I'm going to walk back over to that door, and I'm going to lock it. If you're still in here when I lock it, then you belong to me. No going back. You're *mine*. But if you want to leave—if you've changed your mind and you want to take your chances with Harcourt—then you can leave now.”

I walked slowly, giving her time to bolt out the door as I made my way back over to it.

Ariana trembled, but didn't move.

My fingers closed around the lock and flipped it.

She was still here.

Fire roared to life in my veins and I turned around to face her. “You’re a daring girl,” I said, my voice slipping out in a purr. “You like to take risks. That’s why you’re stealing from these rich people—high risk but to you a high reward. Now you’re taking a risk with me.”

Ariana nodded. She seemed to have lost her ability to speak.

“So why don’t you come over here?” I leaned back against the sink counter and braced my hands on the edge, waiting for her to join me.

Ariana walked over to me. I could see her legs—those gorgeous legs with her curvy thighs—were shaking.

When she reached within arm’s distance, I was tempted to yank her in, but I maintained control. “Closer.”

She moved closer, so that we were only an inch apart.

“You can get closer than that,” I murmured.

Ariana pressed herself against me.

“There we go.” I pushed my thigh up between her legs. “Straddle my thigh like a good girl.”

Ariana’s hands grasped the lapels of my jacket and she spread her legs further, pressing up onto my thigh.

“Now,” I ordered. “Grind against it. Just like you would have out there on my shoe if I’d ordered you to.”

A delicious whimper escaped her and she did as she was told, rubbing her panty-clad pussy down on my thigh.

My cock grew excruciatingly hard, and I kept my hands braced against the counter. “There we go. Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Y-yes,” Ariana whispered.

“Get that angle just right,” I murmured. “Rub that pretty clit against those panties.”

Ariana’s head tipped back, her lashes falling half-mast as she shifted on

my leg, seeking just the right pressure and friction to make herself come.

“Nobody’s ever spoken to you like that before, have they?” I mused.

She shook her head, her lips parting but not speaking, apparently in a bit of shock.

“No. They were either too intimidated or disrespectful. They wanted to just ruin you so they felt better, or they were terrified of you and wanted you to dominate them. But now you’re going to know what true submission is like and how good it feels.”

So few people could handle someone as smart and capable as Ariana. But I suspected, given how she’d been doing this thievery on her own for so many years, and losing her parents... that she desperately needed someone else to take control. She needed to be praised and told she was good, she needed recognition. There was only so long we could toil away without someone noticing our efforts before it became frustrating and unfulfilling. I was willing to bet that Ariana was starving for a guiding hand and to be taken care of properly.

Ariana fucked herself desperately on my thigh, her hips rolling back and forth. I smirked, still refusing to touch her no matter how tempted I was. She had to earn that.

A piece of her hair came loose and I gently tucked it behind her ear. I leaned in, letting my lips brush the soft shell. “I’m going to take you home, and I’m going to tie you to my bed, and I’m not going to let you go until the very *thought* of me touching you has you coming.”

Ariana whimpered again, her fingers tightening in my lapels, her thighs clamping tighter against mine. “S-Seth...”

“You better come soon, baby, because that’s the only orgasm you’re going to be allowed for a while if you want to escape me. If you can make it without orgasming, then I’ll let you go,” I said, giving her one last out. “But if you do... you’re all mine just like we agreed. Because I’m a generous man.”

I knew she wouldn't win. I had a specific plan in mind for her, one that I'd long harbored as a fantasy but had never made a reality. This was going to be exquisite, just as she was.

"So why don't you take that edge off for yourself?" I murmured, staring at her flushed face. "And come?"

Ariana moaned and her hips stuttered, her body going stiff. She shuddered as she came quietly, her expression fucking gorgeous. I couldn't wait to see the emotions that would flash across her face as I truly pushed her over the edge on my terms.

Ariana's forehead fell to my shoulder, her breath rasping out of her, and I finally touched her to wrap an arm around her back so she wouldn't fall. "There we go. That was beautiful. You deserved a reward."

I licked at her ear. "And now... you're going to become mine. However, and whenever I want."

It was going to be so much fun to break her.

CHAPTER 10



Ariana

I couldn't admit it out loud, but holy fuck, I had never been so turned on in my life.

Sex wasn't really something I'd had a lot of, unfortunately. Usually when it happened it was a hookup I met through an app, and I never told the guy what my job was. Men in my field had major inferiority complexes when it came to women coders. They treated us like crap, wanting us out of 'their' territory.

Between that and my mission, I just found that it wasn't worth it to try and find someone. I'd assumed romance would come later in my life after I slowed down on the stealing and could relax a bit.

Now, I had a handsome man who could probably bench press me, whispering in my ear and telling me that he was going to dominate me and make me orgasm. That I was going to belong to him, and if I didn't want to, I better fucking enjoy coming *now* because I wasn't going to get to do it again. If I orgasmed when I got back to his house, our deal would hold.

On the one hand, I appreciated the possible out. On the other hand, I had

the feeling that this was another game he wanted to play, and that he wasn't going to make it easy for me. That he would enjoy making me fail.

And for some reason *that* made me orgasm.

His thigh was so thick and steady, it was perfect for me to grind against. I came hard, staining my panties, pleasure rocketing through me. I had images of being tied up, of being spanked, of being tied to a vibrator and forced to orgasm over and over running through my head. And I *came* from it.

Yeah, I was a lot kinkier than I'd ever imagined.

His voice in my ear, and the casual confidence, the power I'd felt from him... it did things to me. Every other man I'd been with, they'd either been overconfident to the point of being inconsiderate, or they'd been insecure and overcompensating. Seth was the first man I'd been with where I could feel that he truly knew himself and knew what he could do, but made sure he was considerate with me while he was at it. I didn't feel like he would drop me, literally or metaphorically.

And then there was the bet.

If I didn't orgasm again after this first time, if I could withstand his pleasurable torment, then he would let me go free and he'd figure something else out. Seth had to be really sure of himself, because if he let me go, I would split like a goddamn banana. I didn't have an escape plan. I hadn't been smart enough to put one of those in place, nor had I ever needed to. I hadn't thought that I would get caught—or that if I would, I'd see the signs and I wouldn't be so blindsided.

That didn't mean I wouldn't find a way to disappear and avoid jail if I was able to escape Seth. I couldn't go to prison and possibly put every single person I'd ever helped in front of a court to be judged and stripped of their money. I couldn't let that happen.

Even with so much on the line, the idea of being dominated and teased and pushed to orgasm... it had me so hot and wet. One orgasm truly wasn't enough. But I had to remain strong. I wasn't going to give in easily.

Although there was a part of me that wanted to.

I'd had a taste of what Seth could give me, the pleasure he could bring me in submission and control, and I wanted more.

Seth wrapped an arm around me as I rode out my orgasm, my panties absolutely ruined. I could feel his smirk against my neck. "That's a good girl."

I pulled back, loosening my fingers from his lapels, and smoothed out the fabric where I'd horribly wrinkled it. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize." Seth's voice was a soft growl. "I like seeing you lose control."

I shivered at the heat in his eyes as he stared down at me.

Seth released me and stepped away from the sink. "Clean yourself up. I'll be waiting for you at the table."

Once he was gone, I felt oddly cold and empty. I made myself presentable again and rejoined him at the table—only to find that a warm chocolate lava cake had just been placed in front of us.

Seth was in the middle of signing the check. He glanced up at me and smiled. "I thought you might like a little reward afterwards."

I bristled because I wasn't sure if he was mocking me, and Seth's expression grew serious. "Have you ever done any kind of BDSM before?"

I shook my head.

"Afterwards, even if it's something small, it's important that you're taken care of—you need affection and reassurance," he said, his tone soft, and surprisingly gentle. "It's simple brain chemistry. The emotional and physical high that the sex takes you on will leave you and you'll crash, hard, if you aren't taken care of afterwards."

Clearly, there was a lot I was going to learn in this relationship. I found myself actually excited, wondering about what I'd experience.

Didn't hurt that the chocolate lava cake was also delicious. I dug in, enjoying every luscious bite. Seth had a couple tastes himself, but mostly he

just watched me. Had he always looked at me with such heat and hunger in his gaze? Or had he held it back and it was only now that he was letting me see it? Either way, I liked it, more than was probably wise.

We finished the dessert, and Seth smiled warmly at me, the same friendly look that I had come to expect from him. That helped me to relax. This was still the person that I liked, the person I'd flirted with, the person I had hoped to go out on a date with when this mess was all over.

I felt like I could trust him. I just hoped that wasn't a mistake.

Seth offered me his arm when we got up from the table, and I shivered as I accepted it, feeling the heat of his body against my side. I wasn't going home, he'd made that much clear. I was going to his place, and I was going to be under his control. I was accepting my 'punishment' in the hopes that it would ultimately save me, and I didn't know what it said about me that it didn't feel like a punishment at all.

We got into his car—I noticed Seth generously tipped the valet—and we set out. I tried not to be nervous or intimidated, but honestly... those feelings just had me more turned on. It was like the lack of knowledge about what would happen, and the anxiety, was ratcheting up my arousal.

I shifted in my seat, and I saw Seth's gaze flicker over to me. I could be imagining it, but he seemed pleased. I found myself hoping I was right.

We pulled into the parking spot for a brownstone, and my eyebrows rose as I got out. "I didn't expect you to live in a brownstone."

"What did you expect?"

I shrugged. "Something a bit more modern."

Seth smiled. "You're probably not the first person to think that. When I bought this, I wanted to buy something that I would own for the rest of my life—a place I could eventually raise children in."

"You want kids?" I asked, unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

Seth nodded, leading me up the steps and unlocking the door. "I, uh."

To my shock, I realized from his hunched shoulders and his pink ears that

I was seeing Seth nervous. Perhaps even embarrassed. For the first time ever.

“I’m a bit of a romantic at heart,” he confessed. He opened the door and led me inside. “Which I know sounds crazy given what I like in sex. But here we are. Drives me a little nuts that my friends got a girl before I did. One is completely anti-social and the second is a player who slept around. Feels a bit unfair they found the love of their lives before I did.”

“That’s how it is sometimes,” I commiserated. “I never thought that I would still be single and with barely any friends at this point in my life. I thought, and hoped, I’d be married and with a couple of kids by now.”

Seth flicked on the lights, illuminating a warm hallway that led into a living room, a dining room, and further in. To my surprise, the rooms looked a little bare.

“You didn’t feel like decorating?” I teased.

“I always figured that I would want my future wife to help me decorate,” Seth admitted. “When I bought this place I didn’t think it would take me so long to find someone. I didn’t want her to walk in and feel like everything was already done for her and she’d have to conform to my personal taste and all of my stuff. I wanted this to be a place for both of us combined.”

That made my heart ache. I hadn’t met anyone who’d been so thoughtful and ready for a spouse. The men I’d met hadn’t thought that far into the future—or into the future at all. There’d just been a focus on sex, and the present moment, and the idea that the woman would conform to the man’s life and fit herself in there somewhere instead of two people building a new life together.

“I really hope that you find her soon,” I told him softly. “You deserve that.”

“You deserve to find someone too,” Seth replied.

I laughed softly. “Ah, yes, the thief who’s stolen probably upwards of a million dollars, she’s definitely going to find someone serious to settle down with.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” he said, and gave me a wink as he moved my way. “I think a lot of guys would find it sexy.”

“Until they realize how dangerous it is,” I replied, feeling my heart rate increase as he closed the distance between us.

“Maybe you’ll find someone who’s good with danger.”

We were standing very close now, and I could *almost* imagine that this was the end of a proper date, and that Seth was interested in me as his potential partner, that he might be serious about me . . .

Something flickered in Seth’s eyes and he stepped back quickly, leaving me feeling cold. “Well. I’ve left you waiting long enough.”

He gestured at the front door. “You know the rule. Once I lock this, you’re in.”

“You said that already,” I reminded him.

“I want to keep giving you an out.”

“Why, your conscience?”

“Something like that.” He shrugged as he took off his suit jacket and tossed over the back of a club chair. “Are you going to hold to your end of the bargain, then?”

“Yes,” I replied, this time without any hesitation at all.

He nodded succinctly. “Alright . . . If you can get through the night without an orgasm, then you can go free, and you can vanish into thin air if that’s what you want,” he reiterated. “But if you come, then you’re mine for as long as it takes for me to sort out this mess with Harcourt and any underhanded dealings he might or might not be involved in. I don’t like crime going unpunished, but I think in this case a more unconventional punishment will be fair. Agreed?”

I nodded and bit my lower lip. “Agreed.”

Seth walked over and locked the door. It sounded as loud as a gunshot.

He turned to face me, and the friendly man I’d known had fallen away. In his place was a commanding, *dangerous* man, the kind who could do

whatever he wanted to me and get away with it.

I felt like I wanted to sprint, to run away—and also like I wanted him to catch me. Like a hunter stalking his prey. I didn't know where the urge to bolt and hide came from, and I didn't want to confuse him or make him think I'd changed my mind, so I didn't follow the instinct, but it shocked me that it was even there in the first place.

I sure was learning a lot about myself tonight.

Seth walked over to me, looming over me in a way that I'd never noticed from him before. His warm fingers trailed down my cheek, and then further, down my throat, to the swell of my breasts in my dress. I trembled, not in fear, but anticipation.

“Take off your clothes, Ariana,” he ordered softly. “All of them.”

I did as I was told while Seth watched, kicking off my shoes and quickly and efficiently stripping off each layer until I was completely naked. No slow, tantalizing striptease necessary since this wasn't your average seduction.

“Look at you,” he murmured huskily as his lust filled gaze raked over me. “Standing right in front of me, so easy to capture. I would've expected a bit more fight in you, Ariana. Or are you really that desperate for a man to take you in hand and show you what real pleasure is?”

I bristled, but before I could even think of what to say in response, he was picking me up and hefting me over his shoulder. “Put me down!”

Instinct took over and I kicked at him, hitting at his back with my fists, but Seth just laughed. He smacked me on the ass, his hand lingering on my bare skin, and I shivered with heat.

“None of that now,” he said, effortlessly restraining my legs with one of his strong arms around them. “It's too late to fight at this point.”

He carried me up the stairs like I weighed nothing, the lights staying off so that I couldn't quite tell where we were or where we were going. I squirmed and twisted, but I couldn't get away from his strength or his firm

grip. My struggles didn't even seem to register to him.

Seth opened a door and led me into a pitch-black room, where I was tossed onto what had to be a bed. I scrambled up, but before I could do anything more, something wrapped around my wrists, binding them together. I blinked furiously, trying to adjust to the lack of light—but then something else wrapped around my eyes and was tied tight.

I was bound and blindfolded. How had he done that so fast and quicky?

My pussy felt like it was vibrating with desire and I was shocked to realize that this scenario was ratcheting my pleasure up tenfold. It was like all the things that erotic novels and porn had promised me but that no man had actually been able to deliver with any sort of skill.

I was in for it with Seth. And I found myself *excited*.

Seth picked me up and took me away from the bed, slinging me over his shoulder once again. I could hear his feet on hardwood, and I felt that we were going into another room. A room he hadn't wanted to even chance me seeing while I had my eyesight. What was waiting for me here?

A light flicked on, but I couldn't see anything through this thick black blindfold. I was still in darkness. He put me on my feet for a moment before I was picked up again, and then I was set down on what felt like... a saddle, my legs spreading wide against either side.

My arms were raised over my head and the tie was used to hook them onto something so that now they were trapped up above me. "Wh-what are you doing?" I whispered. I felt terrified by the unknown and wildly turned on all at once.

"You'll see," Seth murmured. "I know you can handle what I have in mind, but just in case it gets too intense and you need to tap out, just say your safe word, which is red."

I heard him doing something nearby before he grabbed my hips and lifted me, and then—something hard and smooth and *big* nudged against my entrance. I froze, my breath leaving me in a rush. It felt like a cock, but it was

made out of silicone or something equally firm. It was slick against my pussy, like he'd lubed it up.

"No," I blurted out in a panic as he guided me down onto it. I tried to twist away, all to no avail as the dildo kept penetrating me, stretching me open, almost uncomfortably, around the sizable shaft. "N-no, it's too thick..."

"I know," Seth murmured, his lips at my ear. "It's modeled after my cock. I have to train you to take it."

Oh God.

The head of it was inside me, and then a little more, gravity doing the work to force it deeper inside of me. It helped that I was still wet from my orgasm earlier and the building anticipation.

"You're going to sink down onto that dildo," Seth told me, his grip on my waist making sure of it. "Inch by inch. Until you reach the bottom. Once that happens and the saddle feels your weight, it'll trigger the vibrator—and the thruster."

Oh God. "No, no, please..." There was no way I could keep from orgasming if I had a thick cock fucking me and vibrations shooting through me.

"You can prevent this," Seth noted calmly as he slid my feet into stirrups. "Just stay braced up so that you don't slide all the way down on the dildo. If you can last the night without an orgasm... you win your freedom."

I thrashed and tried to push up on the stirrups, but I could barely lift myself. My arms stretched above me were already feeling tired. How long could I last before I gave in and my body welcomed that dildo into me, inch by inch, until I reached my doom and was fucked into a babbling, incoherent mess?

I was definitely going to find out.

I heard sounds of Seth moving about the room, but I had no idea what he was doing or where he ended up. Was he just sitting there, watching me?

Was he touching himself? I couldn't tell, and the fact that I had no idea also excited me. I wanted to know so *badly*...

With the blindfold taking away my eyesight, my imagination ran wild, imagining how Seth would look as he slowly stripped down, revealing inch after inch of bare skin and rippling muscle, picturing how thick and large his cock was and how it would look as he stroked it in his hand.

My mouth watered. I could feel myself getting slicker, which only made it easier for the dildo to slide further inside of me. My legs and arms trembled with the effort of trying to keep myself pushed up and away.

Would it really be so bad if you let yourself sink down?

Yes, it would, because that would mean I'd just up and quit, and I had never done that in my life. I knew that ultimately there was no way for me to last all night like this. But I was damned well going to make it for as long as I could. I wasn't stealing for my own gain, and I wasn't agreeing to this to save my own skin. I wouldn't betray my principles just because Seth was hot and I wanted him to fuck me.

But oh, God, did I want him to fuck me.

I tried to shift my arms and help them relax and stretch a little, but instead that made me sway and sink down farther onto the dildo. I cried out as I was swiftly filled another inch. Gravity was doing its thing. I could feel the unyielding shaft sinking further into me, bit by bit. I tried to push myself up farther, but my trembling legs couldn't manage it. I had no idea how long I was trapped on there, sliding down inch by slow inch.

The tease of it was pure torture, and I couldn't stop from panting. I also felt like just one touch against my clit would make me come, and I wanted and needed that relief so *badly*. It took all of my strength to keep silent instead of begging the way I wanted to. I would never give Seth the satisfaction. Or at least that was what I told myself. I knew in the back of my mind that it was only a matter of time until I gave in and pleaded with him to give me what I so desperately needed.

The act of resistance, though... that was just as hot as everything else that was happening to me.

A solid warmth at my back was the only warning I had before the tips of Seth's fingers lightly teased up and down my bare stomach. "You're almost there," he murmured, his tone dark with desire. "Only another inch."

His fingers slid down almost to my clit and then back up again, just barely grazing the underside of my breasts. My entire body shivered.

Please touch me. I can't take it anymore. I valiantly swallowed the words before they could escape.

"You've been doing so well," Seth praised me. "I'm impressed. But you're going to give in eventually."

My pride and my desire warred with one another as Seth continued to tease me with feather-light touches. I trembled uncontrollably. I didn't want to give in and ask to come, but God I was so close, I wanted it so badly—

Seth's finger skimmed down my abdomen once again, nearly touching my clit before he caressed his way back up. I let out an involuntary wail of frustration. My body writhed with aborted pleasure and desperation, and I sank down that last bit, my ass hitting the saddle, the dildo bottoming out inside of me. I was stuffed so full, and the fact that it was underneath me only made it so much bigger, pushing up into me relentlessly. I felt stretched wide and completely helpless.

I screamed, realizing too late what I'd done, but there was no stopping what I'd activated. I heard the whirring sounds of the mechanisms, and the dildo sprang to life inside of me, thrusting up into me at a rough, delicious pace—while vibrating.

I babbled as I was held in place and fucked relentlessly. Tears slipped free as I thrashed in my restraints, sobbing and moaning. It felt so incredibly good I could hardly stand it. My head fell back and I moaned helplessly, giving in and letting the machine fuck me like I was a toy. High-pitched whimpers escaped the back of my throat. I was going to come, I could feel it

heading towards me like a freight train, *oh God oh God oh God—*

I sobbed harder as I came, tears streaming down my face, my body seizing up, a white-out of pleasure washing over me. I'd never come so hard in my life before.

And the machine kept going.

Seth chuckled. "You really thought I was going to stop at just one? That I was going to let you off that easily? No, you're going to come as many times as I want, baby."

I gasped, writhing uncontrollably.

Seth's hands slid over my body, *finally* reaching up to grab and fondle my sensitive breasts and to rub at my clit. "How long has it been since you were satisfied with a partner, hmm? Had to rely just on toys and your own hand this whole time, huh baby? I'm going to make it up to you for all the times you were disappointed... and show you just how good I can make you feel when you submit to me."

His hands on my breasts felt so *good*. He massaged them expertly, pinching and rolling my nipples, not too rough but not tentative either. It took *skill* to be rough in a way that made a woman feel good.

And dear God, Seth had that skill.

He rubbed my clit in slow circles, a complete counterpoint to the rough and fast fucking the dildo was giving me. How was he still managing to tease me while I was literally being fucked harder than I'd ever been fucked in my life?

"I can't wait to fuck you myself," Seth murmured, running his nose up the side of my neck. "But I do love using this machine. It's perfect for discipline... and lets me play with you while you're getting fucked at the same time. I can take my time with this luscious body of yours."

I felt myself flush with pleasure at the praise. Usually when people praised me I felt patronized, condescended to, even. But with Seth it just made me fill warm all over and... relaxed, even. Like I didn't have to worry

about anything. I could enjoy the pleasure. I was *good* for enjoying this.

Seth trailed warm, damp kisses along my neck and I melted. The last of the resistance fled me, and I let the machine fuck me senseless as much as Seth wanted.

“That’s it.” Seth sounded elated. “That’s it, come for me, baby, come as many times as you want. I want to see you overwhelmed with pleasure.”

Seth pressed against me and I cried out, realizing that he was shirtless. I couldn’t feel the rest of his body because of the machine in the way, but his bare skin against my back had my senses jolting into overdrive. I didn’t know what it was about skin-on-skin contact, but it drove me wild.

My head fell back onto Seth’s shoulder and I moaned helplessly as I came a second time, writhing on the dildo. It was making filthy noises now from how wet I’d gotten it, making it all even hotter somehow.

Seth’s mouth moved all over me, kissing my shoulder, my neck, his teeth lightly tugging at my ear. I felt like I was sinking into pure pleasure, a euphoric high I’d never known before. I moaned incoherently, past the ability to say *yes* and *so good*.

I could only *feel*.

“Maybe I’ll gag you next time,” Seth murmured, his voice tinged with amusement. “But right now... I wanted to be able to do this...”

He wrapped a big hand around my neck and tilted my face up, his mouth sealing over mine. I parted my lips instantly, letting him dictate the kiss, letting him do whatever the hell he wanted to me. I didn’t care—no, I did care, I *wanted* him to keep doing things to my body. He was so amazingly good at it...

My legs and arms trembled uncontrollably and I couldn’t possibly hold myself up. I was completely at Seth’s mercy. He could leave me on here as long as he wanted, until my body completely gave out and I was begging for the machine to stop.

That sent another thrill through me.

Seth seemed to sense this, because he finally sped up on my clit. “One more time for me,” he murmured. “C’mon, one more orgasm for me, let me see how out of control you are. Come for me, come for me...”

I did. God help me, I couldn’t stop myself... his mouth, the fucking, his fingers on my clit... my body seized up in pleasure and I choked on my own breath, shaking uncontrollably as I reached the peak for the third time.

My bones felt like they’d melted away and like I was made of rubber. As my orgasm rocked through me, I could only let it sweep me away. I didn’t even feel quite in my body anymore, like I wasn’t wholly physical. I felt like I was made out of sensations.

As I panted, slumped back against Seth’s chest, the dildo slowed down, fucking me less and less until it came to a stop. I felt my arms lifted up and off the hook they’d been strung around, and then I was slowly lifted up and off the dildo and the saddle. Seth carried me in his arms, bridal style, with my eyes still blindfolded. I had no idea where we were going, but I didn’t care. All that mattered was the bliss I floated in and Seth holding me as I sagged against him.

I was taken into another room—the same one as before, perhaps?—and set down on a bed like I had been before the blindfold had been put on me. Once I was lying down, my hands were untied and the fabric was taken off my eyes.

There was one small lamp on in the room, sitting on a nightstand next to the bed, the only thing giving light. It kept the room illuminated without being too jarring or harsh for me.

The room wasn’t anything like what I’d expected. I’d thought I would be in a bedroom. Instead, I was in the kind of playroom that only the rich could afford, the kind I hadn’t ever expected to be in myself. The walls were done up in gray with beautiful patterns in darker silver painted onto the centers, swirling lines that reminded me of the carvings in the ceilings of palaces. The ceiling had dark gray drapes across it, making it all seem smaller and softer,

and the floor had a rich, plush black carpet. I was on a bed, and the fucking machine with the saddle that I'd just been on was across the room. There was another fucking machine of some kind at the foot of this bed, a rack and a set of shelves covered in various toys... yes, this was a playroom all right.

This probably should've scared me. Or perhaps exhilarated me. Honestly, I was too swept up in my body's sensations to really take it all in. My body still spasmed with aftershocks, luscious waves of pleasure sweeping through me. Seth cupped my cheek, his thumb gently stroking back and forth against my skin.

That simple touch had my whole body relaxing into the mattress, like I was a puppet with my strings cut. I closed my eyes again and basked in it.

"There we go," he said in a soft tone. "Just relax."

I stretched out, relishing in my naked body against the silken covers. I opened my eyes and saw Seth watching me, his gaze dark and hungry. He was bare-chested, and my mouth watered to see all of that muscle laid out in front of me. I wanted to touch it. I wanted to lick it, to suck on his nipples, to bite down on his arms.

Then my gaze dropped lower, and I saw the enormous outline of his erection in his pants. *Fuck.*

I'd just had a dildo based on his cock inside of me. I knew how big he was. But seeing the bulge in his pants, seeing the real thing... it was different. I felt heat slide through me, down between my legs. I'd just orgasmed multiple times, and yet I found myself wanting him to fuck me. For it to not be a machine—no matter how amazing that machine was—but Seth himself.

Seth smirked, apparently reading my expression. "Normally, I'd ask if you're up for it, but... you orgasmed. Quite a few times, actually. That means you belong to me. Bargain's made. So it doesn't really matter if you're tired or not, does it? If I want to fuck you, that's what I'm going to do."

His tender care with me a few moments ago gave away what a lie that threat was. If he really didn't care, he would have just started fucking me the

moment he put me onto the bed, or maybe not even waited for the bed and just pulled me off the machine to fuck me while I was still strung up on the hook.

But he'd waited. He'd check in with me to make sure that I was alert, and that I wanted this. That I wasn't going to use the safe word to tap out.

The *idea* of the threat, though—the fantasy of it, that he would fuck me good and hard as his prisoner whether I wanted it or not—it had me biting my lip and shivering with desire. My body had been through a lot, but dear God, I wanted the warmth and weight of him on top of me fucking me—

Seth undid his pants, slowly pushing them and his boxer briefs down, revealing the rest of his body. His cock sprang free, flushed and thick, curving up towards his stomach, and I nearly crawled forward to put him in my mouth and suck him down.

Seth stroked his cock slowly, almost showing it off for me, his gaze contemplative as he looked me up and down like he was deciding what to do with me next. I had yet to be with a man who knew how to take his time and pause, who wasn't rushing for some reason or another. It sent another shiver through me.

“Tonight, you get to choose,” he murmured graciously. “On your back, or on your knees? How do you want to be fucked?”

Oh my God. This was already the sexiest night of my life.

And now it was going to get even better.

CHAPTER 11



Seth

I had left a lot of my place mostly undecorated for the reasons that I'd confided to Ariana. I didn't want my future wife to come into a house that was already full of me and my décor, my furniture, my choices, and feel like there wasn't room for any of *her*. I figured we could then decorate the place together. If I ever found someone, that is.

I'd been torn between hope and despair when it came to my friends finding the women they loved. On the one hand the fact that my three friends could find someone meant that there was a good chance I could find someone too, but on the other hand, the fact that I had yet to find someone while they all had... it had stung.

However, there was one thing that I had taken care to actually fully install, one room that I'd completely decorated myself, and that was the sex room.

It was adjacent to the office on the second floor. I'd covered up the door to the hallway with a full-length mirror installed, and then in the office I had a bookcase that led to it. I had toyed with the idea of bricking up the door to

the hallway in some way, but I'd decided that I would rather keep that second entrance available in case of a fire or another emergency. Instead, the two covered entrances meant that unless you knew how to get in and where the doors were, you couldn't accidentally trigger them.

The room itself had my fucking machine set up on the saddle with the hook in the ceiling that I'd used on Ariana tonight, but that wasn't the only thing. I had done it all up in shades of gray—it felt classy to me—and had various other toys including a second fucking machine that was set up at the foot of a bed. This way, all of the big things could stay in one place instead of getting hauled out of a closet when I wanted to use them, and my bedroom could stay clean and free of sex toy clutter.

It had been ages since I'd used my sex room, though. Ages since I'd brought someone home. And I definitely hadn't had the woman stay the night. I'd scheduled us early enough in the evening that I could give her aftercare and then she could still be home to her place without it getting too late.

Call me cliché, call me old-fashioned, but I just didn't want wires to get crossed, which was what inevitably happened if you let someone stay the night.

I worried that maybe I was going too hard, too fast with Ariana, setting her up on the machine right out of the gate, but holy *fuck*.

Watching her come apart numerous times was the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

And now, the hungry look on her face as I took off my pants and stood naked in front of her was delicious. She stared at my cock like she wanted me to fuck it down her throat, and I was seriously tempted to take her up on that.

But not tonight. I wanted to fuck her properly this time.

I stroked my cock, giving myself a bit of relief. It was really only a tease at this point, giving myself just a hand instead of the hot wet pussy that I knew was waiting for me. But I also wanted to remind Ariana of what she

was about to get. She'd just had a version of my cock, but now she'd get the real thing.

“You get to choose,” I murmured, feeling gracious. “On your back, or on your knees? How do you want to be fucked?”

I was happy with either outcome. I knew I could drive her to one final amazing orgasm either way.

Ariana watched as I reached into the bedside drawer, retrieved a condom, and rolled it on. “I want to be on my back,” she whispered. “I want to see you.”

I grinned. I had zero problem with that. “Then come here.”

Before she could move, I grabbed her ankles and yanked her towards me, spreading her legs and keeping her ass right on the edge of the bed. I was going to fuck her while I was standing up so that I could get some real power behind my thrusts.

I slid my hands under her ass and lifted it up so she could wrap her legs around my waist. The head of my dick glided along her pussy and then—oh *fuck*—I was sliding into her, her slick, warm body taking me in, and it was so fucking good I felt like I was going cross-eyed.

Ariana whimpered.

“Feels better than the machine, doesn't it?” I purred.

She nodded jerkily, and I sank my cock into her, balls deep. I took a moment to just breathe while Ariana adjusted to my size. She felt so fucking good—hot and wet around me, fluttering and clenching, miniscule reactions that no toy could ever possibly hope to replicate.

Since I was standing at the edge of the bed, it was easy for me to bend down and lavish attention on her breasts the way I wanted to from the second I saw them in the tight top of her dress. Getting my hands on them was fun, but getting to lick and suck on them was a revelation.

Ariana moaned as I flicked a hard nipple with my tongue, arching her hips and pressing her breasts up into my mouth. I bit down slightly, testing to

see how she reacted to just a little bit of pain.

Ariana panted, her hands flying up so that her fingers slid into my hair and tugged. “Yes,” she moaned. “Yes, yes, yes...”

She clamped down around my shaft, milking my cock. I tugged at her nipples with my teeth and her moan increased in pitch. Fuck, yes, she liked it. She liked that a *lot*.

I pulled back and lightly spanked her ass, the angle of her hips perfect to keep her ass lifted off the mattress so I could smack her as I thrust in. Ariana cried out, shoving herself down onto my cock.

“You like that?” I growled. “I gave you all this pleasure, you want a little taste of pain? Some punishment?”

“Ye—es,” Ariana gasped, her voice cracking halfway through the word. “Oh my God, oh my God Seth, *Seth...*”

Usually I had my submissives call me ‘sir’ or ‘master’, but it had been so long since I’d had a woman moan my actual name during sex, I hadn’t realized how good it would sound and how much I would like it.

I groaned as I slammed into her. “Say my name again.”

“Seth...” Ariana sounded like it was the only word she could think of to say anymore. “Seth, Seth, *Seth...*”

I loved hearing her moan my name while I fucked her. I was the one doing this to her. Not a machine—not even a machine controlled by me—and not anyone else. I had her. *She was mine*.

I wrapped my hands around her hips to keep them in place and fucked her rough and hard, my hips slapping against the curve of her ass and filling the room with the hot, slick, filthy sound of our fucking. I didn’t want to stop, but I didn’t want to give her any mercy, either. She was going to know what it was like to be completely dominated by me. To be broken by me and be filled with nothing but mindless pleasure.

Ariana whimpered and clawed at the bed sheets, thrashing, out of control. I could feel her clenching beautifully around me, so tight... so hot... so

wet...

I bent over, ramming into her like a mindless animal, all thought leaving me except to fuck her and make her mine. I wanted to mark her so that she knew who she belonged to, so that even when this was finished and everything was taken care of with Harcourt, she still didn't want to leave me—that she'd still want to do this together—

Ariana cried out and came around my cock, clenching down so tight that I could no longer hold back. My dick pulsed and throbbed as the intensity of my orgasm swept through me.

Jesus. I sank down onto my elbows on the mattress, getting my breath back. Ariana was panting as well, her eyes glassy, her body slick with sweat. I'd put her through the wringer tonight, but when I reached up to push her hair out of her face, all I got from her was a breathy smile.

Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned in and kissed her, our tongues sliding together and my hand cradling her face. Ariana was pliant and limp, letting me take full control of the kiss. It was delicious. I could feel her losing energy, her body finally pushed to the point where she was going to pass out into sleep any minute now.

I pulled away, scattering kisses along her face and down her throat. I always liked this part—the slow kissing and physical touch for the sake of it that came after mind blowing sex. I liked to reassure my submissive that way, and to feel intimately how good of a job I had done in taking care of them.

How well I'd done in taking care of Ariana.

I kissed her until she was only barely awake, hardly responding to me. Only then did I pull away and go and clean myself up. When I returned a few minutes later, Ariana was as pliant as a rag doll as I took care of her and got her into bed. I was pretty sure she was completely asleep by the time her head hit the pillow. I stared at her as I paused in the doorway, watching her sleep. It was tempting to stay, or hell to even take her to my bedroom and have her sleep with me there...

No. My arrangement with Ariana was only temporary, and the last thing I wanted was either one of us getting attached and thinking that this agreement was something more than just sex. Things between Ariana and me were complicated. I was probably going to have to send her on the run with a new identity before this was all over. I couldn't let myself get hopeful and fanciful just because I was a damn romantic who was annoyed I was the only one of my friends left single.

Honestly, I was certain the only thing Ariana wanted from me was her freedom, and possibly some great sex. And really, what should I want from her if not good sex in return? I was putting her up on a pedestal just because I connected with her and because she seemed to be one of the few genuinely selfless people I'd met in years.

I had to keep my head on straight. Stick to our bargain, and figure out how the hell to deal with Harcourt and the theft without implicating Ariana.

With that in mind, I left her asleep in the room alone and went to my own bed.

CHAPTER 12



Ariana

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I definitely remember getting fucked so hard and well that I was pretty sure I saw Heaven during that final orgasm.

The machine had been amazing, but nothing compared to Seth. For one thing, Seth's cock was warm and felt fantastic. There was really no comparison between a toy and the real thing. To have his body over me, to have his hands on me, his hot pulsing cock inside of me... there was really nothing like it. I had truly felt dominated, even more than I had when I'd been tied up and on the dildo.

For another, Seth fucked like nobody else I'd ever had sex with. He fucked the way that I'd always hoped every other man would fuck me, and they never did. They were either too rough and hurt me or they just couldn't keep up the strong pace.

But Seth... I'd been out of my mind with pleasure. The angle of his cock had dragged against me in all the right ways. I had clawed at the sheets and arched my back, shoving myself down onto his cock, completely without

finesse but desperate to keep up and to have more of him inside of me. He could've fucked me for five minutes or an hour, I had no idea, but either way I was in ecstasy the entire time. I hadn't wanted it to end.

Afterwards, I felt like I was floating. Like I wasn't quite in my body anymore—and yet at the same time, my body felt so deliciously sated and heavy. It was the most pleasant feeling I'd ever experienced. My bones could've been completely melted, but I didn't care. I just wanted to sleep. Hell, I wasn't even deciding I needed to sleep—I was just falling asleep naturally.

I was out before my head even hit the pillow, but the last thought I had was just a feeling of being cared for, in a way I hadn't been since before my parents died.

I hadn't even realized how much I missed it.

When I opened my eyes again, I realized that I was in this strange room still. There were no windows, and everything was done up in shades of gray that made it seem elegant, like a fine dining room or an office instead of a sex room. There was the nightstand lamp still on, allowing me to see, but I had no idea what time it was—just that I felt incredibly rested.

I slowly sat up. I was hungry, and I ached in that pleasant post-sex way for the first time in years.

Oh no. Work!

The thought hit me and I scrambled out of bed and searched for my things. I yanked my dress on—my only clothes, I would have to ask Seth to get me more from my apartment—and hurried to find my purse where I'd left it at the entrance.

The door that I chose exited out into a hallway, but when I looked back at it, I saw it had a mirror on the other side. Genius. Probably to keep random guests or the housekeeper from finding the sex room. I knew I wouldn't want just anyone wandering in there thinking they'd found the bathroom.

In the light of day, I could see the upstairs area and found it was about as

bare as the downstairs. I walked down the hall and passed by what seemed to be the master bedroom. I peered inside and found it empty—not just of Seth, but of pretty much anything else too. On the wall I saw several paint swatches showing different shades, and I wondered if he was leaving them up there so that his future wife could help him choose one.

It was incredibly sweet and thoughtful, but also incredibly lonely. My heart ached. So few men in my experience were ready for marriage and to settle down. They felt pressured to find ‘the one’ when they were still focused on other things, and they had women throwing themselves at them. Yet here was Seth, ready to take that next step in his life, and he didn’t have anyone.

Was it that he was picky? It couldn’t be that women didn’t want him. He was insanely hot, sweet, successful, and charming. Who wouldn’t want him?

I headed downstairs, where I finally saw a clock on the wall that told me it was eight in the morning. Not terribly late, but definitely later than I usually slept. I must’ve really needed the rest after Seth wore me out last night. In fact, coming down the stairs I could feel the ache in my thighs, but it wasn’t an unwelcome one.

My purse was where I’d left it, untouched. I retrieved my phone—yikes, I would need to charge it—only to find that there were already texts waiting for me from Tony.

God, I was in so much trouble, wasn’t I?

I opened the messages.

Hey, Seth told me you’d let him know you would be skipping work today and giving him your security info. He said you had a stomach bug? I hope you feel better soon!

Hey, me again—had a long talk with Seth. There’s some kind of issue going on and he’s going to be using your account to do double-blind testing. He said in the meantime it would be best if you left your account alone so there’s no crossed wires on who does what. Since you’re already not feeling

well why don't you take some time off for a few days while Seth works through this? You've been on call since you were hired and I'm gonna miss you but you deserve a rest, ha ha.

Well, looked like my work situation was taken care of, thanks to Seth. I texted Tony back and said I appreciated it, and I was pretty sure it was some fish I'd eaten and I would be fine by tomorrow or the next day, but I was happy to enjoy my time off and I wished Seth luck in the whole endeavor as long as he didn't fuck with my coding.

Tony texted back a string of laughing emojis at my joking threat.

So, it appeared that I had the whole house to myself, then. I was surprised. I thought I'd be stuck in that one room all day, to keep me from running away. Then I looked at the front door and saw that there was a panel on the inside wall next to it. It was a security system, and on the screen it said: ARMED.

Ahh. If I tried to leave, that security alarm would blare loud enough to wake the neighborhood. I had no doubt an alert would be sent to Seth and to the police, who'd converge on the spot. I could roam the house, but unless I found a way to disable the security system without Seth realizing, I was stuck in here.

Clever. It's almost like he works in security or something, I thought to myself sarcastically.

Well, I wasn't going to try and escape on an empty stomach anyway. I went into the kitchen through the bare dining room, which had nothing but a beautiful, large dining table made of some kind of gleaming dark wood. I had a feeling it was an antique, but either way it must've been damn expensive.

The kitchen itself was huge, with brand-new appliances that were styled in a vintage feel. Seth seemed to have an old-fashioned streak when it came to decorating and favored darker colors. I liked that. It gave the home a very lived-in feel, if you asked me. Cozy, not overly bright and cheery.

The oven was on, and a sticky note was attached to the fridge with my

name on it. I picked it up.

Ariana – I have to go into the office. I'll cover for you. You have the house while I sort this out, but I wouldn't recommend trying to leave. Breakfast is in the oven.

Yeah, that's what I'd thought. I wasn't going to get out of this house unless Seth let me.

In the meantime, though, I had the entire day to myself, and he'd made me breakfast. That wasn't so bad. It was a hell of a lot better than being turned into the police. Prison or being fucked six ways to Sunday by a handsome man while I hung out in his house the rest of the time? It was no contest.

I set the note down and opened the oven, the smell of delicious food wafting towards me. Inside was a warm cast-iron pan—when I brought it out I saw that inside was shakshuka, kept warm by the oven, which looked amazing. I set the pan on the stove, grabbed a plate from the cupboard, and served myself. It tasted just as good as it smelled and looked. Seth was a hell of a cook.

Once I finished eating and cleaned up, I gave into temptation and explored the rest of the house. I wanted to know more about this man. Seth intrigued me. On the one hand he wanted to settle down and have a family. He'd bought this beautiful house and was charming and outgoing. But on the other hand, he liked to dominate in the bedroom, to push me past my limits and to have total control.

Whenever I remembered being strung up and slowly forced onto the dildo, I shivered. It had been unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. When I'd thought about the possibility of indulging in kinkier sex, I had pictured things like being tied up and spanked. I'd pictured it hot and heavy and full of action, but when it actually happened with Seth... the slow, deliberate, inexorable quality was even more intense than anything I could've come up with in my half-baked fantasies.

It also gave me a sense of satisfaction I'd never felt before. I hadn't realized—just how much I needed someone else to take the reins and be in charge for a while, and make the decisions for me. I had spent so long on my own. I'd had to be in charge of Dad's chemotherapy and Mom's healthcare after the accident...

God, Mom. She'd felt so guilty. She'd been driving recklessly while crying about Dad—it was only a few months after the funeral—and she'd been struggling badly with depression. I knew she felt horrible for putting me in a situation to care for and lose another parent. I'd tried to stay cheerful for her.

I missed her so much. If I could change anything, it would be that I ask her not to drive and wait for me to take her to the store instead.

But I'd been in charge of her, and Dad, and then I had started my crusade. And so here we were.

I shook myself clear of such dark thoughts. I was in a pickle, and I had to focus on how to get out of it. I shouldn't be reminiscing about my pain. Seth was covering for me for now—in exchange for sex and staying out of his way—but how was this going to end, really?

After cleaning up the kitchen, I roamed around the house, finding a computer in what looked like it would someday be a library. There were books haphazardly piled everywhere, and a few sets of bookshelves, with one big comfy armchair, but the rest of it wasn't assembled. I itched to start decorating this place myself. I could already picture in my mind's eye the potential colors for the walls, and putting a nice big thick rug in the middle of the room, and adding a couple more chairs for reading . . .

I shook those crazy thoughts from my head and started toward the computer that was sitting on a desk in the corner that had a double monitor set up. Ah, this was a gamer's system, of course. It didn't fit in the library but right now it worked just fine. Didn't surprise me that Seth was a gamer. This looked like a severely modified PC setup he had, complete with some custom

keyboards. Nice.

Honestly, I salivated a little sitting down at this elaborate and expensive setup. This was the kind of gamer or computer geek wet dream that I only hoped to someday be able to afford.

I booted the computer up and frowned when I was greeted with a login screen. Right. I grabbed my phone and pulled up a sophisticated app I had installed, then put the phone next to the computer and ran my encryption program.

Within ten minutes, the app decoded the password and logged me in, and I was able to access everything. Excellent.

I couldn't log into the company without Seth noticing, so to start with I just straight-up hacked into the system. Unless Seth was looking for suspicious activity and caught me in the moment, he wouldn't see anything—there would be no trace of me. And I wasn't planning on changing anything. I just needed to get into Harcourt's files and take a look.

Because one question was seriously bugging me: how had he noticed the thefts? It had taken Seth some detective work to figure out how I was changing the numbers, and he'd had to discuss it with individual department heads to realize those numbers were fake. Had Harcourt done all of that detective work himself? Was he better with coding than he let on?

In all my years stealing from these billionaires, I found there were two kinds: the tech bros who actually knew what they were doing with the computer technology, and the men who were just good at sales and could sell the idea to investors but hired others to do the actual work of making the app, company, coding, or whatever they were selling run smoothly.

Harcourt hadn't struck me as the latter. His whole company was built on the idea that you would use them as angel investors to get assistance in your own startup. There wasn't a ton of new or crazy technology involved. Harcourt's company rather served as a consultant and advisor to the new company or entrepreneur, and then to established investors and companies,

they were a way to see that new company was legitimate. They gave you clout and verification.

Now, Harcourt wanted to take the company public, that much I'd found. That would require him to take a closer look at how things were run so that he could report good numbers to the examiners of Wall Street. But if he had done the amount of work to identify the thief, then surely he wouldn't need to call Seth in and let Seth do all this homework for himself? Surely he could have just told Seth what he'd found and let Seth then do the final stretch of tracking down who had made these changes?

I scoured Damien's documents. According to the financial records, we were spending more than we expected but we weren't quite in the red. That was what I'd planned. I tried to steal directly from the accounts and salaries of the C-level executives who were grossly overpaid and wouldn't notice, but wouldn't take the company itself into a downward spiral.

Wait . . . I lifted the funds from the executives directly. Hmm.

I went back into their cryptocurrency accounts. Personally, I was not a fan of crypto. It was basically a Ponzi scheme, and thousands of people had been stolen from by people like Harcourt who promised this was the currency of the future when the fact was you needed a ton of money to buy the computer power to do the calculations ('mining') to equal a new piece of bitcoin.

There were classic pump and dump schemes everywhere in the cryptocurrency world and nothing was regulated. The market regularly crashed. And the assured 'privacy' wasn't really true. Any transaction was ripe for theft because once made, it couldn't be undone, but what was more—since transactions couldn't be undone, you could follow them all the way back to the original person and learn that person's identity even if they tried to use a pseudonym.

I hacked into Harcourt's cryptocurrency wallet and checked the history. I recognized my microtransactions, but there were other transactions as well. I

set about tracking them down.

This was going to take a while.

In the meantime, while I ran some programs to follow the threads, I could work on the other part of my plan.

Seth had a well-stocked kitchen, and he'd kindly made me breakfast. Why not make him dinner for when he arrived home from work?

I left the computer programs running, and with ingredients I found in his kitchen and refrigerator, I set about making a beef and bacon stew with mashed potatoes. That took me a few hours, and I left it to simmer while I checked on the computer again—only to hear the front door open.

Shit. I quickly put Seth's computer into screensaver mode so that the screen was dark and it looked like it was off, then hurried back to the kitchen just as he entered.

"I smell something delicious," he said with a smile. "Did you cook?"

I lifted the lid on the pot of stew and gave it a stir. "Well, you made me breakfast."

He came over to the stove and stood next to me. "You really didn't have to."

"No, seriously," I said with a shrug. "I know you're doing me a favor, not turning me in right away, so it's the least I could do."

Seth didn't look convinced that he was really doing me a 'favor' but he didn't ask about what I'd been up to today, and he didn't head into the library to look at the computer.

Phew. That had been a close one. I'd just have to wait until the first opportunity to go and look at what my results were when Seth was occupied.

And hope he didn't discover what I'd been up to.

CHAPTER 13



Seth

I didn't expect Ariana to make me dinner. Frankly, after last night and keeping her in my house all day today, I expected her to resent me a little bit. But when I walked in she was smiling and cheerful, and I found my heart flipping in my chest.

This was so close to what I had wanted for so long, to come home to someone, to no longer be alone. But it was all temporary. Ariana needed me to protect her and not turn her in, and she wanted to be on my good side. This dinner was probably a form of bribery. I couldn't let my dick or my heart get in the way of my head.

We sat down to eat, and Ariana thanked me for giving Tony a good reason why she wouldn't be at work.

"Well, you'll pay for it," I pointed out with a smirk after swallowing a bit of the delicious stew. "Every day that you're hidden here, you know what you have to give me in exchange or I turn you in."

"But you could've just turned me in instantly," Ariana replied, almost flirtatiously. "Most people would have. They wouldn't have seen any value in

what I was doing.”

Yet, I had. I couldn't deny that despite her illegal way of obtaining the money, I was sympathetic to her crusade to help others who were less fortunate. “How did you get into doing it?” I asked.

Ariana shrugged and absently swirled her spoon in her stew. “It just felt like the right thing to do. I wanted to spare others the pain I'd felt.”

“But all your medical debt is paid off.”

“You think that happened legally?” Ariana laughed bitterly. “My father had just died when my mom got into the car crash. We hadn't paid off most of his medical bills and suddenly we were saddled with more. I tried to pay the bills down but there was only so much that I could do.”

A deeply pained expression came over her face. “It's my one regret—letting her drive. I didn't realize how bad she was after Dad's death. She would have days when she was fine, and times when she really, really wasn't. I should've offered to drive her to the store myself if she was willing to wait.”

I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it. It was all the reassurance I could offer, meager as it was. “You know it's not really your fault.”

Ariana nodded. “I know. Logically. It's just . . . I miss her and feel so alone sometimes.”

I squeezed her hand again, and she squeezed back. I thought about my parents—I didn't get to see them as much as I'd like but I made a point to fly out during the holidays to spend time with them. They'd love Ariana, or at least that was what I thought. She clearly needed a family, and to not be so alone.

Ariana withdrew her hand, but her eyes held mine. “After my parents died... I had lost all my friends taking care of them. Not that anyone just dropped me, but it was hard. I couldn't have a social life. And we were in such debt. So I did what I had to do to get myself out of it. I know it was selfish but I was so angry and depressed. I had just lost my parents. I didn't

want to be drowning in debt for the rest of my life from trying to take care of them.”

She exhaled a deep breath before continuing. “My father had already taught me about the importance of technology and how technology itself isn’t bad or good, but the way people use it can be either of those things. The way that these tech oligarchs control it all and use it to scrape data on us and sell us things... it’s a horrible privacy breach, but they don’t care, because it makes them rich. So I decided that it was only fair that these people give back some of their wealth. I stole from the company I worked for to pay off my debts, and from there...”

“You stole to pay off the debts of other people,” I completed.

Ariana nodded, and her chin lifted determinedly. “I never wanted anyone to go through the pain that I had. People die every day because they can’t afford the medical care they need. People have to ration out their insulin and they die when they run out and can’t buy more. Meanwhile, these men sit on money they will never, ever use and is illegally gained. There’s only so much you can spend your money on and the rest just literally sits there.” Her eyes blazed with passion and conviction. “I know it’s ethically wrong, but I took it to help people survive. I never took anything for myself once my debts were cleared. Never.”

I hated to admit it because it felt like I was betraying my client, the person who had hired me, and she was technically breaking the law, but... I agreed with her. I admired her, actually. She had done what so few people actually managed. People talked all day long about how things should change or be better, but few people actually did anything about it. Ariana had. She had helped hundreds of people. How many people could really claim they’d done the same?

And yes, she’d broken the law, but she had done it for a good cause, fighting against a system that benefited the few rich and ignored the thousands of struggling poor. Until the system changed, people were going to

keep dying and suffering, and she was doing what she could to balance the scales. Could I really blame her for that?

“I think that’s amazing,” I said honestly. “What you’re doing, how you’re helping people...”

Ariana gave me a sad smile. “But you can’t let it continue.”

I couldn’t deny that she had a point. I wasn’t law enforcement. I couldn’t force her to do anything and truthfully, I had no obligation to turn her in. But how could I let her just go on doing what she was doing when I might run into her again when another client hired my company?

Ariana cleared her throat. “It’s—it’s fine. I’ll figure something else out. My luck was bound to run out eventually, right? Nothing good lasts forever.”

She abruptly got up, clearing our plates from dinner and taking them to the sink to wash the dishes, and put away the leftover stew.

I stood up. “You made dinner, I’ll clean it up,” I insisted. “It was delicious, by the way. It was nice to come home to someone else being here and having the company.”

Ariana smiled down at the sink. “It was nice to have someone else with me, too. I hadn’t realized how lonely I was.” She paused, and I saw her cheeks go slightly pink. “Or how much I wanted someone to take control from me in the bedroom.”

I started on the dishes, gently hip-checking her out of the way so I could get to the sink. “Well, it makes sense to me. You’ve been alone for so long, making constant choices...” I shrugged. “In my experience, we want in the bedroom things we don’t get in our regular life. They fill a visceral need. They scratch an itch. So if you haven’t had support or have always had to make choices for yourself and take care of others, then it’s nice to be taken care of when it comes to sex, and have someone else supporting you.”

Ariana nodded. “That—that’s exactly it. I—” She swallowed. “That was the best sex of my life, honestly.”

Pride flooded me and I nearly dropped the plate I was washing. I knew I

was good at sex. It wasn't like I'd never been complimented on my skill in the bedroom before. But coming from Ariana it meant more to me. I didn't want to think about why. That was a dangerous road to go down.

“By the way, I liked the paint swatches in the bedroom,” she said, changing course so fast it almost made me dizzy. “I think you should go with the darker teal color. It's soothing and it matches the darker color scheme you have going through the whole house. Have you considered wallpaper in some rooms on the ceiling?”

“The ceiling?” That was a new one on me.

“Yes.” She nodded. “People forget about ceilings and they're just these bare spaces that you stare up at. But if you wallpaper them or paint them they can add dimension to a room. Especially a bedroom where you stare up at them while you're going to sleep.”

“I really like that idea.” I had the sudden image of going to a store with Ariana to pick out paint colors and wallpaper, and I hated how much I wanted it to be real.

I had to get this back on track. I wasn't going to make the mistake of falling for someone who would in one way or another leave me—whether that was by striking out on her own to escape her criminal past, or because I had to have her arrested. I was a romantic, not a moron.

Finishing the dishes, I dried off my hands. “So. You said that you liked it. What we did last night.”

Ariana's eyes went wide. “I... I did. I actually...” She bit her bottom lip and looked away. “I liked the—the idea that I—that we—”

I didn't want to make her say it if she was still embarrassed. I wasn't going to push her too far too fast. I'd already kind of thrown her into the deep end. “Do you mean the fact that you owe me?” I murmured, dropping my voice a little and sharpening it.

Ariana inhaled quickly, falling right into the ruse I was setting up. “I—I don't, I don't owe you anything...”

“You know the rules.” I could let the more serious topic go for now and have some fun. If she wanted me to fuck her... well, I sure wasn't going to object.

Besides, if this was the first time in her life she'd had genuinely satisfying sex? I would want more as soon as possible, too. And I was far from complaining about getting to fuck her again.

“You get my protection,” I continued, turning to face her and stepping toward her very purposefully. “I don't turn you into the police. And in exchange, your body is *mine*.”

Ariana backed up until her shoulders hit the fridge. “No,” she whispered. “I don't belong to you.”

The protest was a weak one and contradicted the flare of desire in her eyes. I chuckled and advanced on her. “Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll go easy on you. You might even find yourself enjoying it... begging me for more...”

I picked her up in one swift motion and hauled her over my shoulder, just as I had last night. Ariana shrieked and hit my back. “Put me down! No! No! Put me down!” More feigned objections, which only fueled my own lust.

She wanted control taken away? Then I could definitely make that happen. I carried her upstairs, ignoring how she kicked and hit at me, knowing it wasn't nearly as hard as she could strike me if she really did want to try and get away. Ariana was a fighter. There was no way she couldn't actually make my life difficult if she wanted to break free and escape me.

It reminded me of how much she really wanted this, too. She liked this kind of roleplay, where I wrestled control from her completely one way or another. And it fed my inner beast, so it was a win-win situation.

I carried her upstairs back to the hidden room and dumped her on the bed. She scrambled off the mattress and made a break for the door, but I was able to catch her again with ease. “If you're going to be so difficult...”

Abandoning the bed, I ripped her dress off her—I'd have to get her more clothes from her apartment—and discovered she wasn't wearing a bra, just

her panties. I quickly grabbed her hands, using the dress to knot them together. I hoisted her bound wrists up and onto the hook from last night, but I didn't put her onto the saddle. Instead I left her dangling, lowering the mechanism so that her feet just barely touched the ground. She could stand with her feet raised a little up and be comfortable—I didn't want her to actually hurt herself, just feel a bit of a twinge.

Ariana thrashed in the restraints, her breasts bouncing enticingly. "You can't do this!"

"Actually, I can do whatever I want to you," I pointed out, giving her a wicked smile. "Now, where to start?"

I surveyed my various toys, trying to figure out which ones I wanted to pick out for her. Hmm. Finally deciding on what I wanted to do, I grabbed the implements I'd chosen and walked over to her.

"What—what are you doing?" Ariana sucked in a breath as I attached one of the devices to her nipples.

Driving you crazy, I thought.

This was going to be a fun night.

CHAPTER 14



Ariana

I trembled with my arms held above me as Seth surveyed rows and rows of toys and instruments. I didn't know what he was going to do, but I knew that I would be completely at his mercy while he did it, and that sent a huge thrill surging through me.

Finally, he picked up some small devices and walked over to me. He put them on... my nipples?

I gasped. "What—what are you doing?" They felt like suction cups, sticking to my skin, and had some kind of wire attached to each of them that ran down to a remote that Seth held in his hand. My heart raced in anticipation, along with a little panic.

Seth didn't reply, but he smirked in a knowing way that had my blood running hot. Whatever was about to happen to me, I knew that I was going to be in for it—and that ultimately I would like it.

Then the suction cups turned on.

They were *vibrators*.

I cried out as the vibrations shot through my breasts, tickling my nipples,

filling my body was pleasure. I squirmed and arched, my body suspended, unable to do anything else to react to the sensations teasing me.

No, torturing me.

I waited for Seth to do anything, to say anything, but he just stood there, that possessive gleam in his eyes and a smirk teasing at the corners of his mouth. I didn't understand. He couldn't just leave me hanging here. There had to be more to it, didn't there?

Then it hit me. *This was all there was to it.*

Last night he had teased me by letting me slowly slide down onto that dildo, strung up and letting gravity do the work, unable to speed up the process and get it over with. Now... this wasn't enough to make me come. These sensations would only tease me without providing true release.

And they were all I would get.

I moaned helplessly. "Please make it stop, Seth. Please!"

Ignoring me, Seth walked back over to the toys and shelves, then returned with a red ball gag. I screamed, *no*, which was the wrong choice to make because he neatly fit the ball into my mouth and tied it around my head, gagging me. I kept screaming, but now it was muffled. I couldn't release any words at all, my tongue trapped under the red ball and my mouth forced apart.

Oh, God. Hearing my own muffled screams, my inability to speak... it turned me on even more. I hadn't expected that. It was almost like Seth knew my body better than I did.

I twisted on the hook, my feet barely able to keep their grip on the ground. I begged through the gag with inarticulate noises, begging him to let me come, to give me something more so that I could orgasm.

Seth just pulled up a chair and continued to watch me.

I could see the bulge in his pants and knew that he was wildly turned on. Remembering that thick, long cock of his only made me more desperate to orgasm. I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted it so badly. But he wasn't going

to. He wasn't even touching himself. He was just watching me with a dark, heated look on his face, like that was all that he needed.

The vibrations didn't stop, a relentless tease of sensation that brought me tantalizingly close to what I wanted, but still wasn't enough. I gave up, my body swinging a little as I dropped my weight and let myself just hang from the hook.

I was trapped. Stuck. And deliciously tortured.

I had no idea how long he did this to me, but I swore I was insanely close to orgasm a few times, only seconds away—only to have it never come. Sometimes Seth would use the remote to slow down or speed up the vibrations, making me cry out and jolt, but it was all just another form of pleasurable torture.

Seth finally, slowly, began to strip. He started with his shirt, but he didn't stop at that this time. His gaze was hot and heavy on mine the entire time and I felt like he was putting on a lowkey show for me, reminding me of what I wanted—and what I currently couldn't touch.

He was hard and his cock was just as thick as I remembered it being. My pussy *throbbed* with need. I wanted him to drive into me, to make me feel full and satisfied...

Seth stroked his cock, taking his time, obviously teasing himself just as much as he was teasing me. He was in complete control, and he knew it and loved it. He stopped right in front of me and slid two fingers into my soaked cunt, thrusting them slowly in and out of me and occasionally swiping his thumb across my clit. It wasn't enough for me to truly feel full, or enough to get me off, but it was better than nothing. I sobbed in relief and let out more garbled pleas to orgasm.

Seth shook his head and tears of frustration slid free, running down my cheeks.

“You don't need to come,” Seth murmured, the first words he'd spoken in what seemed like ages. “You just need to give in. Take what I give you.”

Submit completely.”

I sobbed. I wanted to come so badly...

“Just submit.” Seth’s voice was soft but it was unmistakably an order, his fingers pumping in and out of me slowly, the vibrations never stopping on my nipples. “Give in. You don’t need to come. You need to do whatever I want you to do.”

The vibrations and pleasure were addling my mind. It all felt so good... so fucking good... and his voice was so soothing...

My body was being pushed and I felt like I was entering a space where my brain was foggy, where I couldn’t do anything except for obey him. Part of me seized up in fear at that—and the rest of me unwound with heat at the fear. The fear just made it all *sexier*.

“Yes,” Seth growled, like he could sense me giving in. “That’s a good girl. Just give in.”

His praise made my body pulse with pleasure. I sank further into the fog, floating on the exquisite sensations. Letting him take control was somehow reassuring. I could let him decide when I did and didn’t come. And along the way he would make sure I would feel so... so good...

“There you are.” Seth added a third finger inside of me. “You’re being so good for me... I love when you scream and beg. Gets me so fucking hard. But I love it when you obey. It’s like you’re a toy for me to play with.”

Seth pulled his fingers out of me and walked away, then came back with something new in his hand. He slid it into me and I realized it was a plug. I moaned as I was filled, but the device didn’t vibrate or thrust up into me. It wasn’t as big as Seth’s cock, either. It was just enough to give me a sensation of being full without doing anything to bring me release. It was another way to tease me.

Seth reached up and lifted me off the hook, then laid me down on the bed before refastening my wrists to the headboard so my arms remained above my head and restrained.

He straddled my mid-section and stroked his cock in his hand. “Fuck, I’ve wanted to do this for ages,” he growled. “Maybe since I first saw your pretty tits.”

He upped the vibrations on my nipples, making me scream around the ball still in my mouth and my pussy clench down around the plug. My eyes rolled back into my head and I swore my vision whited out for a second. I felt like I wasn’t in control of my body anymore, and I actually kind of loved it? Seth was in charge, and he was going to take care of me. He made me feel so *good*.

Seth squeezed my breasts together—and then pushed his cock in between them. “There we go.” Seth slid between my breasts in short little griding thrusts, like he wanted to draw it out for as long as possible so he was taking his time. “You feel so fucking good.”

His silence earlier made his words, his voice, that much hotter now. It felt like I was really seeing him start to let go and lose control a little. And it was because of *me*. Because I was that hot to him, because I was a good girl who submitted.

Seth’s pre-cum leaked all over my chest as he continued pumping his shaft between my breasts in short, sharp thrusts, his gaze hot and heavy-lidded on me the entire time. The vibrations never stopped, giving us both pleasure, and I was sure it had to feel amazing on his cock. His rhythm sped up bit by bit, his breathing growing heavier as I watched him lose control while I was forcibly teased and tortured on the edge of orgasm.

With a low groan, Seth came all over my chest and throat, marking me up. I whimpered. I was so close to coming—*I needed it*—I trusted him and I didn’t scream or beg for the release but I couldn’t deny that my body was so, so close...

Once Seth recovered, he moved off me, stood at the side of the bed, and removed the vibrators from my breasts. I moaned—they had tortured me but they’d also felt so good—there was no way I could orgasm just from the plug

inside of me.

Seth watched me squirm, a knowing smirk on his face. “Poor thing, I put you through so much and made you suffer, didn’t I?”

He took one of the suction cups and fit it over my clit instead. I tried to scream but the sound was muffled as Seth turned it onto its lowest setting. I burst into tears, not from pain, but from the overwhelming sensations buffering through me. This was a whole new way to fuck with my mind, to cross my wires and addle my body with pleasure and a release that wouldn’t come.

“You are so hot like this.” Seth watched me as I writhed, his fingers idly stroking my stomach.

His gaze on me had my skin feeling like it was on fire. Sometimes he turned up the vibrations and would send me careening right to the edge of orgasm while I screamed *yes, yes, yes* beneath the gag... only to lower them at the last moment and leave me sobbing and unfulfilled.

Possibly the sexiest part, though, was watching Seth’s cock slowly get hard again as he played with me. If my hands weren’t tied I could reach out and stroke his shaft, perhaps even take it into my mouth if I didn’t have this gag on. But I was stuck. I could only watch as I was tortured on the edge of orgasm.

I could feel myself slipping back into that haze, that feeling where it was all fuzzy pleasure, and there was no need to orgasm. There was only the need for whatever Seth gave me. His gaze on me was almost hypnotizing, and the vibrations pulsing through my body only added to it. I could’ve been lying there for hours. All night. It didn’t matter. I was being a good girl. I was being submissive. I was his toy.

Finally, I felt the vibrations die down and the suction cup was taken off my clit. Then the plug was pulled out of me. I was left with the phantom vibrations and a clenching, empty pussy. I needed to be filled...

Seth walked away a final time, allowing me to breathe and take a break,

then came back. I thought I caught a glimpse of something on his cock other than a condom, but then he was kneeling on the bed and spreading my thighs, hitching one leg around his waist as he thrust into me, and I couldn't think about anything anymore.

“Oh, *fuck.*” Seth grunted as he bottomed out inside of me. What was that at the base of his cock? It felt similar to a dildo in that same yielding but firm silicone sensation. “Yeah, you're ready. So fucking wet, baby. I'm going to fuck you into an orgasm you've never thought you could possibly have.”

He pulled out, then thrust into me—and vibrations shot up his cock and teased my inner walls. I groaned. He was wearing a vibrating ring around the base of his shaft, like he was fucking me with the dildo from last night only better because it was his real, warm, actual cock.

Seth growled in satisfaction. “Yeah, feels so good, doesn't it? You feel amazing... squeezing me so fucking tight...”

Seth fucked me hard and fast, like he was chasing not just his orgasm but mine, and I could feel it barreling towards me like a freight train. I was seized with terror that he wouldn't let me come again, that he'd snatch it back at the last minute, but he just kept pumping into me as I careened at last over the edge.

My entire body seemed to shatter apart. Ecstasy—like I'd never felt before, like I hadn't known I was capable of feeling—washed over me. The world went white again, and I was distantly aware that I was sobbing, but it didn't matter. It was tears of pure joyous release.

Seth kept thrusting, growling low in the pit of his chest, his movements a little more erratic as he unloaded inside me with a groan, grinding his cock deep, deep, into me.

When he was done and could move again, he pulled out, turned off the cock ring and removed it, then slid the plug back inside of me. I clenched around it, welcoming the sensation. To go from all of that to nothing would've been too much, and he seemed to know that.

“There we go.” Seth gently stroked my hair away from my face. “You did so well. I’m so proud of you, you were so good for me. That felt good, didn’t it?”

I nodded, the world spinning a little. Seth reached around and undid the gag, taking it off, and then got up. Being left with my hands tied and a plug in me honestly felt... soothing.

When Seth returned, he helped to prop me up against his chest and brought a glass of water to my lips. I’d had no idea until that moment how thirsty I was. It made sense—I’d been screaming, I’d had a lot of athletic sex, and I’d been crying—but I’d been so out of my body that I hadn’t realized.

Seth prevented me from gulping the water down too quickly. “Slow sips,” he ordered. “There you go.”

When I emptied the glass he put it away and undid my wrists, throwing the fabric of my dress aside. “I’ll stop by your place and get more clothes.”

I nodded. I couldn’t speak. It wasn’t just that I was too tired—it was like I had no words, at least not yet.

Seth didn’t seem to mind. He guided my head onto his shoulder and held me like that for a while, his hands caressing my bare back. I didn’t know how long. I just knew that it felt necessary. Not just for myself, but for Seth. Maybe after everything he’d put me through he needed the reassurance that I trusted him. Maybe, just like I needed to be held, he needed someone to hold.

Eventually he pulled away and stood, then picked me up and carried me down the dark hall to a bathroom. I hadn’t taken a look in the upstairs bathrooms, only using the one downstairs, but this one had to be the master bath. It had a giant soaking tub and a large glass-walled shower and the walls were bare. The floor, however, was in a beautiful pattern of black and white in marble—the white was the main background but the black swooped and curled, similar to the patterns painted on the walls in the sex room.

He liked abstract, flowing patterns. I thought it interesting, compared to the fact that he was a computer guy. Maybe after spending his days immersed

in linear numerical code he wanted something a little more evocative of nature.

“I need to pick out the tiles for the walls,” Seth noted as he turned on the water for the soaking tub and then helped me into it. He gathered up some soap and supplies and brought it over, then climbed in behind me. I leaned into him instantly, like I couldn’t bear not to be touching him.

As the deliciously hot water poured into the tub and Seth continued to hold me, I realized that I had never felt safer in my life. I should’ve felt like I was at my most precarious and vulnerable, like any wrong move could send me to prison or worse. But instead all I felt was contentment. Maybe that was just the amazing sex talking though. All I knew for certain was that I wasn’t going to be able to go back to the kind of mediocre sex I’d had before Seth.

I decided all that was a problem for another day. Right now, I just allowed myself to feel safe.

CHAPTER 15



Seth

I think that might have been the most satisfying sex of my life.

Ariana was truly something else. The way her body responded as I edged her over and over... she'd been so into it. The way she'd cried and moaned, the trembling of her body... every one of her responses were so unbelievably hot.

Afterwards, she was a limp, clinging mess, and I loved that just as much. The way she cuddled into me made my heart twist. I was always careful with my aftercare, at least usually. I took care of my submissive because they needed it, and to do anything less would be neglectful and hurtful—possibly even emotionally damaging. But they weren't my girlfriends and I hadn't wanted them to be. I hadn't felt any emotional connection with them.

Ariana though...

I couldn't think about how my feelings for her were shifting. I just focused on the present and taking care of her.

I settled her into the bath and climbed in with her. For a bit, Ariana was out of it, just relaxing into me while I cleaned us both off and washed her

hair. That was normal. It could take a while for the submissive to really come back to themselves. Your body crashed after so many endorphins and you needed to recover. Hell, I needed to recover in my own way.

But after a bit of soaking in the hot water, Ariana stirred in my arms.

“You treat every girl like this?” she murmured huskily. “Or am I just special?”

I chuckled and idly skimmed my fingers down her stomach. “Well, I do take care every time I do this with someone. It’s important to keep you from crashing. Which will happen. Just like you need to rest after doing a hard, physical workout. There’s a lot of emotion involved in this so... you need to protect yourself against a mental crash.”

I didn’t want her to think that she was just another hookup for me, though. “But no, I don’t usually... go quite this far.”

“Lucky me,” Ariana murmured.

She sounded a bit sleepy, and so I tried not to read too much into it. But it warmed my heart all the same.

When the water started to cool, I got out of the tub and grabbed towels, then helped her out and dried her off. “You can wear something of mine. I’ll go to your apartment and get you some more clothes.”

“I can’t come with you?”

“You need to sleep. And you shouldn’t leave the house anyway.” I hated to remind her of our bargain, but I couldn’t risk her trying to get the drop on me or alerting associates—if she had them—that she’d been found out and needed a rescue.

Ariana was enough out of it that she just nodded, and settled back against my chest as I got her wrapped up.

I carried her back to the sex room and laid her down on the bed, then went to my bedroom to pull out some pajamas of mine. They’d be a little big on her, but hopefully in a way that made her feel cozy.

Ariana pulled the pajamas on, and she was in fact swimming in them

lengthwise, but the chest filled out more than I would've thought on the shirt, thanks to her full breasts, and the pants stayed on her waist because she had those broad hips.

My stomach clenched with renewed heat. I hadn't expected it to affect me, seeing her in my clothes like this, but it made me feel a bone-deep satisfaction.

Control yourself, I reminded myself, but it felt less certain than the other times I'd said it. My control and emotions were slipping.

Ariana crawled into bed and settled herself in, dropping to sleep immediately. I wasn't surprised, she was clearly exhausted, but... I was disappointed she didn't say more of a goodnight.

And then I was angry at myself for being disappointed.

Leaving her, I went downstairs to get some work done to distract myself from Ariana. I didn't want to do something stupid like crawl into the bed and sleep with her. That would only make things more complicated down the line.

I sat down in front of my computer console and opened it up—and froze.

Someone had hacked into the Smirtech computer system and pulled up Damien Harcourt's financials, specifically his cryptocurrency account.

Yeah, no prizes for guessing who had done this.

My computer had fallen asleep, but I had seen the screens as black when I'd come in earlier, so she must've switched it to screensaver. Ariana had to have been on the computer when I came home and had hurried to get out, unable to shut anything down.

What was she doing in Harcourt's account? Was she trying to steal from him to skim enough money to get away? Was she trying to frame him for something?

Hmm. Looked like she hadn't hacked in to manipulate the account, she was just on view mode. Had she run out of time? She had to know roughly when I'd be back here. She wouldn't have left something like that until the

last moment. So why would she just be looking at his transactions?

I was tempted to try and investigate further to figure out what she was doing, but why would I do that when I could just let her do the work and watch her?

I set up one of my miniature security cameras on a bookshelf, angling it so that it would see and record everything she did on these computers. I didn't dare put anything on the computer itself or she might detect it.

Then, I got up and left the computer back on sleep mode and went to her place to get her more clothes. She would be asleep for a while, but she had to know I'd get on my computer sooner rather than later, so she'd need to move fast. As soon as she was awake enough to remember, she'd be on it.

I figured going to her apartment to get her more clothes should give her enough time. And when I got back and checked the video feed? I'd be able to figure out what she was doing.

Ariana's apartment was shockingly bare. I knew my place was pretty basic, but it was for a reason. I had some possible paint colors up on the walls, and fabric swatches for furniture. I was just waiting for the right person to build my home with me.

Her apartment looked like she was ready to jump up and run at any moment.

There was no personalization to it. Nothing that showed me who Ariana was. The warm, funny geek who understood computers and technology so well, the hard worker with a lonely heart, the uncelebrated Robin Hood... none of that was on display here.

The furniture was all from IKEA, which was fine, but it was impersonal. Just a couch that turned into a bed, the plain wood bookshelves, the coffee table and a stand for the television. Everything seemed cold and uninviting.

No pictures on the walls. Not even an area rug. Nothing.

The only signs of life were on one shelf devoid of books. Instead there was a row of photographs featuring what looked like a young Ariana with

two other people, a man and a woman. They were at Ariana's birthday, at her graduation...

Her parents.

My heart broke for her as I surveyed the framed pictures. My own parents didn't see me enough. I should amend that. They'd probably love Ariana instantly and want to adopt her.

Not that it mattered. They wouldn't ever get to meet her.

I went into the closet and dresser, pulling out the essentials and putting them in a duffel bag I found on the floor of the closet. I didn't want to pack her entire wardrobe but I also didn't know how long this whole thing would take and I didn't want to keep coming back here. When I finished packing, I left the sad empty apartment and went to get myself a late-night burger—just to give Ariana a bit more time in case she slept.

When I arrived back, the house was silent. I went upstairs and peeked into the sex room, and saw Ariana deeply asleep. Or at least she pretended to be.

I left the duffel bag of clothes and toiletries in the room at the foot of the bed and went back downstairs to grab the security camera.

Time to find out what she was up to.

CHAPTER 16



Ariana

I fell asleep practically before my head even hit the pillow. It was just so warm and cozy in the bath, and my body was absolutely exhausted. My head was in this happy fuzzy place, like my mind had been wrapped in a warm cozy blanket. I felt like I was falling asleep even while I was putting the borrowed pajamas on.

When I woke up, it was dark and I was alone.

A pang of loss hit me. I knew that there was no reason for Seth to stay, but I wished he was here, holding me. He was going out to get me clothes, though, I remembered that now. I was alone in the house.

Oh. I was alone.

The computers!

Adrenaline shot through me and I bolted upright. I had to get rid of what I'd been doing on his computers earlier! I hadn't had a moment alone once he arrived home from the office, so I couldn't go back to the room without him noticing, but I'd left it all on screensaver mode. It was only a matter of time until he sat down, brought the computer to life, and discovered what I'd been

up to. No way could I let that happen.

I hurried downstairs, his pajamas just big enough on me to make me feel cute and cozy. I ignored that thought and sat down in front of the computer. Okay. Time to finish what I'd started.

The computer sprang to life with just the touch of the mouse. Yikes. Yeah, if he'd sat down here, he would've seen everything. Thank God he'd gone right out to get my clothes.

Damien Harcourt's crypto financials stared at me. "Talk to me," I murmured. "What secrets do you hold?"

Numbers didn't lie. They'd give up their truths eventually. I just had to be patient.

Examining his finances, it looked like my microtransactions to the account I'd used to steal from him weren't the only tiny transactions of crypto that he'd been making. There were also transactions that went into an account in Puerto Rico.

Interesting. Puerto Rico had become a haven for cryptocurrency investors as Silicon Valley stumbled. They'd even introduced tax breaks and benefits, incentives to get people to keep coming—at the expense of the actual locals, of course. Always fun when your literal government was aiding in gentrification and you couldn't afford to live anywhere on your entire homeland island anymore.

Having an account that linked to Puerto Rico wasn't that unusual. But I followed the trail to that account to see how much money was in it. That took a bit of hacking, but Seth had state of the art systems on here. I felt like I could hack into the goddamn Pentagon with this computer. It was a hell of a setup.

Once I was in, I saw that the account was... empty?

I pulled up the account history. Okay, let's see...

According to his transaction history, Damien had been making regular microtransactions to this account for a fair amount of time. They were small

like mine had been, but his were labelled ‘interest fee’, something he must’ve gone in and manually changed. It wouldn’t generally catch anyone’s eye, not unless you figured out that these ‘fees’ were going into another account that he owned rather than towards a bank or other institution.

The microtransactions added up to quite a lot in the end—potentially millions of dollars, so long as the crypto market was on a high and so a tiny bit of crypto amounted to a ton of traditional money.

Given that the account was now empty, it looked like he’d done exactly that: cashed out the account into traditional money when the market was high.

That meant Damien now had hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars unaccounted for in *his* possession. I had no idea how much money it was, because it all depended on what the crypto was worth when he converted it. I pulled up the internet and looked up some websites to see if I could figure out what crypto had been worth at the date of this withdrawal.

Looked like one total coin at the time of the withdrawal had been worth fifty *thousand* dollars.

Holy shit.

I pulled up a calculator and did the math, adding up all the various fractions of coins he’d been putting into this account through the microtransactions. Crap. He’d had the equivalent of two hundred coins in here when he’d cashed it out. That was a cool ten million dollars, if each coin was worth fifty thousand when he’d sold them out for cash.

What was Damien Harcourt doing with ten million dollars in cash he didn’t want people to know about? He couldn’t literally have that cash on hand. He had to have withdrawn it, then put it into a separate account, perhaps manually—I was willing to bet that account was either in Switzerland or the Caymans.

Was he planning to cut and run? But why? His account didn’t show any activity once he cashed it out, so this wasn’t a regular scam he was pulling.

This was for something *specific*.

Maybe it was time to take a closer look into Damien Harcourt's past.

I searched for Harcourt on Seth's computer, and found that he'd done some background research on the guy to make sure he was on the up-and-up. Everything seemed to be okay, but there were things that a computer search alone couldn't tell you. Sometimes you needed on-the-ground research, too.

I wrote down the names of the people that Harcourt had grown up with, his parents, and his college classmates and teachers. I had to get out of this house and interview them, find out who Harcourt really was and why he might need to flee with ten million dollars. There was a reason for this, I just had to find it.

Erasing all evidence of my detective work, I shut down the computer and hurried back to bed, tucking the list of names and addresses into my pillow. When Seth left tomorrow, I'd find a way to break out of the house and track these people down. Maybe—just maybe—if Harcourt was caught doing something illegal, my withdrawals would never have to come to light, and I'd be off the hook.

I just hoped that Seth could forgive me.

CHAPTER 17



Seth

I put in the video feed and sat down to survey it. The camera was state-of-the-art, so I could see exactly what Ariana was doing on my computer in the video.

Huh.

She wasn't trying to steal anything. She was looking at the history of an account in Puerto Rico that Damien had registered in his name. She was monitoring his transactions...

Ariana stopped and pulled up a window on the internet, looking into what the values of various cryptocurrencies were on a certain date. Looked like the one she'd been looking at specifically had been valued at fifty thousand dollars a coin. *Goddamn.*

Ariana went back to the account, and I saw the date that she was looking at—the date that Damien had apparently withdrawn all of the currency from the account as cash. It was the same date that the crypto was listed at fifty thousand dollars a coin.

I paused the video so that I could do the math on the transactions on

screen. It amounted to ten million dollars in cash.

Holy fuck.

Damien had ten million dollars in cash hiding somewhere? For what purpose? But it was all highly suspicious considering the company was about to go public, which usually happened to raise additional capital.

Ariana then opened up the internet and went browsing. She was looking up Damien, trying to see what she could find on him. Yeah. I was going to need our tech team to do a much deeper dive on him than I'd had them do originally.

On the screen, Ariana shut everything down, wiping away all traces of her activity on my system. She was good with computers, I had to give her that. As good as I was.

I put away the camera and contemplated what my choices were.

Ariana suspected that Damien was doing something behind the scenes, and now I had to agree with her. My confusion was what, exactly, he would need that money for. His company was operating successfully except for the small amount of withdrawals Ariana had made—nothing compared to the cool ten million sitting in Damien's pocket. He was about to take the company public. Why would he need money squirreled away and untraceable? Was it something he had done in his past? Or was it something he was about to do?

In my experience, you needed that kind of money if you were about to do something extremely illegal. For example, disappearing off the face of the earth. Or...

Maybe I was wrong. But there was a kind of job that our security company was sometimes asked to do, one that we always declined. We were in security, plain and simple. The 'security' wasn't a front for anything else, as in mercenary work. But lots of former military veterans opted for a deadlier job, one where they were taking lives instead of protecting them.

The going rate for hitmen was pretty damn high. It was why all those

‘hire a hitman’ sites on the dark web were fucking scams. Actual skilled hitmen were either employed by the mob, or insanely expensive to hire. They didn’t exactly advertise their services willy-nilly.

I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but that particular possibility gnawed at my instincts.

I couldn’t do anything at this hour of the night, but I went to bed with troubled thoughts. My bed felt too big and cold, and unusually empty. I wondered if I slipped into bed with Ariana, just to hold her...

No. I couldn’t give into that weakness.

Now that she was on to Harcourt, my concern was that she could potentially cause a whole lot of trouble if I didn’t get ahead of her detective work and figure this out *first*. If Damien was actually doing something dangerous with this money, whether that was fleeing the country and creating a new identity or hiring a hitman, then Ariana would be putting her life in jeopardy if she pursued what she’d discovered. I couldn’t give in and be soft with her and let myself fall further.

Which suggested I was falling at all, in the first place.

Goddammit.

I slept restlessly, and got up early to work out and try to get rid of some of the tension. Ariana was still asleep when I left her, and I headed immediately to our company headquarters at Elite Protection and Consulting to get in touch with some of our contacts in the underworld.

I was on the phone with someone when Vaughn came in. He looked well-rested. Honestly, he looked a lot more relaxed and better-rested since getting together with Claire. I was happy for him, even if I was also a bit envious.

As soon as I disconnected the call he rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. “How’s the case going?”

“This might be a bigger problem than I thought,” I replied. “And we might not be getting paid.”

“We might not be getting paid?” Vaughn glared at me. “What kind of

fucking job is this?”

“A job where I was hired to find whoever was stealing from the company and learned that the CEO has been doing something far more suspicious himself. He just made ten million dollars go missing from the company.”

Vaughn whistled. “That’s not chump change.”

“But it’s not the kind of embezzlement we normally see, either,” I said, scrubbing a hand along my jaw. “I don’t think it’s for his wealth. And it’s just the one transaction.”

Vaughn frowned. “So he needs a specific amount of money for something *off* the books.”

I nodded. “Exactly. It’s very well hidden.”

“What do you think?” he asked.

I leaned back in my chair. “Well, I need to establish exactly how he’s in trouble, or why he might need that kind of untraceable money. In the meantime, I’ve reached out to some contacts to see if anyone knows about a hitman being hired.”

Vaughn cringed. “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

“You know how I just love to disappoint you,” I quipped sarcastically. “It could also be that he wants to disappear and he’s lining up the money to do just that.”

“And you don’t know why?”

“No. His company’s doing well and he’s about to take the company public, so it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

Vaughn shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the doorframe. “Maybe someone’s blackmailing him.”

“To the tune of ten million?” I asked incredulously.

“Well, you said he’s about to take the company public.” Vaughn shrugged. “That makes him vulnerable. If he botches the public offering—or if someone fucks it up for him...”

“It could ruin him,” I finished, following his trail of thought. “So you

think someone's threatening to expose a dirty secret and ruin his company and reputation *before* he goes public, if he doesn't pay up?"

"It would make sense with the timing."

"Or he could be paying a hitman to take out the blackmailer," I mused, trying to see the situation from all angles. "Because really, who has the balls to ask for ten million dollars when blackmailing someone?"

"Fair point." Vaughn grinned. "Let me know when you figure it out. I want to know how this ends."

Yeah. I wanted to know how this ended, too.

It was going to take time for my contacts to get back to me with anything solid, so I headed back to my brownstone. I didn't want to leave Ariana alone for too long in case she did something stupid. She'd already hacked into my computer. Who knew what else she could be getting up to?

I parked and walked inside, disabling the security alarm. "Ariana? I know I'm home early, I hope I didn't startle you."

Silence greeted me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. "Ariana?"

Nothing.

I moved silently up the stairs, keeping an ear out. She could be in the shower, or in any other situation that made her unable to hear me, but I didn't think so. My gut told me I was in an empty house.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I searched every room.

No sign of her.

There was no sign of a fight or struggle, either, which eased my mind somewhat.

I went back downstairs. My alarm system hadn't alerted me of any sensors being triggered. Goddamn. How had she hacked it? She was even better than I'd thought. I'd underestimated her, and now I was paying the price.

Something on the dining room table caught my eye. I walked over and

saw a note lying there.

I'll be back. I'm sorry.

Damn it. Ariana was in the wind, pursuing her own leads against Damien, and it might get her killed. I had to get to her before Damien found out what she was up to and went after her himself.

I jogged upstairs again, this time right for my bedroom, and pulled back the painting that concealed my safe. I opened it and retrieved my gun.

I wasn't taking any chances where Ariana was concerned.

CHAPTER 18



Ariana

*I*t was stupid to feel bad for slipping out on Seth.

He'd basically blackmailed me into sleeping with him. And yes, I liked it and wanted it and had consensually agreed. Yes, I felt safe with him, but still. There was no reason for me to leave him a note and apologize! If anything he should apologize to me.

But all the logic in the world didn't change how I felt. And I felt bad, guilty even, for deceiving Seth.

I had to do this. I wasn't going to sit around and wait to see if Seth would figure out what was going on. My freedom was on the line here and I wasn't a person used to waiting for others to save her. Nobody had ever saved me or helped me. It was why I wanted to help others—to give them what I never had. A sense of safety and security, even if it was just monetary.

But while I loved how Seth took care of me in bed, that didn't mean I could trust him to do it outside of that. I'd taken my destiny into my own hands before. I could do it again.

My first stop was to the college where Harcourt had met his two buddies,

one of whom came from a rich family and persuaded his father to give Harcourt the startup cash to take their company from a dream to a reality. It was easy to get the professors and administrative staff to talk to me—I just told them that I was a journalist working on a big piece about Harcourt.

“It’s all right if you don’t have anything to say that’s positive,” I assured them all. “I want to have a full, comprehensive look. People like a bit of scandal and controversy anyway. It makes them feel like they’re getting the full story and they can make up their minds themselves about whether they like the person or not.”

Harcourt’s professors remembered him as an average student who thought he was smarter than he actually was, but was good with people. “He always gave the presentations for group projects,” one of his business professors told me. “I always suspected from student feedback that he hadn’t done any of the actual research work, but he was a great presenter. I think most other students were glad they had someone who liked doing public speaking in their group. Most students get nervous about presenting.”

Most of the people he’d been in a frat with were long since gone from campus, but the administration had a slightly different picture for me than his professors.

“He was trouble,” said one secretary named Mavis who’d been at the college for fifty years. I was pretty sure that you could fire the entire board in charge of the college and you’d be fine as long as Mavis was still around, actually doing the work to run things.

“What kind of trouble?” I asked. A dozen possibilities flew through my mind, from assault to cheating to frat pranks.

Marvis pursed her lips. She could’ve been sixty years old or a hundred, it was impossible to tell. “The subtle kind,” she said. “You won’t find anything in his records here. He kept his nose clean. But he was the president of his fraternity his junior and senior years, so I dealt with him a few times. He was very good at using people. And discarding them.”

“In what way?”

“He had hangers-on in the fraternity. His two closest friends, I don’t remember their names off the top of my head I’m afraid, but if you gave me them that would ring a bell. Those stuck around. But the others... he would be quite friendly with them for some time, and then when he got what he wanted, he’d move on. Quite a lot of girlfriends, obviously. But I would see him making friends with the more quiet, studious types in various classes. And I noticed he always did well on tests even if his class participation was abysmal.”

I grinned. “Mavis, I bet you could tell me so much gossip about this school.”

Mavis gave me a demure smile. “You have no idea.”

So, Damien Harcourt was the type to use someone and then get rid of them, whether that was for grades or sex, or anything else he wanted. It stood to reason that he’d be the same kind of person nowadays. In fact, in my experience he’d be even worse, since enough wealth made you divorced from the reality that most people had to deal with and dulled your sense of empathy.

Had he done something—used someone bad enough—that it was worthy of indictment? A jail sentence? Was he trying to avoid prison?

I decided to go right to the source next and visited his parents with the same story as before. They were in a large house in a respectable upper middle class neighborhood, the kind where everyone was actually kind of rich but didn’t realize that they were and thought they were just ‘comfortable’. No insane sprawling mansions but the kind of house that you could expect to see in an ‘80s film.

This was the level of wealth that everyone should have—the kind of wealth that you could enjoy without it being obscene excess and more than you could possibly spend. The kind of wealth that people who grew up poor like my family could actually possibly achieve in a fair world.

I tried not to let my anger and envy take over as I knocked on their front door. Damien's parents were the kind of smiling, sweater-wearing benign folk that I'd expected. I was greeted with pleasantries and brought into the living room where I was offered water or coffee.

"I just want to know what kind of person Damien's like," I said. "A real intimate picture."

"He took a while to come into his own," Mr. Harcourt said. "He wasn't really great at holding onto friends, growing up."

"He was very ambitious, but he didn't know exactly what he wanted to do with that ambition," Mrs. Harcourt added.

"Well, he's good at all of that now," I replied cheerfully. "He's kept his close friendship with the two men that founded the company with him, right?"

"Yes, of course." Mr. Harcourt smiled and he seemed relieved. "It was nice to see that he finally found his people. He had a bit of a revolving door in college but those two were the ones who stuck by him."

That fit with what Mavis had told me, although it was filtered through the lens of a parent's love. Damien hadn't kept friends for long because they'd served their purpose—except for these two men. Brian and Jackson. I'd tried to frame Brian as COO, and Seth had seen through it. But was Brian really squeaky clean? Did he and Jackson stick by Damien because they were truly friends? Or did they continue to serve a purpose for him? Or, did they have something over him, something that made it so Damien couldn't get rid of them the way he had the others?

Brian and Jackson had helped him start up the company and had been there for his college career. They might very well know something about what Damien had done and held it over him.

I didn't think I could get to Brian or Jackson but... Jackson's family had been the ones to fund the company when it was just a startup. Perhaps they might know something? Had Jackson's father really given them that money

because he believed in the cause, or because Damien had forced him to—through blackmail or extortion?

I headed for the office of Jackson's father back in the city. He was the head of a successful chain of real estate offices, but once I told his secretary I was a journalist, she let me right in and said I could have half an hour before he had to leave for another meeting.

Mr. Conners sat at his desk, going over papers in a lazy manner. He looked up when I entered. "My secretary told me you were a journalist?"

"Yes, and thank you for seeing me so last-minute, Mr. Conners. I was supposed to have more time with this story, but the main story for an upcoming issue fell apart and so we're replacing it with mine." I sat down across from him. "We're doing a piece on Damien Harcourt, now that he's about to take Smirtech public."

Mr. Conners blinked, apparently in surprise. "He's taking it public?"

"Yes, although—is this not common knowledge? I'll thank you not to spread it then."

"Of course, of course," he said, nodding.

"You're the person who gave Damien the money to get the company started," I said confidently. "What made you so certain in the future of Smirtech?"

"I wasn't," Mr. Conners said bluntly. "But I knew my son believed in it, and he was going to go along with it whether or not he had my support. I figured it would be better, if he failed, he failed with my money rather than someone else's, so I gave them what they needed to get started. Nobody gets anywhere in this world without a little help, and I'd rather my son turn to me for help than someone who'll be a predatory investor and demand too much in return."

I tipped my head to the side. "And it looks like that philosophy paid off."

"Yes."

"How much of that is due to your son and how much of that is due to

Damien?”

“I’m sure Damien thinks it’s all due to him,” Mr. Connors replied with a laugh. This was definitely not a man who liked to mince words. “But my son had the connections he needed. Jackson understands how to operate among the wealthy since he lived with them all his life. The other one, Brian, was like Damien. Completely wet behind the ears. But he had a lot of enthusiasm. Damien knows how to get people to do what he wants, and sometimes in our industry that’s all you really need.”

I nodded along, pretending to take notes in my notepad. “You don’t sound particularly fond of him.”

Mr. Connors gave me a thin smile. “No, I’m sure I don’t. That’s because I know what type of person Damien is. He’s the kind that drops people once they’re no longer useful to him. He’s selfish and always has been. I don’t like my son associating with him. But if I tell Jackson how much Damien is bad for him, he’ll just cling tighter. That’s how kids are.”

“You’re very forthright.”

“I know you’ll have to edit so it’s not too damning. But you like your stories with a bit of scandal. Everyone does. I’m happy to be the person suggesting that Damien Harcourt is not to be trusted. And who knows? I do carry some weight in this town. Maybe people will read between the lines of whatever edited thing you publish, and they’ll decide to listen to me.”

“If Damien is the kind of person to abandon someone when they’re not useful to him anymore, why do you think that your son has lasted so long at the company?”

“Ah.” Mr. Connors looked pleased. “Because I made sure that when the whole company was founded, Jackson—and Brian, since I was feeling generous and the poor boy had no idea what he was getting into—owned enough of the company that Damien can’t just kick them out. They have enough power.”

He shrugged. “I’m not a loving father. Not in the usual affectionate way.

But I look out for my son.”

Interesting.

I thanked him and left. Back in the car I’d... ‘borrowed’... I contemplated my next move.

Mr. Connors could be lying, but I didn’t see any reason why he would. So, there was no reason for either man to be blackmailing Damien.

But Damien couldn’t like having Jackson and Brian still around. They’d served their purpose. He’d want all the power for himself. What if...

What if the ten million... was to get rid of his two ‘friends’?

Right when the company was going public—it was the perfect time to oust them. My heart raced. I knew I wasn’t really in danger, or at least I didn’t think I was, but I still felt like I should look over my shoulder.

There was no way that Damien would actually know what I was up to. Right?

I decided to head into work. There had to be something there that I could find. Seth would be there, possibly, but that was a risk I was willing to take if it meant I could get answers.

When I arrived, I found Tony. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Oh, all right. Boring.” He shrugged. “I thought you were taking more time off? The security guy isn’t finished yet.”

“I know. I was working on something and wanted to come in and get some information from our system directly instead of trying to log in remotely. It’s always a pain.”

Tony waved me in. “Yeah, of course, no problem.”

I appreciated his trust in me, but the man could afford to be a little more suspicious.

I didn’t go into the tech department, though. Instead, I went up to the executive break room.

This was where the executive assistants would hang out during their lunches since generally they were too busy running the schedules of the C-

level execs to actually go out somewhere and eat. Which was fucking depressing, if you asked me.

It was right around lunchtime, so I was able to go in and make some coffee while waiting for people to file in.

Soon enough, a few people entered—men and women—chattering. “Coffee?” I asked.

A few responses came back as ‘yes’ and so I got to work. “It must be crazy right now, with the upcoming public offering,” I noted. “How’s everyone taking it?”

“I think Damien’s going to fire me just to give himself some catharsis,” one woman groaned. “Nothing I do lately is right!”

“He’ll be better after the offering,” another assistant said. “He’s just stressed. You’re an amazing assistant.”

“Yeah, tell him that.” She rolled her eyes. “He owes me a raise for how crappy he’s been treating me the past week. In fact ever since that security guy showed up.”

“Maybe there’s been a security breach,” one of the men said.

“We would have heard about it,” the second person who’d spoken replied. “It would be a lockdown for all of us. They’d make us do those annoying passwords with the two-factor authentication.”

Everyone at the table groaned.

“I heard from someone down in tech that he’s just poking for holes and doing a general beefing up,” I chimed in. “I think so that Damien can promise potential investors that everything’s state-of-the-art and their money is safe.”

Damien’s assistant took her coffee from me, shaking her head. “I don’t know what’s up, but he’s upset about something. It’s like he keeps waiting for a shoe to drop, and it’s not dropping.”

“What about the others?” I asked casually. “I mean, he can’t be the only one who’s nervous.”

“Jackson? Nervous?” Another man snorted. “Yeah, right. Ever since his

daddy got Damien to sign that stupid contract that gives Jackson partial control and a massive stock share, he's been lazy as all hell. He doesn't care what's going on."

"At least Brian tries," another woman said.

"You're only saying that because you want to sleep with him."

"No, she's right," the first man replied. "Brian does try. Jackson's just too used to coming from money."

Everyone pulled out their lunches and sipped their coffees in silence for a moment, enjoying their meal and the caffeine boost. Time for me to speak up.

"Doesn't Damien want to... I don't know... find a way out of this?" I asked. "If Jackson isn't doing anything to help the company but has that much control, surely... Damien would want to buy him out?"

"Fat chance," the second man muttered. "The only way that Damien could get away from Jackson is if Jackson died."

I nearly dropped my coffee cup as the realization hit.

So that was it. Ten million was a *lot*. But if you split it in two, five million per person... Jackson and Brian...

Smirtech was about to make a public offering. It would be worth hundreds of millions, if not a couple billion—what was five million per hit to get rid of the two hangers-on standing in between Damien and complete control of such a company? The only two 'friends' that Damien couldn't shake off and abandon?

I felt sick and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Shit. I'm late. See you guys later!"

None of them had any idea who I was. Maybe I was better at this lying thing than I'd thought.

I hurried down the hall, heading for the elevator that was just arriving. It opened—and I literally ran into the man himself: Damien Harcourt.

I swallowed. "Mr. Harcourt."

My voice cracked. Crap. Okay, maybe I wasn't so good at this lying thing

after all. Or at least I wasn't good when I was unprepared.

Damien stared at me curiously. "You're in the IT department, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yes. I'm Ariana."

"Ariana. Right."

I needed to stop staring at him like he was about to stab me. I was giving myself away. "Sorry to have bumped into you. Have a great rest of your day!"

I hurried into the elevator and heaved a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind me.

That was way too close.

CHAPTER 19



Seth

I felt like a goddamn idiot.

No, I wasn't an idiot—I was arrogant. I had assumed that she couldn't hack through my security system to get out of the house. But she had. I'd underestimated her, or more accurately I'd overestimated myself. I had grown too used to being unbeatable.

Now I had to find her.

Smart girl hadn't taken her phone with her so I couldn't track her, but I did have that security video that showed her looking up where certain people lived. I watched the video again and made a list, same as hers. The question was, what order would she go in?

Best to start at the beginning—with the parents. I stopped by their place, out of the city proper and into the suburbs, but she wasn't there. Should I wait here for her? Or had she already come by? I didn't want to go up and ask the parents—that would make them suspicious and the last thing I wanted was for one of them to possibly call their son and say that people were stopping by to ask about him.

No, she'd most likely already been here. I went to the college next.

The campus was just big enough to be annoying when trying to find someone, but she'd probably want to talk to administration. I grabbed a clipboard out of my car and went over to those buildings, then walked around. Nobody questioned me as I strode purposefully through the building, occasionally making a note on the clipboard. They just assumed I was there for any number of reasons.

There was no sign of Ariana anywhere.

God fucking dammit. Had I missed her? Or had she not come here yet? Where had she gone? I needed to find her and she'd gone off the grid. Unless I really wanted to pull out all the stops and start calling in favors to really track her down, I was fucking stuck.

My phone buzzed with a text. I pulled it out in case it was Damien. It wasn't, but it was Tony.

Hey, this might be no big deal, and I hate that I'm texting you this. But Ariana came in just now and she seemed weird. Not like herself. I don't know I just got a strange feeling. She's a really great person and I'm sure it's nothing but I know you've been using her account to run double-blind testing for the security system and I thought maybe something had happened?

Thank God Tony had listened to his instincts. What the fuck was Ariana doing in the company building? Did she want to put herself directly in danger?

She might not even realize how much danger she was in. I had to get to the office and nab her before she did something that put her on Damien's radar.

I needed to placate Tony so he didn't do anything stupid that would land Ariana in hot water. I texted him back:

Ah, crap. I found some anomalies and didn't tell her about them. She must be concerned. No worries. I'm on my way into the office so I'll explain to her before she thinks we're being robbed blind. She's got a real eye for

detail, no wonder she's your best.

There, that should throw him off the scent.

I started up my car and booked it. I didn't know exactly what Ariana hoped to do or find while she was at the office but I had the feeling it wouldn't be good for her general safety. What if she went to confront Damien? What if she thought she could play the hero that way?

I was almost there when my phone rang. Oh man. Bryce. That probably wasn't anything good.

"Hey, what's up?" If this turned out to be something about how to work the finicky printer at the office then I was going to cut off his trigger finger.

"Hey, where are you?" he asked.

"En route to a location, why?"

"Is it Smirtech? Because I just got a call from a buddy of mine who said you were shaking the tree and seeing if any contracts fell out."

"What did you hear?" I asked anxiously.

"My buddy's buddy has a contract for two kills. He didn't say who, just that it was five million apiece. Client *might* have been your guy."

I could hear the quotation marks around 'might'. Obviously the sniper didn't want to officially confirm anything, otherwise he might be on the hook for breaking client confidentiality later.

"Thanks man. I appreciate it. I know these guys are sticking their necks out a little."

"Yeah, well, the money's already paid so if the guy's arrested, what's he gonna do? Rat out his sniper to get his money back and admit he paid for a hit?" Dark humor laced Bryce's voice. "Yeah, right. And I know you won't use that testimony to nail him."

No, I wouldn't. All I needed was to know what it was for so I could assess Damien's threat level. "I appreciate it. Tell your friend's buddy I owe him one."

"He likes Johnny Walker."

I grinned. "Will do."

I hung up and gunned the engine. Damien was willing to hire someone to take out two people. Ariana had made a list of people, and that list had consisted of college staff and administration, Damien's parents, and the family of Damien's friends Brian and Jackson. I didn't think anyone in the college staff would be the target, but I would have to look at their financials just in case they had a bump in income they couldn't explain.

That left Damien's parents, or his two friends. Or, just possibly, the parents of one of those friends. Jackson's father was a rich man. He'd provided the capital they needed to get Smirtech going. Could Damien hope to eliminate Jackson's parents so that Jackson would inherit everything and pour it all into Smirtech?

The money had been paid, so there were really only two ways for me to find out: either the sniper would do his job and I'd know when I read the damn obituaries, or I'd get it out of Damien first and call the sniper off. I didn't relish the second since it would blow my cover, but I'd rather do that than let two innocent people die.

My biggest worry was Ariana. Hiring a hitman was one thing. Rich people got used to being able to order whatever they wanted and have it done for them. Killing someone up close and personal was different. It took a particular kind of determination. Would Damien be able to hurt her if he got wind of her suspicions?

I finally pulled into the parking structure after what felt like fucking ages, even though I knew I'd broken quite a few speed limits getting here. I took deep breaths as I got out of the car and made my way to the lobby. I had to stay calm. Nobody could suspect that anything was wrong.

This wasn't usual for me. I should be calm automatically. How many times had I been in a bad situation? How many times had I made a tough call under pressure? You learned how to manage the adrenaline and instinctive panic or you didn't pan out in the military or as a security team of any real

caliber. Why was I so damn anxious?

I crossed the lobby, and my heart leapt as the doors of one elevator opened and Ariana stepped out.

Thank fuck.

She looked a bit shaken but otherwise fine. I hurried to her and grabbed her by the arm. She jolted and I saw her mouth open to scream—only for it to snap shut as she saw it was me.

“You scared the shit out of me,” I hissed, the words slipping out of me before I could stop myself.

“I’m sorry!” she whispered.

“C’mon. We’re leaving.” I practically dragged her back down to the parking garage. “What were you thinking?”

“Damien is up to something!” Ariana insisted as I continued to lead her towards my car. “I didn’t like deceiving you but I had to find out what it was!”

“Well, you found out, I’m guessing. You look spooked. Are you okay? Do he do anything to you?”

“He didn’t do anything, he just ran into me,” Ariana replied. She sounded shaky but annoyed—with me or herself for being shaken, I couldn’t tell. Maybe both. “But Damien—he’s hired a hitman. He’s going to take out Jackson and Brian, the two others he started the company with.”

A muscle in my jaw flexed. “We don’t know for certain those are the two he’ll go after.”

“Oh, it is,” she insisted. “Jackson’s dad made it so that Damien can’t have sole control of the company. He can’t kick his two buddies to the curb—like he did everyone else. So he’s getting rid of them the only way he can. Jackson won’t ever sign over his portion of the company, or at least that’s the word on the street.”

Fuck. “And right before he’s about to go public would be the perfect time to shuffle funds and stocks to consolidate power.”

It would have to be carefully done so the deaths didn't look suspicious, but if the assassin was worth their salt (and for five million a head, they should be) then they'd make it look like tragic accidents and they'd get the timing right. Damien Harcourt would simply suffer two losses right around the time of the public offering, and everyone would feel bad for him, and he'd have to take control during such a turbulent time in his company after all, and that would be that.

As long as nobody saw fraud, they wouldn't look too closely, and fraud wasn't the issue here. So what else was there to find?

Once we arrived at my car, I practically shoved Ariana inside.

"Now this feels like a proper kidnapping," she muttered as she got in.

"Don't even start." I started up the car and tried not to peel out of there like we were running away after robbing a bank. "If he suspects that you know something he could kill you."

Ariana chewed her bottom lip. "I know," she said softly. "It was terrifying to run into him."

Silence fell in the car. I felt bad for snapping at her. I was just fucking worried about her. She was a good person. She didn't deserve to get in the crossfire of someone else's greed and ambition.

"What do we do?" she asked, her voice soft.

I took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "We have to find a way to stop him," I said. "Or at the very least make sure that he goes to jail for what he's done."

A frown marred her brows. "Can we stop him?"

"If he's already paid the assassin, then probably not. I'd have to find a way to figure out who the guy is and stop him from completing the task, and that would be a hard sell. In that kind of world your word is your bond. Not completing a job that you were paid for? People are going to ask questions. They're going to wonder why. It'll damage your credibility."

"If you could figure out who it is, could you tell them to call it off

because nobody will know that they were hired?” Ariana asked. “I mean—they were paid so it’s not like any work has gone to waste.”

I pondered that as I navigated the streets back to my home. “It’s... possible. But we shouldn’t rely on that.” If enough word had gotten out in our community then that would be a problem. You couldn’t put the cat back in the bag.

“Damien would try again,” I added. “So we would need to find a way to stop him completely.” One that wouldn’t drag either of us into it.

Ariana watched as I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “Why do you do that?”

I stopped. “I didn’t realize I was. It’s just a habit.”

“It’s like you’re mentally coding.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess I am. It’s just how my brain works.”

Ariana smiled. “I like it.”

I definitely was not feeling anything about that. Not at all.

I managed to get us to the house safely and practically shoved her inside. “You’re in extra danger now that he’s had contact with you.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure how good of a liar I am.”

Well, that was reassuring. “I still have reason to be at the office so I’ll figure out what we’re going to do moving forward and how we can nail him.”

“What about the thefts?” Ariana asked. She looked embarrassed that she was even asking. “I’m sorry. That’s selfish of me. I just—if Damien is arrested for some reason or other then people might look into the company and they might find the thefts and what I did. They’ll want an explanation.”

“I’ll figure that out,” I promised her. I was concerned, though. She had a point. If the team brought on was as good as I was...

Well. Not many people were as good as I was. Or as Ariana was. But you couldn’t rely just on your own skills, as her ability to hack through my home security system had proven.

Ariana looked reassured by my words, though. “You’re sure?”

This woman really didn't have many reasons to trust me. It would be so much easier if I just turned her in along with Damien when I got what I needed against him. But she still looked at me like I could really save her.

I took her face in my hands. "Ariana. I promise, I'll find a way to get you out of this."

Somewhere in the back of my head, Vaughn started laughing. Yeah, I was a goner. But I almost didn't care.

Ariana inhaled sharply. "You really can't promise me that. I know you can't."

"Yes, I can." I hadn't ever failed a mission yet and I didn't plan to now. "Just trust me. I'll figure it out."

Ariana's eyes searched my face with a piercing, demanding gaze. I stayed firm. I didn't have the answers yet, but I was determined to find them.

"Why?" Ariana asked. Her voice was harsh, but then it cracked at the end, and tears filled her eyes.

She was scared. And probably wondering why she had any reason to trust someone when she'd been on her own for so long.

"Because..." Dammit. I wanted to look away, to hide my face, for possibly the first time in my life. I had been emotionally compromised by her from the start, and I hated it. But now we were down to the wire and I supposed it was time for me to be honest.

I looked her in the eyes. "Because I care about you. Far more than I should. And I want to help take care of you because nobody has and you deserve that. You shouldn't have lost that with your parents."

Ariana looked down and wiped at her eyes. "You really don't owe me anything. We can argue all day long about semantics and this weird game we're playing, but we don't actually owe each other anything. Nobody would blame you for turning me in, including me."

"I'm not going to turn you in." The moment I said it, I knew it was true.

Even if it would be harder to get us both out of this and avoid getting my

own reputation damaged for helping shield a criminal—I wasn't going to turn her in. I truly believed in what she was doing, even if I felt she was going about it in the wrong way. And I cared about her too much to let her be punished for helping people.

“I'll figure something out, but I'm not turning you in,” I reiterated, even if that meant pulling every favor in law enforcement owed to me to make that happen. “I'm keeping you safe. No matter what.”

Ariana stared at me for a moment in apparent shock, her mouth open and eyes wide. “You really mean that.” It was a statement, not a question, but there was still a note of wonder in her voice.

I nodded. “I do.”

For all that I had a bit of a soft heart, and I could admit to that—I found myself without any poetic words to say. It was like it all crammed up in my throat. I liked spending time with her and I respected her. I liked her décor suggestions for my house, and I liked coming home to her. I liked that we could take turns cooking for each other and that I could talk with her about computers and that she was so damn talented at them.

Ariana stared at me for another moment, and it was like she could read everything I couldn't find a way to say in my eyes, because she lifted onto her tiptoes and kissed me.

I kissed her back, my hands falling to her waist. This wasn't what I'd expected. I would've thought that Ariana would want to get away from me, that I was just a semi-reliable protector and a good time sexually. But instead she seemed—relieved. Overwhelmed.

The kiss kept going on, neither of us willing to stop. I found myself clutching her, pulling her against me, like someone might try and rip her away from me. I would've felt embarrassed at myself, except that Ariana was clinging to me, looping her arms around my neck and sliding her fingers into my hair to grip tightly while she pressed herself against me.

My hands slid down and I picked her up as Ariana wrapped her thighs

around me, stumbling a little until I had her pressed against the wall.

This wasn't anything like our previous times together, times I'd kept myself completely leashed and under control. I hadn't given into any urges to let loose. I had kept myself precise. I hadn't taken her to my actual bedroom, I hadn't slept with her after the sex, I'd been in control.

I didn't do any of that now.

Ariana could've so easily been caught and turned into a patsy or worse if Damien had realized what she knew—and what she'd done. I could've lost her before I ever really had her, because of all my friends, I turned out to be the chickenshit who couldn't admit when he was falling for a girl. I wasn't going to make that mistake again.

I felt wild, kissing her with abandon, the hall filled with the slick noises of our mouths and Ariana's tiny little moans. She clung to me wildly, her hands roaming all over me like she couldn't figure out where she wanted to touch me, greedy for all of me.

Not that I was any better. I ground against her, my cock straining at the fabric of my pants. Jesus, I wanted to just fuck her hard right up against this wall. I hadn't had an out of control hookup like this since... since college, actually. Once I found BDSM and I knew I didn't have time for the relationship I wanted, I was careful to never get my heart involved, waiting for the right woman.

Looked like I'd finally found her, and I'd been stupid enough to nearly let her go.

I dug my fingers into her thighs, relishing the softness and warmth. Even though the fabric I could tell that she was wet. I couldn't wait to feel it—on my fingers, on my mouth, on my cock. I was going to fuck her so goddamn hard...

Ariana moaned as I kissed down her neck. "Fuck me, Seth, *please*..."

A growl slipped out of me, like someone was trying to take her away from me. I continued to thrust between her legs and Ariana's eyes rolled back

into her head. “N-no, you’re gonna make me... come...”

I practically ripped her shirt off, throwing it to the side. Ariana tugged at mine, helping me to get it off while we desperately thrust together like a couple of teenagers. I wanted to make her come just from this, just from grinding against my clothed dick, like we really were sixteen and fueled by lust. I wanted her that fucking desperate.

Ariana clawed at my bare shoulders and threw her head back against the wall. “Seth,” she moaned. “Seth!”

She kept chanting my name as she shuddered, and I felt the front of my pants get wet with her orgasm. *Fuck.*

As much as I wanted to take her right here against the wall, we were both wearing pants, and if we were going to bother to get those off we might as well be on a horizontal surface.

Besides, I really wanted to fuck her in my bed.

Ariana squeaked as I hoisted her up and carried her up the stairs. “God, yes,” she pleaded. Her hands framed my face and she kept kissing me—she was damn lucky I was strong enough that I wouldn’t drop her and that I knew my way through my house by heart so I didn’t need to see where I was going.

When we reached the bedroom and I tossed her onto the bed, Ariana blinked and looked around, confused. She looked so fucking hot, topless and spread out for me, but there was real confusion on her face.

“We’re not going to the other room?”

I shook my head. “That room is for a scene.” Not that we couldn’t do BDSM in my bedroom, but I didn’t know how to get into all of it now, how I was feeling and what I wanted from us.

Ariana softened and gave me a shy smile, and I had the feeling she knew what I was really saying. Or at least I hoped she did.

I undid my pants, tearing the rest of my clothes off while Ariana did the same, so I could crawl onto the bed over her. I desperately wanted to slam inside of her, but I didn’t want to rush this. I found myself kissing her more

slowly this time, putting my body weight on her and settling into the feeling of our skin pressed together.

Even when I had been cuddling and comforting her after sex, it hadn't been like this. The slow, simmering burn of anticipation and pleasure was completely different from the reassuring laziness of aftercare. I ran my hands all over her body, taking my time like it was the first time I'd touched her, the first time I'd felt her warm skin and her curves.

And Ariana was finally able to really touch me back.

Her hands roamed all over me, a little greedier than my own, excitement lacing every touch she gave me. I let her do whatever she wanted. I'd done whatever the hell I wanted to her, after all. It was only fair she had a turn.

I slid my hand down and dragged my fingers through her folds, feeling just how goddamn wet and ready she was.

Ariana shivered. "I want you inside me."

I wanted that so fucking badly. I grinned and nipped at her neck. "Then why don't you make that happen?"

Her hand wrapped around my cock and I groaned, my head dropping to her shoulder. *Yes*. She dragged her fingers up and down the shaft, at first just feeling my size and length, before her grip tightened and she stroked me. Her thumb toyed with the tip of my cock, finding all the things that made pleasure shoot through me and my body jerk in her grip.

Ariana was breathless, her gaze hungry on my shaft. She was so damn eager. I adored it, and her.

"C'mon, baby," I urged her. "Let me fuck you good and hard, the way you like. Let me fill you up."

Ariana shuddered deliciously, and guided my cock into her. "Yes," she whispered. "Please..."

She didn't have to beg me twice. I thrust into her, my fingers digging into the sheets for leverage. Ariana arched, clenching around me, so hot and tight as I drove all the way home.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Oh my God, yes!”

She was so vocal in bed—which I loved—sounding almost shocked every time we fucked, like she had no idea how good sex could be before now. I wrapped my hand around her thigh and hitched it up, looping her leg around my lower back to get better leverage and bring her even closer to me. Ariana shrieked and raked her nails down my arms, gasping and writhing on my cock.

“That’s it,” I growled. I didn’t want her to hold back. “Show me how much you like it, sweetheart, that’s it.”

Ariana sucked me into her, greedy for my cock, hitching her hips up in time with my rhythm as I thrust wildly into her. I didn’t care about staying in control this time. I just wanted to fuck her until we both came and she was screaming my name. I wanted her to belong to me in the simplest, most primal way possible.

I was harsh as I pounded into her, in a way that I normally wasn’t. I bit her when we kissed and thrust roughly into her, out of control, wild like an animal. Ariana was just as wild back, clawing and biting, scratching me, clinging to me. I sped up as I felt my orgasm roaring through me like a speeding train, rushing through me—oh *fuck*—

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. I came so hard I let out a loud moan, shaking from the force of my release. Ariana whimpered and clenched around me, and when I looked down at her glassy expression I realized she’d come, too.

I didn’t want the moment between us to end just yet. Not the closeness. Not even being inside her. I rolled her over onto my chest, still keeping my cock inside of her. I let the warmth of her body send little aftershocks through mine. All the rough energy of before, the desperation, was drained out of me. I held her close and kissed her everywhere, keeping us joined. Ariana whimpered, clenching every so often around me like she couldn’t help herself. It made my cock jerk weakly inside of her, the spirit willing even if the flesh needed a break.

I slid my hands down to knead her ass when she tried to lift herself off me, pushing her back down onto my cock. “What?” Ariana moaned, blinking, her eyes dazed.

I grinned up at her. “Oh,” I assured her, “we’re not done yet.”

I was fucking her one more time before we were through.

CHAPTER 20



Ariana

I hadn't felt this desperate and wild since high school, when sex was new and all us teenagers wanted to do was explore all the different ways to make our bodies feel good. I definitely hadn't ever had sex that was actually this rough and hot and frantic, though, and I loved it.

And then—then Seth said that we weren't finished yet.

I was on top of him now, and his cock was still inside of me. He wouldn't let me off, grabbing my ass and keeping me speared on him when I tried to push away. He wasn't hard anymore, but he was still nice and filling inside of me, and there was something sexy and naughty about keeping his cock in there, like I was a good little submissive being his cockwarmer.

Maybe we could play with that idea another time.

My brain was so full of hazy pleasure that it didn't even occur to me to be concerned that I was thinking about 'other times' with Seth, like those were guaranteed. I was floating on the high of Seth's possessiveness and his promise to protect me.

We explored each other slowly, the orgasms chasing away our neediness

for now, exchanging slow, deep kisses. Honestly, I felt like all that was missing was a roaring fire and a cliché bearskin rug. Seth touched me like I was precious and valued. I had never been touched or kissed like this before.

I hoped that this wouldn't be the last time.

Seth kept kissing me like we had nowhere to be and nothing to do except this. I melted into him, my trust in him complete. If he wasn't concerned, then neither was I. Why would I be worried? Seth had promised he would protect me, and I believed in him.

Little by little, I felt his cock harden inside of me again. I gasped as my body flooded with renewed heat. I squirmed, clenching instinctively. There was something so erotic and naughty about it, and something so... so submissive in having him inside me and just slowly getting hard while I couldn't do anything about it.

“You feel that?” Seth purred as he kissed along the slope of my shoulder. “Get me nice and hard again so I can fuck you again.”

I squirmed on top of him, a whimper escaping me. Seth put his hands on my hips and ground me down onto his filling cock. I shivered all the way up my spine, panting. It felt so good... so wrong and naughty and delicious...

Seth kissed me again, deep and slick, and I whimpered around his tongue, sucking on it eagerly. I felt almost like a plaything, one that he was able to use to make himself hard again, one he could touch and kiss and play with as much as he wanted. It wasn't like when we were in the sex room. This was more intimate and fluid. But it was still submission, he was still in control, and it still fulfilled that itch deep in my soul.

Seth's dick hardened inside of me more and more as we continued to kiss until I was grinding down on his fully hard cock, moaning eagerly.

“You want to come, baby?” Seth murmured. “You want to fuck yourself on my cock?”

I nodded, words stolen from me. I was so desperate I was about to start riding his cock like I was back on the machine—whether he gave me

permission or not.

Seth chuckled, his lips trailing up my neck. He was composed as ever, but there was something more relaxed about him now. I liked how wild he'd been when we'd fucked a few minutes ago, how he'd just embraced his desires. It had been another form of connection between us and it had been so... delicious.

But there was also something more to our joining. More to the way we were connecting now. Another layer underneath it all that hadn't been there before.

"Go ahead," Seth murmured. "Fuck yourself on my cock, sweetheart. I want to feel how wet you are... how much you want it..."

He didn't have to tell me twice. I braced my hands on his shoulders and thrust down onto his shaft with wild abandon.

Seth tightened his grip on my hips. "No, like this."

He guided me into thrusting deep and slow instead, and he rolled his hips up to thrust his cock into me just the same. It was like another version of his cock getting hard inside of me, gradual but inexorable and so, so amazingly good.

Seth made sure I kept up that slow, deep pace, not letting us give into the desire to be frantic and rushed this time. Instead, the arousal and pleasure built up slowly between us as we panted into each other's mouths, and I took his cock over and over again inside of me.

I almost didn't want to ever come, didn't want this to ever stop. The way that I felt, pressed against him, on top of his firm, broad body, his erection hot and thick and *pulsing* inside of me... I never wanted it to end.

But of course it was going to. I could feel my orgasm building steadily inside of me, an increasing pressure of the best kind that I couldn't ignore. Little mewls escaped my mouth as I rocked down onto Seth's cock again and again.

I fell forward as Seth pumped up into me harder, my hands braced on

either side of his face and my knees on either side of his hips, spread wide. His hands pressed me down against him as he thrust up hard into me and I cried out into his mouth, squirming and wordlessly begging.

I felt like we were more connected than we'd ever been before, and I knew instantly that I couldn't let this go. I couldn't let *him* go.

Seth finally sped up, fucking me harder, faster, and I gasped as he found an angle that dragged pleasure through me like electricity. I came with a moan. It was like my body was melting. Seth growled and I felt him releasing inside of me, and I melted even further.

I shuddered and collapsed on top of him, the both of us breathing hard.

Seth's fingers gently skimmed up and down my back. For a moment we lay there, sated, just breathing together.

This was different, too. After the other times we'd had sex I'd felt so completely exhausted, almost out of my body. Or maybe even more in my body than ever before, but with my mind gone.

This wasn't so much exhaustion of the mind as it was just... the pleasant tiredness that came after physical exertion. And we could just breathe together. I didn't need to be taken care of. I was just able to relax with Seth and hold him and be held.

I really loved the sex that Seth had opened my mind to. But I had wanted this, too—something intimate where we didn't have to think or plan anything, we could just be together in the moment and enjoy each other's bodies.

Eventually, Seth pushed himself up onto his elbows and I sat back on his legs so that I could look at him. Seth stopped running his hands over me, and just held me instead. I felt a sense of peace wash over me.

I didn't want to break the silence. But at the same time... I felt like something had passed between us. Like we had shared something. I didn't want to ignore that and shove it under the rug.

The fact was, I'd liked him before I realized what he was up to and what danger I was in. I'd wanted him to ask me out and I'd wanted to flirt with

him. Was it too late for us? Or could we possibly have something between us after all?

Just say something, dammit.

The same boldness that had seized me when I chose to start stealing seized me now. I hadn't gotten anywhere in my life by being timid. I had helped hundreds of people because I'd dared to take a chance and risk it all. Now I needed to do the same when it came to my heart.

"I don't want to leave," I blurted out.

Not my most eloquent statement, but it was all I had.

Seth stared up at me, his brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean—I don't want to leave you. I know we've got this little charade going on but I don't care about that. I wanted you to ask me out, when we first met, before I realized what was going on. I don't know—I know you can't probably—but I want you to know—"

Seth put his finger over my lips to silence me. "I don't want to hear it. Not right now. Not until I've sorted it all out and taken care of you."

Taken care of me? "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't want to start a relationship with you with all this hanging over us," Seth clarified. "But I'm not going to let you go to prison, either."

I swallowed hard, wanting so badly to believe him. "But your reputation. The truth. How are you going to handle all of it?"

Seth smirked. "You'll see." He paused, and looked around the room, then put his gaze back on mine. "I've never brought a woman in here."

I looked around, taking in the half-finished bedroom. It was rather bare, but it didn't feel like the kind of bare that I'd noticed in the homes of a lot of other men I'd hooked up with—this feeling like they just didn't know how to care for their home, or that they weren't mature enough to put in the effort to make their home a place they enjoyed living in.

It was more... unfinished, and all the more vulnerable for it. He was letting me into an area that wasn't polished, wasn't all set up and ready to

receive visitors. It was raw and open. Like us.

Seth hadn't brought anyone else into his bedroom. Just his sex room, I assumed. But he'd brought me here.

I hoped that meant something. I hoped it meant what I thought it did.

Seth smiled gently. "I'll take care of Damien, all right?"

I nodded. I believed him.

And I think I knew what he was trying to say in that moment—that he was allowing me into a place he'd never brought anyone before. That he was doing things with me he hadn't done with anyone else. The two of us, together, were something more to him, too.

I had to trust that—and hope that we'd actually get out of this without either of us going to prison.

CHAPTER 21



Seth

I was determined to keep Ariana from going to jail.

Was this selfish of me? Yes. Probably the most selfish thing I'd ever done. But she wasn't a bad person and I didn't think she deserved to go to prison for trying to help people in a broken system. The system had failed the people she helped and allowed just a few to get insanely rich. Ariana never did anything for herself. She did it all for other people. Why should she be punished for that?

I knew I should get up and take care of things, but first, I just held her in bed for a bit, letting our skin cool. My fingers ran through her thick hair. I hadn't had sex like that in... well, technically I hadn't had sex like that in years, but I didn't really think I'd had *intimate* sex like this ever before. I'd never done this with someone I really wanted to *stay*.

That wasn't something I was going to let go of so easily.

In a more just world, meeting Ariana would've been more like a romantic comedy. The banter we shared, the mutual interests, my respect for her skills... we would've had a simple, easy meeting and start to our relationship.

Instead, we had to deal with this.

But for the sake of what we could have, and this connection I felt—dammit, I wasn't going to let this go. This was what I'd been waiting for all this time and I was going to fight for it. What kind of man would I be if I didn't?

I was tempted to fall asleep right then and there, but I made us get up and shower together. There was still a bit of tension in the air. The threat of prison loomed over our heads. But Ariana was relaxed with me, and almost playful. I couldn't wait to introduce her to my parents and to my friends, to see her blossom even more once she was no longer so alone in the world and so closed off.

But for the first time—for the first time since I'd decided to give in and try for that romance I'd always wanted—I let myself be a boyfriend to someone. I goofed off in the shower with her, kissed her under the spray, and she wore more of my pajamas even though I'd gotten her plenty of her own clothes she could pick instead.

We made sandwiches for dinner, since in my worry over Ariana and her running around everywhere, neither of us had eaten in ages.

I actually went to sleep with a woman in my bed with me, for the first time since I'd bought this place.

“Is this really something you haven't done before?” Ariana asked.

She waited until I'd turned off the light, I noticed. Like she only felt safe asking that question in the dark.

“Yes,” I replied. It was funny—out of all my friends, I was the one who'd wanted a proper relationship, and now that I had the chance at one, I was terrified. “I've always wanted that one and done relationship. I wanted something serious. I was waiting for that woman I really clicked with. Until then I never wanted to give a woman the wrong impression. I'm all for a fun time but I didn't want anyone to think that I was ready for more. Call me crazy but I just felt like... when I met that person I would *know*.”

Ariana's head was on my chest, and I swore I could feel her smile in the dark. "A secret romantic. Who would've thought?"

"What about you?"

"I... I gave up on it, I guess," she admitted, her voice heavy. "I gave up on a lot in my... quest, I guess you could call it. I stopped having friends when my parents were sick. I had no time for it. I used to want a partner, a husband, but I kind of forgot about that dream."

"And now?"

"Now I... I want a family again. And I think I could... have that husband. If the man wanted it."

"The man does want it," I assured her.

I felt her press a kiss to my neck.

It was nice to sleep with someone in my arms. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done that. Early days in college, maybe? But that was more passing out with people at the end of a frat party when we'd had wild youthful sex. It wasn't nearly the same thing as holding someone I was falling in love with in my own bed in the home I hoped to build with her.

Not that I stayed the entire night.

No, I couldn't. I had work to do.

My phone vibrated softly under my pillow when my alarm went off. I slipped out of bed, leaving Ariana sleeping peacefully behind. Through the windows the moonlight lit up the nearly empty, undecorated room and Ariana's beautiful face. Soon this room would actually be full of her personal tastes and mine, warm and welcoming. The whole house would be.

I was excited to host all of my friends, to have parties, to raise a family. And now that it was all in reach, I wasn't going to let it go just because some asshole decided he wasn't going to share his wealth with his loyal friends.

It meant that, like Ariana, I was about to break the law for the greater good.

The company headquarters were dark at night and manned by just a few

security guards who were, like most, under-trained for such a job. While the best places hired security guards who were former cops or military, very, very few places provided training. They just expected their security guards to actually have the training themselves when they already arrived, whether that was from the military, the police, or a private security firm.

Unfortunately, much like bouncers, these security men were often bored and not necessarily the best bang for your buck. They were in the equivalent of an office job for their profession. The really good guys were guarding dignitaries or still in the military, working as hitmen or doing something like what I and my buddies were doing—basically, what I was saying was—it was damn easy to slip in at night when no one else was around.

And what I wanted for this, I needed to do it at night. I couldn't risk someone else running into me and asking what I was doing, asking too many questions. I needed a few hours where I could just focus and work my magic.

This was going to be possibly the hardest thing I'd ever had to pull off, especially since cryptocurrency was involved. The blockchain was a newer technology that people were still learning about, and in theory it was impossible to falsify records with it. However, just because something worked one way in a theory didn't mean it worked that way in application. I was going to now test that and see if I couldn't succeed where Ariana had previously failed.

I couldn't show that Damien had hired a hitman. Nobody could prove where his money had gone once it was cashed out of his account, and the hitman wouldn't talk, if I could even get his or her identity. And I wanted to keep my reputation with the rest of our contacts, thanks. If I ratted out a hitman we'd all be sunk.

But, I could beat the hitman to the punch.

If I could make it look like the money Ariana had taken had been stolen by *Damien*, and then made two botched murder attempts that framed him, the hitman would have no reason to carry out the hits. It would put too much heat

on them. Damien would be indicted for the attempted murder of two of his executives, *and* for stealing from his own company. Brian and Jackson's lives would be saved and nobody would even know that Ariana had done anything wrong.

This would all have to be done now, though. I had no idea when Damien was going to move. I assumed he was waiting until I caught the thief, and then he would give the hitman the order and make the public offering—or perhaps the other way around, I wasn't sure on that, but either way, he wanted that thief dealt with first.

It was kind of funny, in a dark way. If Damien hadn't found that someone was stealing from him, then we never would've discovered that he was planning something shady. But he never would've found the thief if he hadn't been investigating his system so closely in an attempt to cover his own tracks.

I parked down the street at a meter, then walked around to the back of the building. There was a security camera, but judging by the angle...

I stayed in the blind spot, then walked up and under to use a lockpick to get into the stairway entry. Stairwells tended to be a good place to try your luck getting in. Because they were relied on for emergencies like fires, they didn't usually have electric locks the same as other areas of a building that might otherwise require a keycard. The last thing you wanted was people unable to escape from a burning building because the electricity had gone out on the card readers and the doors were all locked.

Once I was inside, I made my way up the stairs and to Damien's office on the top floor. I kept an eye out for cameras, but as I suspected, there weren't any up on this top floor, only at the elevators. The executives didn't want to be spied on.

Getting into Damien's office would be a problem if I was just a normal employee, but I had given myself level four clearance, so it wasn't an issue at all. Level four clearance meant that you could get into the office at any time

without there being an alert—the only level to do so.

It was one of the reasons I'd asked Ariana if she had it back when we first started. She'd managed to get around those limitations but at the time I'd assumed that was one of the perks the thief would need in order to do their dirty work. I hadn't expected the thief to be able to hack well enough to get around that.

Time to get to work.

I sat down at the desk and worked on replacing all of the things Ariana had done to make it look like Damien had been the person taking those microtransactions. It was the most difficult piece of hacking work I had ever done, and I didn't have a lot of time to do it, but I could make it work.

People were able to scam others out of their crypto in their wallets. I could do the same here. I could admit that I did have an advantage in my reputation and previous work. Our security firm had worked for a lot of rich and powerful people, and we'd proven our integrity time and time again. If Damien's lawyers tried to question my work, there was an entire community of the rich and powerful who would back me in my research, not to mention all the previous military, government, and security people who would also take my side.

I just had to make sure it wouldn't be easy to undo my hard work so that anyone trying to prosecute me would have a hard time getting anyone to change their minds about me.

It took me until the wee hours of the morning. I basically had to get into the most basic code of the company and rewire it from scratch, bottom up, and I had to do it without crushing any coconuts, so to speak. If I fucked up any weird random coding that had been put in to keep the system running then I'd bring the whole thing crashing down around my ears.

But I had spent the last couple of weeks getting to know this system inside and out while trying to find the thief, and I had Ariana's credentials that kept a log of everything she did, which included the real, actual work

she'd done making repairs and patches for the company's systems. I used that as a blueprint when I was in danger of getting lost.

My phone told me it was five in the morning by the time I finished. I'd been at this for seven hours. Christ.

I triple-checked everything. This had to be perfect. I was putting my integrity on the line, breaking the law and framing a man for another person's crime, and all for Ariana. I didn't mind at all. I was happy to do it for her. But I doubted a jury would understand.

Everything was in place. I had rewritten the very code of the company's system and then used the powerful electricity from the company's bitcoin farming to undo and then redo the blockchain. Supposedly it was impossible—that was what cryptocurrency believers touted as the big draw—but if you had the electric power, you could in fact undo the computer equation, then redo it. I just needed every single bit of the company's electric power at my disposal.

Another reason why I had to do this at night.

But now we were set. Unless one of my very good buddies in the hacking community was willing to work against me to try and undo my work, then we were in the clear.

I just had to make sure that nobody else got hurt, and nobody even thought to look that deeply into the thefts.

Five in the morning was cutting it close on the other half of my operation but... I looked at the clock again.

Dare I risk it? If I did, I could have missed that early-morning window to catch someone unaware. Three to four in the morning was the best time. On the other hand, if I waited an extra day, that would give the hitman time to strike if Damien gave him the go ahead. I shouldn't count on Damien's patience.

Brian, I couldn't do. The man had come from a middle-class background, same as Damien, and he believed in working for his position. Jackson was a

rich man's son and refused to give up his position not because he really cared, but because he wanted to keep his slice of the pie. He'd be the one sleeping in.

I went to Jackson's place.

He lived in the city in one of those fancy condos not far from the office, on the fifteenth floor. I disabled the security cameras in the foyer outside the elevator that led directly to his condo, the only one on that floor, and made sure they stayed off. I wanted a security guard to notice.

From there I had to figure out how to make it look like a *botched* murder attempt, so that the real hitman would steer clear of such a debacle and Jackson and Brian would ultimately remain safe . . . and alive.

Jackson was sound asleep in his bedroom, snoring away. He'd want to start the day with a fresh cup of coffee. I went into the kitchen and found the cleaning supplies. Aha. Antifreeze. Nice to know the man actually had some care for his car.

I used gloves, just like the actual killer would, and mixed antifreeze into the coffee. This was the kind of thing you had to be careful about. You had to put in enough to make the person sick, but not enough to actually kill them. Antifreeze was a great murder method—easy to purchase, and it had a sweet taste so it could be mixed in with a person's drink like a sugary coffee or a soda.

Again, any smart killer would wear gloves. But what most people forgot was that the reason burglars and such wore ski caps over their heads wasn't just for some weird aesthetic. It was because we shed hair constantly, and police could find it during a forensic sweep. I'd gotten some hairs from Damien's office, and I put them around the bottle of antifreeze and the coffee tin.

Damien would have no reason to touch either of them.

I then went into another room, and waited.

At about seven in the morning I heard an alarm go off—a few times,

actually—and then I heard the shower start up. About twenty minutes later there was the sound of stumbling around, then the coffee maker starting up in the kitchen.

Perfect.

Coffee made, silence fell... and then I heard the groaning. By now, the security team should've noticed that a camera was out of power on this floor and had been for a bit. Jackson stumbled back into the bathroom and began to vomit, and then a pounding started on the door.

Security, right on time.

They managed to get inside and immediately ran for the sounds of vomiting in the bathroom—two of them—and I heard a 9-1-1 call start up.

Time for me to go.

I slipped out while their backs were to me, focused on the bathroom, and then I took the elevator down.

Ambulances should get there on time. It was easy to learn how to kill, and kill cleanly. Harder was learning how to take someone to the brink without sending them over. I felt bad for making Jackson sick, but it was better than being executed by a hitman.

Damien would've been to Jackson's place at some point or another. Antifreeze poisoning tended to be done over time, and with his hairs in place, and the public offering about to happen... then the proof of the stealing he'd been doing, all of it mysteriously disappearing into cash...

My work here was done.

CHAPTER 22



Ariana

I woke up to arms sliding around me and I stretched, opening my eyes. “What...?”

“Morning.” Seth kissed my neck, warm and affectionate.

I rolled over and stared at him, my brow furrowing. “You seem... oddly cheerful.”

Not that he hadn’t been in a good mood last night, it was just that the general mood had been more... well. About love. But bittersweet love. Not this cozy happiness. Seth seemed incredibly relaxed.

I sat up. “Is everything okay?”

Seth grinned. “Everything’s great.”

“What happened?”

Seth sat back against the pillows. He was dressed, all in black I noted, and looked like he’d been out with his hair slightly wind tousled. “I took care of things. You don’t have to worry about going to jail.”

My head spun. “How—what?”

“I took care of it. Damien will be blamed for the thefts.”

My jaw dropped. “Wh-what?”

“It took some work—”

“No.” I pointed my finger at him. “No, that is not some work, okay? You’re fucking with the blockchain itself to do that, you would’ve had to—to—to rewrite the entire system—the amount of electricity and—”

Seth just stared at me, waiting, and my voice eventually trailed off. “You—you did that?” I squeaked.

Seth nodded slowly.

“But—the money—the cash he took out for the hitman—”

Seth’s face grew grim. “It’s not going to happen. Right now, Jackson is fighting for his life in the hospital. It’s not going to be fun, but he’s going to pull through. When experts analyze his coffee, they’ll find that it has antifreeze in it. And they’ll find hairs belonging to Damien Harcourt on the antifreeze bottle and the coffee can.”

My blood ran cold. “What?”

“Then they’ll look at the financials and see that Harcourt was stealing from the company and that all this money was turned into cash and is now missing. Between that and the botched murder attempt, they’ll be sending him to prison for life.”

I stared at him like an absolute moron, my mouth open and eyes wide with shock. “You just set a man up.”

“I did,” Seth agreed amicably, then shrugged. “He deserves it. Now that I’ve moved against him, the hitman can’t do anything, so he’s going to just take the money and run. Damien’s in hot water, framed for murder and embezzlement, as he should be. No hired gun is going to show loyalty to a sinking ship, especially when he’s already been paid.”

“But... but what if it came to light?”

“It won’t,” he said confidently.

“But what if it does?”

Seth looked at me. I saw it again—that dangerous glint that I’d seen in

him before, when he'd told me that he knew I was the thief. That look that had told me for all his friendliness, this was a deadly man if he was crossed.

"I don't care. Then we'll fight the courts. We'll do whatever it takes."

I stared at him, unable to voice the question in my mind. Seth seemed to know what I meant, though, because he took my hands in his.

"Look. Ask my buddies—I'm the idiot romantic of the group. I knew that I would know when I found the woman I wanted to spend my life with, and I wasn't going to bother trying it with anyone else. And that person is *you*. Now that I've found you, do you really think I'm going to let you go? Over a good deed you were doing? Because this jackass was able to cover up what a heartless piece of shit he is? Absolutely not. You're mine, Ariana. I told you that you were, and I meant it. And I always protect what's mine."

To my shock, tears sprang into my eyes. It had been so long since I'd had anyone I could rely on—anyone I could call a friend or family. Seth pulled me into his arms as I sobbed with relief I hadn't even known I needed, as he held me and reassured me, as I finally didn't have to do it all alone.

I didn't know exactly what the future would hold. I wanted to keep helping people, although clearly my thievery days were done. But I knew that I had Seth, and that was all that mattered to start over.

EPILOGUE



Seth

“Do you have the rings?” Bryce asked me for the millionth time.
“Yes, I have the rings,” I replied, also for the millionth time.

“And you’re not going to do anything crazy?”

“I will not do anything crazy,” I parroted.

Bryce was a bit of a showman but he had kept his wedding to Leigh small. Both he and Vaughn had been teasing me that they were getting married before I was when I was the only one of us who’d originally even really wanted to get married, but I was going to get even in my own way. They knew it, too, which was why Bryce was being a paranoid son of a bitch, like he thought I was going to ruin his wedding.

I’d never do such a stupid thing. Not because of Bryce, though. No, see, if I made the mistake of ruining her wedding after she spent months planning it, Leigh would murder me. Gruesomely. In public.

I was going to get even, just in a more... subtle way.

This wedding was going to kill two birds with one stone.

The first stone was obvious. I was going to do something that would be

discovered much, much later, but wouldn't upstage the wedding, *but* would still give my friends a bit of a middle finger. I was *also* going to do something that I'd been meaning to do for a while but hadn't been able to, because Ariana was too damn smart.

I should've known that the woman who was possibly the only person in the world who could hack better than I could was also the woman who would be on constant fucking alert for me to propose.

She knew it was going to happen. She'd met my parents (who fucking adored her, as I knew they would) and all of my friends. She was working with Claire at the office, now on the straight and narrow.

I was honestly just happy that she was happy.

But she'd met all the milestones. She knew I wanted kids and to get married. She knew it was coming. And she was fucking prepared any time I did the slightest romantic thing.

She'd even started to get a suspicious light in her eye every time we had sex.

There were a few times I'd been tempted to propose after a long scene, when I was giving her aftercare, but I wanted her fully present in her mind and not in the middle of subspace. So I was going to do it now, because what kind of jackass proposed during his friend's wedding?

Me. That's who.

We got through the ceremony and I didn't derail it the way Bryce kept thinking I would, but when we got to the reception, I waited for the right moment to grab Ariana and pull her away.

The DJ was playing a slower song, so I just whispered in her ear that I wanted to dance, just the two of us, and I led her out of the building and into the side garden. I really did dance with her, holding her close. She was completely relaxed in my arms, unsuspecting.

Then the song ended, and I got down on one knee.

Ariana's hand flew to her mouth. I grinned, pulling out the ring. "I think

you know what I'm going to say.”

She nodded, tears in her eyes.

“You're the person who's turned my house into a home. The one person who can challenge me with computers. I think a part of me knew since day one that *you* were the one. I love you, Ariana. Will you marry me?”

Ariana choked out a *yes* and I stood to put the ring on her...

Click! Click! Click!

Several flashes went off in our faces and I turned to scowl as Bryce and Vaughn emerged from the bushes. “You thought you were subtle?” Bryce asked, chuckling as Vaughn kept snapping pictures.

“I'm going to strangle both of you,” I warned, for killing my big moment.

Ariana took the ring from me and put it on her finger. “Ignore them and kiss me,” she said.

I did as she asked, pulling her into my arms and kissing her senselessly.

Although I did flip off my friends while I did it.

I couldn't wait for the rest of my life with this woman, my crusading little thief.

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