



My Bestie's
BILLIONAIRE
Dad

LACEY NASH

MY BESTIE'S BILLIONAIRE DAD

AN AGE GAP SURPRISE BABY ROMANCE

LACEY NASH



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my Family

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MAYA

“**Y**ou’re fired.”

“What do you mean, I’m fired?”

“I mean... today’s your last day.”

I debate asking for another definition of ‘fired’ to be a real pain in the ass. But my stubborn nature kicks in. “For what? Having an opinion?”

My (ex)boss sets his jaw. I can tell he’s trying hard not to react to my attitude.

“Maya... you know why you’re being let go.”

I do. I know exactly why, but I won’t go out without a fight. I glare at him instead. He sighs and reaches into his pocket.

“Here,” he says, tossing me an envelope of cash. “This should help.”

I snatch the envelope out of his hand. I should’ve known better than to let my feelings get in the way of my career. It was my dream job - Events Coordinator at the prestigious Sunstone Resort. It took me years to get this position.

It was a world of glittering ballrooms, grand conferences, and lavish weddings. My job was to transform ordinary spaces into extraordinary experiences. And I was good at it — really good. I have a knack for details, a flair for creativity, and can handle pressure like a real boss bitch.

I thought I was indispensable to the team.

Apparently not.

My big fat mouth has gotten me in trouble yet again. And here I am, standing in front of my boss, getting fired for speaking my mind.

Maya. I don't know where you got such an attitude from. Your father and I did not raise you like this.

My mom's words sting in my memory. In our family, there was a fine line between being outspoken and being disrespectful. In my case, that line was more like a daring tightrope I walked daily with a blindfold on.

They would sit me down, time and time again, after I'd said something too honest, too blunt, at family gatherings, at school meetings, at my part-time job at the local café.

YOU NEED to learn to filter, they would say.

I want to scream.

It all started during the marketing strategy meeting a few weeks back. As the youngest and arguably, boldest member of the team, I wasn't afraid to rattle a few cages. When my boss unveiled his latest strategy, a plan to cut costs by outsourcing labor to countries where exploitation is rampant, my heart had dropped.

I couldn't bite my tongue. "Are we *really* going to build our empire on the backs of exploited workers? Isn't there a more ethical way we can achieve cost efficiency?"

The room fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop.

My boss looked at me, not with anger, but with an unreadable expression. The meeting ended abruptly after that. And the rest is history, as they say.

I don't get it. What was I supposed to do? Keep my mouth shut and pretend like it was okay? No way. That's not who I am, and it never will be.

Maya, just keep your mouth shut. It's not worth it.

More memories from my childhood flood my brain. I question myself.

Is it better to stay quiet when something is wrong?

I'm not convinced.

I shake my head and look up at my boss. He's still standing there, looking impassive. "Well..." He looks me dead in the eye. "You can go now, Maya. We're done here."

I turn and leave without a word — not even goodbye. As I walk out the door, I know this is it for me and Sunstone Resort. Losing this job feels like I'm losing a part of myself.

The crisp Fall air hits my face. My feet come to a stop and my eyes fall on the trees. The falling leaves are reminiscent of my own situation.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, jolting me out of my thoughts. I grab the phone and look at the name across the screen.

"Great," I mumble as I read it. With reluctance, I answer the call. "Hey, Mom."

I prepare myself for one of 'those' conversations.

"Maya, sweetie. How was your day?" Mom's voice flows through the phone. It's bursting with the usual fake perkiness that I'm not in the mood for at the moment.

"Well..." I hesitate. "Not great."

There's a pause on the line. "What happened, Maya?"

I take a deep breath, bracing myself for the inevitable fallout. "I... I got fired today."

Silence. It's so thick and heavy I can almost feel it pressing down on me through the phone. Finally, she speaks. "What?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I got fired."

"Maya. You were doing so well. What happened this time?"

"What do you think, Mom? I spoke up about something I felt was wrong and got fired for it."

There's a long pause. "We've talked about this, Maya. You can't just go around stirring up trouble."

"Mom, they were exploiting people. I couldn't sit there and say nothing."

There's another long pause. "Maya, you have to think about your future. You can't afford to throw away good opportunities like this."

I can't help but roll my eyes. "Thanks for the advice, Mom."

My tone must have given away my irritation because there's a soft sigh from the other end. "Maya, I just want what's best for you."

"I know, Mom. I know."

The conversation ends, but the disappointment lingers.

I stand there, surrounded by the falling leaves. A chill runs through me and I wrap my arms around myself. The cold air does nothing to numb the pain of rejection and failure clawing at my heart.



AFTER STOPPING at Eli Tea Bar to kill some unwanted free time, I make my way over to the youth club. I've been volunteering there for years now. It's my sanctuary and playground all rolled into one.

"Maya!" I hear a familiar voice call out to me from across the room. I turn to see who it is.

"Hey, Kitty Kait!" I throw up a playful kitten wave.

Kaitlyn is my partner in mischief. My best friend. I met her years ago at the youth club and we hit it off immediately. She volunteers here too and her dad is a big-time donor. She's a few years younger than me, but she gets me and she's like the sister I always wanted.

I make my way toward her and start laughing when I see her gaze locked in on a doodle-ridden notepad.

“Planning to take over the world?” I laugh again as I slide into the seat next to her.

“Maybe.” She grins before turning to face me. “You in?”

“I don’t think I have a choice.”

She quirks an eyebrow at me. “What does that mean?” She knows something’s up.

“Well, let’s just say that I have a lot of time on my hands now.”

Her grin fades and she leans forward, suddenly serious. “What’s up, Maya?”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the conversation. “You know my job at the resort?” My hand starts fidgeting with a loose thread on my jacket.

Kaitlyn nods, her brow furrowing. “Yeah, your gig with the douchey boss dude. What about it?”

“He fired me, Kait.” I can see from her wide eyes that she’s processing the revelation. “I need to find a new job ASAP. The rent, the bills... you know... a girl’s gotta make some money.”

I scan Kaitlyn’s face to study her reaction. There’s no panic. Just the steady look of a friend ready to dive into the trenches with me. It softens the blow from the day.

She leans back. “You know, Maya...” Her eyes flick over to meet mine. Her tone is more serious than usual, but I can see a playful spark in her eyes. “This might be a good thing. I mean, look at you. You’ve been working yourself to the bone for that... that man.”

“You’re not wrong,” I squeeze in before she continues.

“And when you’re not working, you’re here.” She leans forward again, her eyes piercing mine. “You need to get out more, Maya. Have some fun. You’re young, gorgeous, and sassy as hell. You don’t need to spend so much of your

precious time working yourself to death for a man who doesn't appreciate you."

That's classic Kaitlyn, always trying to find the silver lining in every situation, no matter how messy. But maybe she's right. Maybe this is the universe telling me it's time to leap, to explore something new. I give her a small smile. "You're right, Kaitlyn... But also... I have these things called bills. And I have to pay them every month," I say sarcastically.

Kaitlyn's dad is loaded. And when I say loaded, I mean *loaded*.

He pays for Kaitlyn's apartment - a swanky, high-rise in the heart of River North. It's the kind of place that makes you wonder if you've stepped into a catalog for 'Luxury Living: Chicago Edition'. It's not even fair how gorgeous it is; floor-to-ceiling windows with breathtaking views of the city skyline. And it's in the nicest neighborhood of Chicago, the kind of place where you'd expect a billionaire to park his daughter.

After growing up with everything she ever wanted, sometimes I'm shocked at how normal and humble she is. But I'd be lying if I said she knew what it was like to live on her own and have to figure out how to pay bills and get by. She's never had to worry about that a day in her life.

I see a mischievous grin spread across Kaitlyn's face. "Wait a minute... I have an idea..."

Uh oh.

"My dad... he's looking for an assistant to work with him at his office. His quit out of the blue and he's freakin' out."

"What?" I stare at her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, apply to be my dad's assistant." Her voice is tinged with excitement.

Kaitlyn's one for thinking outside the box, but I don't know if this is a good idea. I don't usually mix work and play together. It might be weird. What if I want to complain about my boss? I can't complain about her dad to her. That could be awkward. I don't want anything to get between my friendship with Kaitlyn. She means too much to me.

Not to mention I'm not sure if I even want to work with him. I've never met the guy. People around the city talk about him like he's a grumpy old rich man.

"He's a great boss - tough but fair - and you'd get great benefits." She winks at me.

I start to think about it more seriously.

Hmm.

On the plus side, my parents would approve. They would like how well-known he is in the city. And for once, they'd be happy that I'm 'on the right path' — climbing the corporate ladder like a good little girl.

I continue my silent thoughts.

"That's it. I'm making the call." Kaitlyn grabs her phone out of her backpack

"Wait!" I'm still not sure. But Kaitlyn's already dialing. Her eyes are sparkling with excitement. My heart is pounding in my chest.

"Dad? Yeah, I have the perfect person for you... Maya."

Fuck. This is happening.

Kaitlyn hangs up and grins at me. "It's done. He'll interview you tomorrow at our house, 5 PM. You better bring your A-game, girl." She laughs and gives me a playful punch on the arm. I take a deep breath and silently hope that this doesn't blow up in my face.

HUNTER

Sitting in my office, I stare at the walls lined with degrees and accolades, feeling a vein throb in my head. My assistant, who was with me for years and years, had up and quit without a warning.

The sudden void in my business, the tasks that were now piling up, and the looming deadlines were enough to drive anyone to the edge.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my forehead as I try to shake off the waves of stress washing over me. Life as a big-time businessman is not always as sexy as it seems.

I need to find someone to take over this position ASAP before I blow my brains out.

But where the hell am I going to find someone?

The door opens and Kaitlyn, my daughter, bounds in with a plate in her hand.

“Hey, Dad! You busy?” She pushes the plate of cookies in front of my face. “I made these for you.”

I take a deep breath and try to smile. “Hi, sweetheart. I wasn’t expecting you. What’s going on?”

She beams at me. “Well... I had to stop by to tell you that I have the perfect person to be your assistant! She’s so smart and sassy too!” Kaitlyn continues, barely taking a breath. “You’ll love her.”

My ears perk up at her description. Few people can keep up with me, let alone bring back my signature smirk with their sass. I'm intrigued.

"And she's available to start right away," Kaitlyn adds, as if her words were the cherry on top of her story.

I can't help but raise an eyebrow at her. "Does she now? And who is this mystery girl?" I wait for her response.

"Maya."

"Maya?"

"Yeah... Maya. Dad, she'll be perfect. She works her ass off." She starts rattling off Maya's credentials and I have to interrupt.

"Kait, she's your best friend. I can't hire your best friend. It's not a good idea. Plus, it's a conflict of interest."

Kaitlyn looks up at me with puppy-dog eyes and I can feel my walls crumbling.

Damn it. She is my weakness.

"Just give her an interview, Dad."

"Honey, I can't do that."

"Well... I already told her you would interview her tomorrow."

I spin around in my chair as my eyes widen. "You... what?"

She looks at me again with those damn eyes. "I may or may not have pretended to be on the phone with you yesterday and I told her that you'd give her an interview."

"You lied to her?"

"Lying is a strong word" She bats her eyelashes at me. "I knew you'd say no if I asked so I had to take matters into my own hands." She gives me a sheepish grin.

I let out a frustrated sigh.

“TOMORROW... at 5 PM. She’ll be here for an interview.”

Fuck me.

I take a deep breath and give in to the inevitable. She knows I can’t say no when those eyes are on me.

“Kait, you can’t do that. Do you hear me?”

“Come on, Dad. Give her a shot.” She gives me another pleading look.

I sigh. “I’ll interview her only because you’ve already said something to her, but let me tell you right now. I will not be hiring her.” I cut her a serious look. “Do you understand me?”

She comes over and plants a kiss on my forehead and puts the plate of chocolate chip cookies down on my desk. “Yes, sir.” She smiles at me before turning to head out the door. She knows she has me wrapped around her little finger.

She turns back to me one last time before leaving. “Dad. Give her a real shot. Please, Dad. You’ll like her.”

I shake my head, marveling at her antics as I turn back to the cookie plate and pick one up. I stifle a groan as I start to fill out the paperwork for Maya’s interview tomorrow.

Okay, Maya... let’s see if you have what it takes.



IT’S EARLY in the morning but I can’t sleep. I’ve been tossing and turning all night thinking about the things that are piling up at work that need to get done. I need to fill this position ASAP.

I roll over and look at the clock.

4:17 AM.

I get out of bed and put on some athletic shorts before making myself a cup of coffee and heading into my gym. I might as well get a workout in if I can’t sleep.

The metallic tang of the gym has become my early morning companion. I walk over to the weights and grab a set of 30s. As I wrap my fingers around the cool steel, the weight of responsibility and worry are replaced by the physical weight in my hands. Each lift, each bead of sweat falling down my forehead becomes a rhythmic mantra, disconnecting me from the world of business deals and endless paperwork. It's just me, the weights, and the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears — a momentary reprieve.

As I'm lifting, I don't realize how much time has passed until my phone buzzes. It's a text from my ex.

Hey. I need to talk to you.

Great. Any text that starts that way from her is a guaranteed pain in my ass.

About?

I see the dots coming from her.

And then they stop.

I stare for a minute to see if they start again.

They don't.

Maybe she's over it, whatever *it* is.

I put my phone back down and as I do my phone starts ringing.

Wishful thinking.

“Yes?” I answer, expecting to be on the phone for a while with her. I can already feel my stress levels rising.

“Hunter, I heard Joe quit. Have you replaced him yet?”

This woman still somehow manages to worm her way into my business. I don't understand how she does it. We are divorced.

“No. I haven't. Working on it... why?”

“Listen, Hunter, I know it sounds crazy...” I can hear the hesitation in her voice. “But I was thinking... what if I took the job?”

I almost drop my weight. “You’re joking, right?”

“I’m serious,” she insists. “I’ve been doing some freelancing work, but it’s not steady. I need more money.”

More money? I think to myself.

She made out very well in the divorce and I still pay for almost everything for Kaitlyn. How does she need more money?

“You want to work for me? After everything?”

She cuts me off. “This has nothing to do with our past, Hunter. I need a job; you need someone to fill the position. It’s a win-win.”

I pause, the weight of her words sinking in. It’s absurd. This is half of the reason why we divorced in the first place! She worked for me for a short period of time. But we were at each other’s throats. She hated that I worked so much. She resented my work and my job and... me. Yet, she wanted more from me. More money. More shopping trips. More vacations. I busted my ass to provide for her and Kaitlyn, but it was never enough.

And now she’s asking to work with me?

“Christy. There’s absolutely no way.” The words come out harsher than I intend, but they need to be said. “There’s no way that will work.”

Silence.

Finally, she speaks up again. “Hunter... please don’t say no before you’ve even thought about it. This could actually be a great thing for both of us — and Kaitlyn. You know I’m great at what I do, and you need someone competent to take this job.”

Yes, I do.

But not her. Not my ex. I can’t go through that again.

“Christy,” I say firmly. “It’s not going to work.”

The line goes silent and a few seconds later she hangs up without another word. I exhale and start my next set of lifts,

thankful for the distraction.



IT'S EXACTLY 5 PM and I hear a light knock on my door.

“Come in,” I call out, glancing at the clock. In walks Maya, right on time.

That’s a good sign. I like punctuality.

The door slips open and I watch her as she walks in. Her dark hair is pulled back into a neat bun, her glasses are perched on her nose, giving her an air of studied seriousness that I find unexpectedly appealing.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes,” she greets me with a bright smile that flashes across her face. Her teeth are perfectly straight and her lips are rosy pink and full.

“Maya.” I nod to her. “Please, call me Hunter.”

“If you say so, Hunter,” she retorts, and I can’t help but smirk.

She does have some sass. I like it.

We start the interview and she tells me about her skillsets and her vision for herself.

“I see you’ve worked in a variety of settings, Maya,” I begin, shuffling through her impressive resume. “You seem to have a knack for adapting to new environments.”

She nods. “I like a challenge. Whether it’s a startup hustling to make its mark, or an established corporation maintaining its reputation, each environment has something unique to offer.”

“True,” I respond, appreciating her perspective. “What would you say you are looking for in this job?”

“Opportunity.” Her gaze is unwavering. “The opportunity to grow, to learn, and to make a meaningful contribution.”

I can't help but admire her passion. "There will definitely be a lot of opportunity to grow and learn here." I pause. "I do have to say, I can be pretty tough on my employees. I have high standards. Do you think you can handle the pressure?"

She doesn't flinch. "I'm sure I can."

I feel a little bulge in my pants when she says that. She's confident. It's alluring.

As we progress through the interview, I find myself more and more intrigued by her intelligence, her wit, and her warm-heartedness. It's the kind of combination that could be dangerous for a man like me. I can't help it. There's something about her that draws me in and leaves me wanting more.

"I'm curious, Maya," I find myself leaning forward, elbows on my desk as I study her. "How do you handle situations when things don't go as planned?"

"Well, Hunter... I believe that plans are guidelines, not gospel. When things go off track, I adapt, improvise, and overcome. The best opportunities often come from the most unexpected places."

I feel an inexplicable sense of attraction towards her boldness. "Impressive." My interest in her deepens.

She looks me straight in the eye and for a moment I'm taken aback by her conviction.

"Well then..." I lean back in my chair, impressed by this fiery woman before me. "It looks like you might be the one we're looking for. I want to offer you the position."

I am shocked by the words coming out of my own damn mouth.

Last night, I was swearing to Kaitlyn that there was no way I would hire Maya. I shouldn't hire her.

I start to get in my own head.

What are you doing? She's Kaitlyn's best friend.

And you're over here getting a fucking chub from her?

She's 20 years younger than you for god's sake!

Get it together or this is going to be a disaster.

Fuck. What am I doing? I can't hire her.

You already did, idiot.

“Thank you, Hunter. I'm looking forward to working with you.” A soft blush colors her cheeks. Her lips curl into a small smile.

“Me too,” I say without thinking.

She stands up and I do the same. She reaches out to shake my hand and as our hands meet, I feel a tug in my stomach. She lets go of my hand and turns to leave my office. My eyes trail down to her ass. Her figure is slender and her curves are delicious.

What the fuck am I getting myself into? I'm hit with a sudden wave of regret.

What did I just do? But it's too late now.

The door closes behind her and all I can do is sit here, my mind reeling from the consequences of my impulsive decision.

MAYA

My thoughts are on turbo speed after leaving Hunter's office.

I got the job!

Thank God. Now I don't have to worry about paying rent this month.

I smile uncontrollably as I walk down Michigan Ave.

And holy shit, is he hot.

The way his arm muscles popped out of his navy-blue collared T-shirt and his piercing green eyes against his tanned skin... And he looked like he had an impressive package. I could see when he stood up to shake my hand.

Stop it, Maya. He's Kaitlyn's dad... and your new boss.

I shake my head. My phone buzzes and I see Kaitlyn's name flash up on the screen.

"Hey, girl!"

"Hey! How'd it go? Are you officially our family's newest employee?"

I laugh out loud. "He hired me on the spot!"

I keep my mouth shut about the fact that her dad and I had a few intense moments between us in his office. It was like electricity was flowing between us. It felt a little dangerous for some reason...

"I told you he'd love you!"

“We’ll see! I’m heading home now to have a glass of wine and go to bed. I start tomorrow.”

“Well, congrats on the new job! I’m so happy it worked out.”

“Me too. Thanks for setting it up, Kait... I owe you.”



THE NEXT MORNING, I step into the labyrinth of corporate power: Holmes Investment Offices, my new workplace. As I walk into the all-glass skyscraper, it feels like I’ve entered a high-profile chess game. People are everywhere. Moving this way and that. I make my way toward the reception desk, not sure where to find Hunter.

“Good morning. I’m Maya, Hunter’s new assistant. Do you know where I can find him?”

The big-busted blonde receptionist looks me up and down before answering. “Hunter is in his office. It’s the tenth floor.” She taps her Barbie-pink acrylic nails on the marble desktop in front of her.

I thank her and swim through the river of people to the elevator, taking a deep breath as I press the button for the tenth floor.

When I step off the elevator, my heart starts to race like wild horses.

What’s wrong with me? I never get nervous.

For some reason, I have an unusual desire to impress Hunter.

I make my way to his office, the door standing tall like an ancient fortress. I pull my hand up and give the door a few knocks.

“Come in.” I hear the words echo as I push the door in. He looks up from his desk and our eyes meet for a brief but meaningful moment. He’s wearing a black button-down shirt

with slacks. He looks sexy, yet intimidating. I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

“Welcome to Holmes Investment Offices, Maya. Take a seat.”

I take my seat across from him and we start talking about the tasks for my new role.

“Alright, Maya.” His voice is as crisp as the fall air. “Here’s what I expect from you. First, punctuality. I don’t tolerate tardiness in any form. Secondly, discretion. Whatever happens within these four walls, stays here. Thirdly, efficiency. I expect all tasks to be completed promptly and correctly. No exceptions.”

He starts listing my tasks one by one.

“You’ll handle my schedule, filter my emails, prepare my reports, and coordinate with the team to ensure everything runs smoothly.” His tone is so stern it’s almost uncomfortable. “You’ll also be liaising with our clients and partners, so I expect a high standard of professionalism.”

I can’t help but feel a wave of intimidation wash over me. I didn’t sense this stern demeanor from him in the interview. And his high expectations make him seem impenetrable.

I start to question myself.

Fuck. What did I get myself into?

This is going to be a lot tougher than I thought. Maybe I can lighten the mood.

“In that case, I’m glad I didn’t bring my circus clowns to the office today. Might have clashed with your high standards of professionalism.”

I wait for a laugh, a smile, heck, even a smirk. But all I get is an icy stare. His eyes are colder than winter in Alaska.

“Good to know, Maya.” His voice is dripping with sarcasm. “But here, we focus on work. Let’s keep it that way.”

Hunter stands up and walks around the desk toward me. He’s towering over me now, and my heart starts beating faster

than a hummingbird's wings.

"Of course," I mumble, trying to keep myself from blushing. My breathing intensifies as he leans down close to my ear.

"Let me be clear, Maya... I'm not one for games or jokes in the office. But if you work hard and meet my expectations, I can guarantee you a lot of perks."

AS HE SITS BACK DOWN, my eyes drift over his broad shoulders, to the tailor-made shirt that fits him like a glove.

Perks? What kind of perks is he talking about?

My mind starts wandering down a path it really shouldn't - him bending me over his desk, his hands firmly gripping my hips. I can almost feel the cool surface of the mahogany against my skin, my body arching in response to his. I imagine his touch, strong and demanding, the weight of him pressing me into the desk. I clench my thighs together, trying to suppress the heat that's rising within me.

Those kinds of perks?

Get a grip, Maya. He is your boss. Kaitlyn's dad.

I suppress my imagination and look at him. My heart is racing as I look up into his deep green eyes. The intensity between us is strong. We're both standing in silence for a few moments before he finally pulls away and I take a deep breath.

I don't know how this is all going to turn out, but what I do know is that I like a good challenge. I'll prove myself to him.



THE NEXT FEW days at work are a grueling test of my endurance. Each task feels like a dance between perfection and disaster as I try to do everything exactly how Hunter wants it done. Somehow, I'm managing to never get it exactly right.

Hunter calls me into his office. As I walk in, I see him sitting at his desk, his piercing green eyes fixated on a document in his hands.

“Maya, have a seat.” His voice, colder than an iceberg, sends shivers down my spine.

I sit across from him, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum. He throws the document on the table.

“What is this? I asked for a breakdown report of our quarterly financial performance, not a summary of last week’s transactions.”

I swallow hard. “I thought the transactions were a reflective context for the report.”

His icy stare fixes on me. “Maya, this is not a university project. We are dealing with real money and real investors. I expect you to do exactly what is asked of you.”

Heat floods my cheeks.

Uh oh. I know this feeling all too well.

The feeling of disappointing him. Of not being good enough in his eyes. I start to think back to my childhood. My parents were never satisfied with anything I did. No matter how hard I tried, it was never enough.

I FEEL my attitude about to burst through my chest.

I’m not a child anymore. I need to stand up for myself.

I take a deep breath and look Hunter straight in the eye.

“Fair point, Mr. Holmes... but last time I checked, ‘real investors’ appreciate a holistic perspective. You know, understanding the ‘why’ behind the numbers. But hey, what do I know? I’ll just stick to coloring within the lines.” I flash him a faint, sarcastic smile as I lean down to collect the document from his desk.

He stares at me for a few seconds, not saying anything. I get nervous as flashbacks of the time I was fired as I wait for him to say something.

But something strange happens instead. His face softens a little.

“You know, Maya...” His voice is almost gentle now. “You might be right about that. Maybe I wasn’t seeing the big picture.”

I can’t believe it. Am I *not* getting fired for speaking my mind for once?

He stands up and walks around his desk, leaning down close to my ear. His cologne smells like a mix of sandalwood and musk.

God, does he smell sexy.

I try to ignore it.

“I appreciate your insights, Maya... It’s not often someone is able to challenge me in a constructive way. You can leave now.”

He straightens up as I stand up and fix my black pencil skirt, still feeling a little bit stunned.

I act confidently as I turn around to leave, his eyes on my back like a hawk stalking his prey.



THE FOLLOWING day at work is a whirlwind of meetings, paperwork, and frantic phone calls. I’m trying to get the hang of the pace of insanity around here. But I’m freakin’ exhausted.

I’m supposed to go on a date tonight with a guy I met online. Kaitlyn has been pushing me to get out and have more fun. She says I need to ‘loosen up’ a little.

But her dad has me working like a dog and my date is in two hours.

I’m about to clock out when I hear Hunter’s voice behind me.

“Can you stay late tonight? We’ve got more to get through.” His gaze is sharp and demanding.

“Sorry, boss. I have plans that your charm can’t override.” I wink at him, both of us knowing full well he is *not* charming.

He stares at me unamused, then crosses his arms. “I see. Well, I don’t like it when my team members have other obligations that come before their work responsibilities.” His face is stern.

“Responsibilities, huh?” I adjust my bag over my shoulder and straighten my blouse. “You know, work-life balance is a real thing, Mr. Holmes. You should try it sometime. It might make you less...” I pause, tilting my head as I find the right word. “Icy.”

I turn, the click of my high heels echoing through the room as I make my way out. “Goodnight, boss.”

I walk out of the building, feeling annoyed.

Who does he think he is? Trying to guilt me into staying late?

Kaitlyn told me he was a ‘fair’ boss.

This job isn’t going to work out.

MAYA

The next morning, I meet Kaitlyn at our favorite coffee shop. It's my first day off and I need some girl time. I walk into the cafe and I make a beeline for her as soon as I see her.

"Kait." I slide into the booth across from her. "I swear, your dad is going to be the death of me."

She looks up from her cup, her eyebrows shooting up. "Already?"

I let out a long sigh: half exasperation, half exhaustion. "He's just... He's impossible, Kait. He's always on my case. He expects me to be perfect and then, out of nowhere, he's all understanding and nice to me. It's like working for a bipolar lion – one minute he wants to eat me alive, the next, he's purring like a damn kitten."

Kaitlyn's eyes widen, and she bursts into laughter. "A bipolar lion? Seriously, Maya?"

I roll my eyes but can't help a small smile. "You know what I mean."

She takes a sip of her coffee before leaning forward. "I know my dad can be... intense. But he's not a bad guy, Maya. He just doesn't know how to let go of the reins. Besides..." she adds, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You're probably good for him."

I throw my hands up in mock surrender. "Good for him? Good for him...?" I trail off, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Yeah, Good for his ego. He orders me around like a little puppet.”

“I’ll talk to him. Don’t worry,” Kaitlyn says, patting my hand reassuringly. “I’ll get him off of your case. He’s testing you, to see how well you can handle pressure. He respects people who can stand up for themselves.”

“All right, all right. I’ll stick with it. But if I end up as lion food, I’m blaming you.”

I don’t know how much longer I can keep up with Hunter’s demands if he keeps treating me this way. But maybe Kaitlyn is right. Maybe I need to prove that I can handle his pressure. I take a sip of my cappuccino.

“So, how did your date go the other night? You look like you’re still alive.” Kaitlyn smirks.

I flashback to my date the other night with a guy named Brian I met on one of the dating apps.

Most of the night, he spent scrolling on his phone, the rest of the time he droned on and on, barely asking me anything about myself. He wouldn’t shut up about his job in finance. And I had no other option but to zone out, imagining myself anywhere but there to get me through. At one point, I even found myself wishing I was back at work dealing with Hunter’s impossible demands.

Every time I tried to steer the conversation toward something other than him, he quickly spun it back to himself.

The date finally ended with him walking me to a cab, still talking about his gym routine. I gave him a fake smile, promised to text him (which I had no intention of doing), and got into the cab, thanking God for giving me my freedom back.

I roll my eyes. “It was OK. Nothing special. I would have rather stayed in.”

“Oh, come on,” she says, her grin widening. “You know you need to get yourself out there... loosen up a little... and have some fun. Tell me about it! How was he?”

“It was awful. He talked about himself the entire time and I couldn’t wait to get out of there.”

Kaitlyn’s eyes go wide. “That bad, huh?”

“This is why I don’t date.” I shrug innocently.

“Did he text you again?”

“Yeah. He said he had an amazing time and couldn’t wait to see me again.” I pause. “Of course he did. He loved to hear himself talk... I told him I’m not interested.”

“You’re a heartbreaker!”

“I prefer to think of myself as confident.”

“We’ll see if you can keep that attitude with my dad around.”

I roll my eyes, but I know she’s right. Hunter has the power to make or break me in this job, and I have to make sure he sees me as the confident, capable woman I am. With a deep breath, I smile at Kaitlyn.

“I can handle him.”

Kaitlyn grins back at me. “That’s my girl!” She raises her cup to mine, clinking them together.



THE NEXT DAY at work starts off surprisingly normal. Hunter is gruff as usual, but there’s a bit of softness in his tone when he speaks to me.

“Well, we’d better start on this paperwork then.” Hunter runs his hand through his hair as he glances at the mounting pile on the desk. I watch him, noticing the greys starting to pop through his dark hair. He’s a handsome man for his 40’s. He picks up the first document on the stack, eyes skimming the contents.

I mirror him, picking up my own stack and looking at the first page. “So, what’s the first project we’re working on?”

He looks up from his papers, meeting my eyes. “We’re working on a new restaurant proposal for the Adams account. They’re a big player in the city, so we need to make sure we’re ahead of the game.”

“Sounds exciting.” I scan the document. “What’s the timeline for this?”

He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. I watch as the veins in his forearms pop through. “We’re looking at a presentation in three weeks. I want concepts ready for review in a week, and a final proposal two days before the presentation.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “That’s quite a tight schedule.”

“Welcome to the big leagues, Maya.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Well, Mr. Holmes,” I say, matching his playful tone, “Let’s show them what we’re made of.”

He gives me a look, like he’s studying me or something before snapping out of it and nodding toward me. “Indeed.”

We both set to work, the soft click of our keyboards and occasional rustling of paper creating a hum in the room. I glance up at Hunter every so often, my mind wandering as I take in his features – the strong line of his jaw, the way his hair falls over his forehead. He’s the kind of man I would never expect to be drawn to. He’s twenty years older than me and grumpy AF. But I find myself fighting away a blush around him.

I turn back to my work, pushing thoughts of Hunter out of my head and focusing on the proposal.



AS I’M CLOCKING out for the day, he comes up behind me, so close that I can feel his breath on my neck. “Maya, before you go, I have something for you.” He hands me an envelope.

My eyes widen as I take it from him. “What’s this?”

“It’s a bonus check. You’ve been doing good work. You deserve it.”

I’m speechless. I didn’t think Hunter had it in him to be so generous. “Hunter... Thank you.”

He nods and gives me a small smile before he walks away.

I walk out of the office feeling relieved. Maybe working for Hunter won’t be so bad after all. As I start walking down the street, Kaitlyn’s words come to mind.

You’re probably good for him, she had said.

Maybe she’s right. And maybe he’s good for me too.

I shake my head and bring myself back to reality. With Hunter Holmes, nothing is ever certain. The game of cat-and-mouse could start up again at any moment, and I’ll be ready to play if it does.

For now, however, I’m going to enjoy my bonus check and any other ‘perks’ that come my way.

I abruptly take a right turn as I walk. It’s time for a shopping spree to treat myself.

Lululemon, here I come!

I am about to walk in when my phone buzzes in my purse.

I pull my phone out of my bag, glancing at the screen. It’s my mom calling. I hesitate for a moment before answering.

“Hey, Mom.”

“How are you, sweetheart?”

“I’m good, Mom... Very good, actually. I got a bonus at work.”

“That’s wonderful, dear! But when are you going to settle down? You’re always working. Don’t you want to start a family?”

Typical.

“Mom, I... I’m not ready for that yet.”

“But, dear, you’re not getting any younger. You should consider settling down. Your father and I would love to have grandchildren.”

“Mom...” I sigh into the phone. “I promise when I’m ready, you’ll be the first to know.”

There’s a pause on the other end, and when Mom speaks again, her voice is softer. “All right. Just remember that life’s not only about work and you’re not getting any younger. You don’t want to waste these years. Before you know it, you’ll be older and it will be harder to get men to see you as ‘wife material’ if you know what I mean.”

Wife material? Sounds boring.

I roll my eyes.

“I know, Mom. Believe me, I know.”

Our conversation shifts to lighter topics – her garden, and dad’s latest DIY project.

But even as I hang up the phone and step into the store, Mom’s words linger in my mind.

Am I wasting my youth on work and not having enough fun?

I shake my head.

But I like work. I’m young and ambitious... what’s so wrong with that?

I pick up a cute top off the rack and add it to my growing pile when my phone buzzes.

It’s a text from Kaitlyn.

Where are you?

That’s odd. Why is she asking?

I’m at Lulu’s. Why? What’s up?

You’re supposed to be at the youth club tonight.

Steve was asking about you.

“Shit!” I mumble under my breath as I text back

OMG. I totally forgot...

My dad covered for you.

For real?

Yeah.

Tell him I said thanks.

Or you could. :)

I toss the clothes into a pile on the counter and check out. Hunter must have been at the club with Kaitlyn tonight. He is a big-time donor there and good friends with Steve, the youth club owner.

As I start walking back home, I grab my phone again and dial Hunter's number. It's after work hours. I don't know if he'll pick up.

"Maya?"

"Hey," I say, the words catching in my throat. "I wanted to say thank you. Kaitlyn told me you covered for me at the youth club earlier." I pause, not sure what else to say.

"No worries. Steve was worried about you... said you've been showing up late and that you're not there as much as usual. I figured it was because of work, so it was the least I could do."

There's a silence between us for a few seconds. "Yeah. I've been busier than normal. I guess I lost track of time."

"Your time there is important, Maya. I know that. I want to be sure you have time to keep doing the things you love. If you need more time off, let me know and we'll make it happen."

Something about him saying that is bittersweet. I do miss the youth club. I love being there with the kids and Kaitlyn. But lately, being around Hunter has been weirdly exciting and fun.

"Thanks, Hunter. I appreciate it."

He clears his throat. “All right then... I’ll see you tomorrow at the office. Get some rest tonight. We have a big day tomorrow.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me on the other end of the line. “Yes, sir, see you then.”

As I turn down my street, I can’t help but feel a pang of... something as I hang up the phone. Guilt or excitement, I’m not sure yet.

HUNTER

“**G**ood morning, Hunter,” Maya greets me as she walks into the office.

I’m trying to shake off the strange feeling from my conversation with her last night. Something changed between us, but I can’t quite put my finger on what it is.

“Good morning, Maya.”

My eyes dart over to her slender body as I do a double take. I notice her outfit — a tight-fitting pencil skirt and a crisp white blouse with black pumps. She looks... stunning. My mouth goes dry as she walks past my office and takes a seat at her desk.

“Have you looked over the revisions to the proposal yet?” I ask her and try to keep my voice level.

“I finished it... It’s ready for your approval.”

I nod and stand up. I hand her the coffee cup sitting on my desk and walk over to her. “Good work.... Here.”

She takes the cup from me and grazes my hand with her delicate fingertips as she replies, “Thank you.”

I wonder if she meant to do that.

Our eyes meet for a split second before I notice something out of the corner of my eye: her blush is deepening. She’s trying to hide it, I can tell.

I clear my throat. “You look great today.”

I can't help myself. I want to compliment her.

She looks into my eyes and I can feel the tension in the air between us. I want to do more than compliment her, but here at work isn't the time or place for it. I don't know what's getting into me. I need to keep this professional.

Still, I can't help but notice how gorgeous she is.

I want to kiss her.

Knock it off, Hunter.

Keep it in your pants.

I take a step back and clear my throat again. "Well, let's get this proposal signed off so we can start our day. We have a meeting at the Willis Tower in an hour."

"The Willis Tower?" She raises her eyebrows at me.

"Yes."

"In an hour?!"

"Yes... Can you handle the heat?"

I almost kick myself for the innuendo. It just slipped out.

Maya nods and grabs the stack of papers from her desk. She hands them to me and looks away to avoid any further eye contact.

"The heat has nothing on me. I'll be ready."

Atta girl.

Something about her fiery confidence does things to me. She's always up for every challenge instead of fighting me. It's refreshing.

"Great. Meet me in the lobby at 10 AM."

"See you then." She turns around and walks out of the room without another word. I can't help but smile as I watch her walk away. I shake my head and sit back down at my desk, trying to focus, but all I can think about is her. Her body, her intelligence...

She's 20 years younger than you, Hunter. Get ahold of yourself.

I take a deep breath and try to shake off the thoughts swirling around in my head. I have work to do and fantasizing about Maya isn't going to help me get any of it done.



WE GET into the company limo and the driver shuts the door behind us. As we take a seat, my phone buzzes.

I grab it out of my pocket and see Kaitlyn's name flash across the screen with her picture. It makes me smile.

"Hey, sweetheart. What's up?"

"Hey, Dad! I was thinking we could catch a movie tomorrow night... There's one playing that you'd like too!"

I glance at my watch, then at my overflowing inbox, a pang of regret twisting in my gut. "I wish I could but..."

"But you're stuck with work, huh?" She finishes my sentence. Her tone is a cocktail of resignation and disappointment — a tone I've become too familiar with.

"Yes, Kaitlyn." I sigh, the stress seeping into my voice. "I've got a pile of paperwork taller than me waiting at the office."

She pauses for a moment before replying, "That's okay, Dad. Maybe next time." She hangs up, leaving me staring at my phone, feeling like the world's worst father.

Maya glances over at me, her brows furrowed in thought. "Hunter, can I ask you something... personal?"

I nod. "Sure."

She hesitates, looking uncertain for a moment before plowing ahead. "It's just, I've noticed that you're always working. When do you take time for yourself? Or spend time with your family?"

She must have gotten the hint of what happened. She's not dumb.

I'm silent for a moment, considering my response. "I... Well, I guess I don't have as much time as I'd like," I admit, feeling a strange vulnerability creeping in.

"Is that something you want to change?"

No one has asked me that before. I have to think about it. "Maybe," I say finally. "I just... I don't know where the time goes."

Maya looks at me with an expression of understanding. "Life's too short, Hunter. You should make the time. Kaitlyn adores you."

It isn't a reprimand, but it feels like a wake-up call. What she's saying makes sense. It's a little complicated and I don't know if she'll understand. So, I change the subject.

"Let me brief you on this meeting. We're running out of time and you'll need to know the details." I open my posture to her. "Maya, this meeting is vital. We're meeting with Theodore Bennett, one of the most powerful investors in Chicago. He's known for his cutthroat business practices."

Maya raises her eyebrows, "Theodore Bennett? The Forbes guy? Wow, sounds big."

"Huge... Bennett Industries has its hands in every major business sector in the city. If we manage to strike a deal with him, it could mean massive growth for our company."

"So, what do you need me to do?"

"You have a way of connecting with people, Maya. It's why I brought you with me. I need you to help break the ice, make him comfortable. Use your charm and wit, but also remember to stay professional."

Maya giggles, "So, I'm a professional charmer now?"

Hunter smirks, "Something like that. Just be yourself."

"You got it." She winks at me.

The driver opens our doors and I follow Maya out of the limo. She takes a moment and stares up at the massive glass-coated skyscraper in front of us.

“Ready?”

She takes a deep breath and turns her gaze back at me as she nods, her eyes sparkling with determination.

We walk in and make our way to the elevator. The doors open and we step in. Maya turns to look at me before she pushes the elevator button.

“108th floor.”

She drops her mouth open and stares at me. “That’s the top floor.”

“Yep.”

I move toward her and push the button, my shoulder rubbing against hers as I do. She takes a deep breath as the elevator doors close us in together.

We make our way up, up, and up until some strange jolting happens. Maya and I look at each other. The elevator lights start flickering before it grinds to a halt.

“What happened?” Maya’s face is laced with fear.

I look at the frozen digital display. We’re stuck between the 50th and 51st floors.

“We’re stuck.” I hit the emergency button.

It rings. And rings. And rings.

The panic in Maya’s face is escalating. I try to keep my cool, but I’m starting to get freaked out too. This meeting is important and I don’t want to be late.

Finally, a voice sounds on the intercom. “Hello, what’s the emergency?”

“We’re stuck in the south elevator between the 50th and 51st floors... Nothing is moving.”

“Hold tight. Maintenance will be there to help soon.”

Maya takes a deep breath and looks at me. “So much for being on time to meet Bennett.” She is trying to laugh off the situation, but I can tell she’s panicking big time.

Laughter bubbles up inside me and soon enough I’m doubled over, laughing hysterically. The absurdity of the situation comes over me without warning. Maya wrinkles her brow in confusion before joining in too.

I look over at her. She looks so pretty when she laughs.

“Well, everyone is telling me that I need to loosen up a little, have some fun in my life. I guess this is one way to do it.”

“Same.” She agrees with me. I can tell it’s a little bit of a sore spot for her.

“People have been telling you the same? To loosen up?”

“Yeah... to get out and live... to work less... to find a husband and have kids.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Kids? Do you want kids?” I ask cautiously.

She shrugs, looking away from me. “I guess I do... eventually. But right now, I’m trying to focus on my career.”

“Right.” I nod. I can tell she wants to say more, but I don’t press it.

We lapse into an awkward silence for a few moments before Maya snaps her fingers, a wide smile on her face. “But I don’t know. I want to have some fun in my life too. Can’t a girl have it all?” She laughs and she’s acting so cute right now. So cute that my body instinctually is moving closer to hers.

“Yeah... I think a girl can have it all.” I pause for a moment, trying to keep my attraction to her from growing, but it’s not working. “I think a girl can do anything she sets her mind to.” My gaze locks with hers and something passes between us. Something electric and alive; something that neither of us can deny. “Especially a girl like you.”

We stand there in the elevator, our gazes still locked, and the thoughts are rushing through my mind.

Why do I find her so attractive?

She's everything my ex-wife wasn't. She's playful, determined, understanding... She has a heart as big as the sky.

And she's 20 years younger than you, my thoughts harass me.

But I can't help it. I move even closer to her now. I can smell her intoxicating perfume, and I can feel the heat of her body next to mine.

My face is only inches away from hers. I lock in on her eyes and I can see her breath deepen. Her chest falling, up and down. I study her face, waiting for the right moment.

Her lips are parted in anticipation and my hand reaches out to stroke her face. I brush away a few strands of hair with my fingertips and she leans into my touch. I take my hand to the nape of her neck. Her skin is smooth and inviting under my touch.

I lean in further, my breath hitching as I close the gap between us. Without hesitation, I capture her lips with mine, pouring all the pent-up emotions between us into a passionate kiss.

She tastes like freedom. And mischief. And something else that I can't quite put my finger on.

MAYA

I gasp as he kisses me, but I don't pull away.

This undeniable attraction I feel toward Hunter has been building. It's strange and totally fucking confusing.

He's Kaitlyn's dad, for god's sake! But I can't resist his intense mixture of charm and arrogance. He has this air of authority and confidence that's irritatingly attractive. Yet, the more I fight it, the stronger it grows. It's not just his charming smiles or the way his eyes light up when he talks about his work. It's those moments when he lets his guard down. He's tender under his tough exterior.

But he's totally fucking off-limits. And he's nearly twice my age! This can't happen. It shouldn't. But as his lips meet mine, I realize that it already has and there's no stopping it now.

My hands find their way to the pockets of his jacket, clutching them like my life depended on it and pulling him closer to me. I kiss him back. It's passionate; a dance of our lips and tongues.

He threads his fingers through my hair, pulling me into him, deepening the kiss. I am lost in him. Almost so much that I forget that we're stuck in an elevator.

My heart is racing, my mind screaming at me to stop. But I can't. This is too good and it feels too right despite all the differences between us.

I try to peel myself off of Hunter, but he's not giving up that easily. He takes it as his cue to pin me to the wall of the elevator, pressing his body against mine.

Hunter's eyes are closed as he takes a deep breath, his face inches from mine. My own breathing is still heavy with the desire. I look into his deep green eyes and take my hands to his neck.

His eyes pierce into mine before his hands start ferociously unbuttoning my blouse. The next thing I know, he slides my bra down and takes my nipple into his mouth. Then he's grabbing the other with his hand. I throw my head back and I let out a moan. I can feel his erection pressing against me and it only makes the heat even more intense. He sucks and nibbles on my nipple before moving to the other. He licks and flicks and takes his hand down to my thighs, pushing my skirt up until it's gathered around my waist.

He traces his fingertips around my inner thigh, finally making his way to my clit. I moan in ecstasy as he rubs it rhythmically, hitting all of the spots that make me crazy.

I look him dead in the eye. "Mmmmmmm.... yes."

I feel his eyes penetrate me deeper as his fingers continue to work expertly. Hunter knows exactly what he's doing. He rubs me just the right way, his fingers moving in slow circles, then fast flicks, before slowing down again. The teasing is driving me crazy, wetness pooling between my thighs. He continues the blissful torment, making my hips move, grinding against him. My moans grow louder. His other hand still on my breast, kneading and stroking, adding to the pleasure. It's pure ecstasy, and I'm completely lost in the sensation.

He carefully avoids my underwear before pushing two fingers inside me. Pleasure rushes through me and he moves his fingers in quick circles driving me wild with desire. He anchors his mouth back to mine and kisses me deeply while thumbing my clit simultaneously. Waves of pleasure crash over me as Hunter keeps pushing deeper into me, faster and harder until I'm screaming his name.

"Hunter... Oh, Hunter... Yes! Hunter!"

He stares into my eyes. “I like when you say my name like that.”

He steps back and unbuttons his pants. My eyes devour his body as he slides out of his underwear. His huge erection is standing right before me and I can’t help but lick my lips in anticipation.

Hunter leans in, his lips almost grazing my ear. “Do you want me, Maya?” His voice is low and husky. I can barely get out a nod, lost in his green eyes that are now dark with desire. “I want to hear you,” he demands.

“Yes,” I whisper. He smirks, leaning back to admire me.

“Good girl,” he praises, his hand sliding down my body to cup my butt, squeezing lightly. “Now tell me how much you want me.”

“I want you, Hunter,” I admit. His smirk widens, his eyes satisfied. “That’s my girl.” He leans in to capture my lips in another mind-numbing kiss.

His hands glide up my back, pulling me closer as his lips devour mine. I reach for his cock, I stroke him, and he lets out a groan, his mouth leaving mine to trail kisses down my neck. He lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. The cold elevator wall feels relieving as he presses me until it. He enters me in one thrust, and I cry out with pleasure. Each stroke is more powerful than the last. He moves in harmony with my body, each thrust pushing me higher until we’re both lost in our desire for each other.

“Hunter. Oh... Hunter. I’m going to cum.”

“Cum. Now.”

I cry out as his thrusts reach their peak and my body tightens around his cock. Then, I collapse into Hunter’s strong arms, our breaths intertwining in the air surrounding us. He looks deep into my eyes, a satisfied smirk on his face.

“Well,” he says breathlessly. “That was one way to pass the time.”

For once, I’m speechless.

We both stand there for a few moments, catching our breath before there's a beeping noise followed by a voice on the intercom.

“The technician is almost done. Hang in there.”

We look at each other and laugh as the elevator starts ascending to the 108th floor.

Hunter pulls away from me, buttoning up my blouse quickly as we compose ourselves.

I brush out my skirt and fix my hair in the elevator mirror without saying anything. Suddenly, I get hit with a mixture of guilt and longing. I'm in a daze from our passionate moment, wondering what on earth I'm supposed to do now.

Do I pretend this never happened?

Or do I own up and admit that something unexplainable has started between us?

Fuck.

What did I get myself into?

Ding.

The elevator doors open and a voice from outside the elevator startles me back to reality.

“Well, let's get back to work, shall we?”

HUNTER

Bennette is staring directly at us.

Does he know something happened in the elevator? I can't read his expression.

I'm not sure if he's referring to us looking disheveled or the fact that we just got stuck in the elevator for 30 minutes. All I know is that I have to keep things moving before he starts asking questions.

"Back to work," I say firmly, pushing the elevator doors open.

I offer Maya my hand and she takes it hesitantly. We make our way out of the elevator together as if nothing happened between us.

"This way." Bennette leads us to the conference room ignoring any awkwardness that might be in the air.

Does he know? I keep wondering to myself.

We enter the meeting room and everyone's heads turn to face us. I take my seat at the head of the table and Maya takes hers next to me. I can feel her eyes on me as Bennette explains the technicalities of the meeting.

"I'll give you the floor first. You can pitch everything and then we can discuss it further." As he talks, I'm overcome by guilt for what I just let happen between us in the elevator.

How could you lose control like that?

You fucking idiot.

She's your employee... your new employee.

What if she tells Kaitlyn?

Oh fuck... What if she tells Kaitlyn?

I can feel my palms starting to sweat and I force myself to focus on Bennette's voice.

Maya clears her throat and I feel her gaze on me again.

"Understood," she replies to Bennett.

I can't bring myself to meet her eyes yet. She looks confident as Bennette continues to talk. She takes her fingertips and pushes her hair behind her ear, revealing a small tattoo on the back of her neck. I hadn't noticed that before.

"Hunter?" Bennette looks at me, his expression expectant. "Do you agree?"

I can feel my cheeks getting hot as I nod without looking up from the table.

"Great. Let's start going over the proposal then."

I take a deep breath and make myself focus. We go through the presentation, discussing each point in detail until we finish. Everything has been discussed and all questions answered. It's Bennett's turn to come back with what he likes and doesn't like with the proposal.

He takes a deep breath and looks around the table before speaking. "Well, it's clear that this proposal is strong. It has all the elements I was looking for and more." He pauses to take a sip of water before continuing, "I have one minor suggestion though. There needs to be an additional section focusing on security and how WeWork can help with that."

"Great idea," I reply. "We can add that in, no problem."

He turns towards Maya. "Your team should focus on integrating state-of-the-art security measures that blend easily with our existing framework. Maintain the balance between security and convenience."

Maya nods, jotting down the key points. "Understood. We'll focus on the integration of security measures that won't

disrupt the cost-efficiency or the existing framework of WeWork.” She looks up at Bennett with a confident smile. “We’ll ensure that your requests are our highest priority.”

I regain my composure and say, “We’ll also ensure that the clients see the value in this. It’s not just about implementing security measures but explaining the benefits they bring to our clients. This way, we can justify any potential increase in pricing.”

Bennett nods, satisfied with the insights, “Excellent. Let’s keep the lines of communication open throughout this project. I want to be sure we do it right.”

As Bennett continues to talk, my mind starts drifting again. My thoughts spinning in circles.

How do I act around Maya now?

Do I ignore what happened?

Pretend like it never happened?

Yes. I’ll pretend like it never happened.

It was a mistake.

It needs to stay a secret.

I glance over at Maya who is taking control of the conversation now. I can see that Bennett likes her. I knew he would. She’s personable. She’s witty and smart. The kind of smart that powerful men like. The kind that can hold her own.

I start thinking back to how good her body felt in my hands in the elevator.

The way her curves fit perfectly in my hands...

The way her eyes lit up when I touched her...

The way she moaned as I kissed her...

Maybe there is something between us that could be explored further. If only we had the freedom to do it without anyone finding out.

Maybe... just maybe, we can have that freedom.

Or can I risk something more with her...?

The thought fills me with a strange sense of hope and excitement. The kind I haven't felt in a long time.

"I want to make sure that I understand what's expected of us for this project," she says firmly, not breaking eye contact with Bennette. My heart rate spikes as I watch her in her element.

"Yes. And Hunter, do you have the numbers from the Insani Project? I want to compare notes." Bennette looks at me, waiting for a response.

I take a deep breath and try to focus on the conversation, but my mind is still spinning from thoughts of Maya and I can't seem to spit anything out of my mouth.

Maya chimes in. "Yes." She pulls out a few papers from her folder. "Here are the numbers from the Insani project." She hands them to Bennett.

She just saved my ass. She knows I'm a fucking mess over here right now.

I clear my throat and finally manage to say something. "Correct." I glance over at Maya who gives me a subtle smile before looking back at Bennett.

She is captivating. I can sense the power she has over me and it terrifies me. My doubts start to fade away as I sit there watching her, admiring her strength and courage. It's sexy.

I want to bend her over that desk right now and take her. My mind starts going there again, uncontrollably. But Bennette looks up from his papers and interrupts my dirty thoughts.

"Well, that seems to be all. We'll go over the details once I get the reports back from the team."

He stands up and starts gathering his things as everyone else follows suit. Maya gets her things together, avoiding my gaze as she passes me and walks right up to Bennette to shake his hand.

"It was an absolute pleasure meeting you, Maya." He smiles at her.

“Likewise.” She smiles back.

Bennette turns to me. “Hunter, you’ve got a good one here. I don’t know where you snatched her up from, but she’s a keeper.” He points to Maya.

All I can think about as he says that, is snatching her up and getting her naked again.

Jesus, this girl has got a spell on me. This is dangerous.

“I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other.” He nods his head before walking out the door and leading us to the elevator.

I turn my head to Maya and our eyes meet deeply for a few seconds before she breaks it and looks away. We walk down the hall and step into the elevator with Bennette and I can feel myself getting lost in her eyes once more.

I take a deep breath as the doors close before me, wondering when I’ll be able to get her alone again.

MAYA

I walk in the door of my apartment and drop my things on the couch. I can still feel Hunter's scent on me, like a ghost in the air.

I'm exhausted.

Between whatever the fuck went down in the elevator and the meeting today, my brain feels like it's about to explode.

I slip into my satin pajamas, the soft fabric feels comforting against my skin, contrasting the insanity of the day.

I go to the kitchen and pull out a bottle of red wine from the fridge, pour it into a glass, and cradle it between my hands. With every sip, I try to forget about Hunter. The taste of the wine, rich and bold, is a poor substitute for the intoxicating taste of him still on my lips.

As I sink into the couch, I can't help but let my mind wander back to him: his smoky green eyes, his rough hands, his intoxicating scent. It's a dangerous game, I know. But it's a game I'm finding more and more tempting to play.

Stupid girl.

He doesn't care about you.

He can get any woman with the snap of a finger.

You think he gives a shit about you?

You're nothing more than an easy fuck to him... a good time.

My thoughts start to go crazy.

What if that's true?

What if I'm nothing more than a good time for him?

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of the thoughts that are threatening me. I can't help but feel like I'm just another notch on his belt, another conquest in his long list of women. His charisma, his good looks, his success... He could have any woman he wants, so why me? The way he touched me, kissed me in the elevator, it was as if he'd done it a thousand times before. It was too good, too good to be true... Is that all I am to him? Another woman to add to his collection? Another distraction until someone new comes along?

The doubt eats at me, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth that even the wine can't wash away. I want to believe that I'm different, that I'm special, but my mind keeps circling back to the same agonizing thought: I'm just another number to him.

I take another sip of my wine and close my eyes, falling asleep on the couch.



WALKING into the office the next morning, I am greeted by monitors humming and hushed conversations. I head towards my desk, ready to start the day. But as I do, I spot Hunter's office door closing.

That's odd.

He usually has it wide open.

I approach his office, noticing he's in a meeting. My heart sinks a little.

He's having a meeting without me? Did I miss something?

Knocking lightly, I peek my head in, managing a small smile. "Good morning, Hunter. Did you need me in here?"

Hunter, buried in the discussion, looks up at me with a hint of surprise in his eyes. "Ah, Maya. Good morning. It's an

impromptu meeting, didn't have time to get you in on it."

I raise an eyebrow. "I see. Well, I'll be out here at my desk if you need anything."

"Great. Could you grab us some coffee?"

I force a smile. "Sure."

As I close the door, I can't help but feel a pang of unease.

Coffee? Can I get them coffee?

I knew it.

He doesn't give a fuck about me.

What if he fires me?

What if this was all a test to see how professional I am?

I go to the coffee station and get a few cups of coffee ready, trying to push away my fears. As I approach his office again with a tray of coffee in hand, I can feel my heart pounding.

Hunter barely looks up at me. "Just in time." He stands up and opens the door for me as I walk in and place the tray on the table. He takes a cup and hands it to the man next to him before turning back to the others in the meeting. "So, as you were saying." He turns his attention back to the meeting leaving me with my doubts.

As I settle back at my desk, my mind races with thoughts of Kaitlyn and Hunter. The thought of her finding out about what happened... I can't even bear it. The potential fallout is too dreadful to consider — the hurt in Kaitlyn's eyes, the trust I'd betray. The knots in my stomach twist tighter.

What did I do? I can't believe I let my guard down like this.

And I can't afford to lose this job. How will I pay my bills? I'll be back at square one. I've worked too hard to get here, to let it all crumble over a fleeting moment of passion. The stakes are high, too high.

Every knock, every ring of the phone, sets my heart pounding with dread. The fear of the unknown, of the fallout,

keeps me on a razor's edge. And with every passing moment, the line between professional and personal blurs, making it harder to keep my feelings - and fears - in check.

Hunter's office door finally opens, and everyone exits. He turns to me with a tired smile. "That will be all, Maya. You can finish up for the day." His voice is distant. I nod as he walks past and out of the office.

A chill runs through my body as I watch him go, his footsteps echoing in my ear like a warning bell. I recognize it now — this feeling of dread and fear.

It's the feeling of walking on thin ice. And I can't help but wonder if I'm about to crash through it.

As the moments pass, I start to realize that maybe I don't want this to end. Even despite the looming danger, I feel something for Hunter — something more than passing infatuation.

It's not something I can explain, but it's there. The lingering connection between us is drawing me to him like an invisible force. No matter how wrong it may be.

You're in over your head.

He's about to drop you like a hot potato and you're over her fawning over him.

I shake my head.

As I gather my stuff to leave, my mind swirls with confusion. Hunter's dismissal, so casual and cool, leaves me rattled. It contradicts the heat and passion that simmered between us in the elevator.

Why did he send me home early?

Was it because of the meeting?

Or is there something else he isn't telling me?

My cell phone rings, jolting me out of my thoughts. The screen reads 'Mom'.

Ugh.

I'm vulnerable right now and I don't want her to get any ideas about what's going on with me and Hunter.

Her giving me the 'talk' about how disappointed she is in me, for ruining yet another job opportunity is the last thing I need.

"Hi, Mom. What's up?"

"Maya. Can you come over?" Her voice shakes a little.

Immediately, my heart leaps into my throat. "What's wrong, Mom? Are you okay?"

"I... I've got something to tell you. I need you here."

The urgency in her voice freaks me out. Without a second thought, I grab my things and leave the office. As I drive, the cityscape blurs around me, my mind numb.

When I pull up in front of my childhood home, my mom is waiting at the front steps, a look of worry on her face.

"Mom, what's going on?"

Tears well up in her eyes. "Maya, it's your father."

I follow her into the house, trying to stay calm. My mom and I sit down on the familiar old couch in the living room.

"He's sick, Maya." The words hang in the air. "It's cancer," my mom continues, her voice barely above a whisper. My heart drops into my stomach and a shiver runs through me. The room seems to spin as I try to take in the devastating news.

I pull my mom into a tight hug as she starts crying and tears fall from my face too. "Mom... Dad is strong. He's one of the strongest people we know. And he's going to fight this." My voice doesn't waver, the certainty within me spilling out.

"And... the survival rates, Mom.... They're high, especially if it's detected early. He's in good health otherwise, right? He'll be okay." The words feel strangely comforting, even as they hang heavily in the air.

Mom sniffles, wiping her eyes and looking at me. "Oh, Maya," she whispers, "I hope you're right."

“Did they tell you what the plan is moving forward for his treatment?”

“Your father’s doctors...they’re optimistic. They want to start him on a course of chemotherapy and radiation therapy as soon as possible. They think it’s the best course of action given the stage and type of cancer.” Her voice trembles a bit, but she holds it together.

“That’s good news, Mom. It will be okay...” I try my best to convince her and myself.

After a few moments of silence, she shifts the conversation, trying to lighten the mood. “Anyway, enough about that for now. There’s not much more we can do at this point anyway.... How’s your job, dear?”

Panic surges through me as I scramble for words. “It’s... um, it’s good, Mom. Just... Just work, you know. Same old.” I can feel my throat tighten as I struggle to keep my voice steady. The last thing I want is to let her sense any hint of what happened. “Hunter is... He’s a good boss. Really professional.” I force a smile, hoping it looks convincing.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. You don’t need any more drama right now,” she adds, oblivious to the irony of her words.

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. If she knew what was going on, it would throw her over the edge.

“Mom, I’m sorry, but I need to get going. I have a big project due tomorrow.” I stand from the couch, avoiding her eyes. “I promise to call in the morning and help you out with anything you need.” I exit the house, eager to escape her impending revelation of my reckless behavior.



I DRAG my feet through the glass doors of the office the next morning, my outfit screaming of sleep-deprivation. When I reach my desk, I see a note from Hunter.

It reads, “My office. ASAP.”

Shit. I'm getting fired.

My heart stops for a second. I take a deep breath, push open his door, and step into his office.

“Hunter. Good morning. What can I do for you?”

His lips curl up into a smirk and my heart starts beating again. He looks at me with his piercing green eyes that seem to see right through me. He walks forward until he is standing inches away from me.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

He’s been wanting to talk to me?

I don’t understand. This feels different from the usual banter we exchange in the office.

“Okay. Let’s talk. What do you want to talk about?”

“We’ll discuss tonight.”

A thrilling blend of fear and desire knot in my stomach. My mind races, tripping over questions.

Is this a business meeting?

Or is it something personal?

The ambiguity of his request sends my heart pounding like a drum against my chest.

Is he going to fire me?

Maybe he’s going to kill me...

Ya... definitely going to kill me... That way Kaitlyn will never find out.

I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s so charming and calculated. He could get away with it.

I shake my head at the insanity of my thoughts.

“Okay... Where? When?” I try to keep it cool.

“My driver will pick you up. 8 PM.” He turns and walks away, leaving me standing there with my heart in my throat.

HUNTER

I finish buttoning my navy suit as I wait for her to arrive.

Finally, I hear a car pull up outside and see my driver get out of the car. I walk to the door and open it in time for Maya to step out of the vehicle.

Holy shit.

She looks stunning.

She's in a red dress that hugs her curves in all the right places. Her dark hair is pulled back into a low bun, and her icy blue eyes contrast against the red, drawing me in. I can't take my eyes off of her.

She takes a deep breath and looks around. "Where are we?"

"I'm not sure you want to know." I smirk as my heart races in anticipation. With one arm, I gesture her forward, to the pathway lit by low lighting that leads up to my yacht.

"What is this?" She looks stunned.

"It's my yacht." I watch the thoughts race across her face as she takes in the sight of the boat and then turns to me. She bites back a smile.

"So, this is a business meeting?"

"No," I reply, "This is not a business meeting."

"Oh, so I was right... This is where you're going to take me out to sea and throw me overboard." She's teasing me, but

I can see the apprehension in her eyes. It's cute.

I take her hands in mine and look into her eyes. "There's more of a chance of you throwing me overboard if we're being honest."

She raises her brow. "You're right." The fear in her eyes fades away.

We board the boat and I show her to the deck where I have a romantic, candle-lit dinner set up for us.

"This is beautiful, Hunter." She looks me in the eye. "What is this all for? I'm kinda freaking out."

"Freaking out? It's for you. I wanted to take you on a real date."

The waiter comes over and pulls our seats out for us and we sit as he pours us both a glass of red wine.

I hold my glass up to hers.

"To us."

"To... us?" she repeats, confused. "I thought you were going to fire me, Hunter. I really couldn't figure out why you were bringing me out here." I can see she's confused.

"Fire you? I just hired you. You're too good for me to lose you."

Her face softens and she takes a sip of her wine.

"I don't know. It's just... the other day in the elevator... I just... I don't know how you feel about me? About this? I'm so confused." She looks away, embarrassed.

I take her hands in mine and look into her eyes. "Maya, this is not a business meeting. This is me taking you out on a date. I am drawn to you, Maya. I can't keep myself away from you... as much as I try to."

"But... you're my boss. And Hunter, you're Kaitlyn's dad." Her voice trembles. "I don't want to hurt her." She looks away, tears in her eyes.

I move closer and put a hand on her cheek.

“I can’t lose her. She’s my best friend.”

“We will worry about that when the time comes,” I assure her. “I am curious about you. I want to explore every part of you, Maya. I want to know you. All of you.”

She stares into my eyes, searching for the answers she desperately needs. I can see it there. She wants this just as much as I do.

“I... I don’t know, Hunter...”

I stop her from continuing by pressing my lips to hers. It takes a moment, but she finally melts into me.

“I wasn’t expecting any of this. I was looking to get a job, not fall for my boss and fuck my best friend’s dad.”

I pull away and laugh at her. “Let’s enjoy the night for what it is,” I whisper in her ear. “We both need to let loose a little.” She nods in agreement as she relaxes back in her chair and looks out over the calm water. The skyline is lit up in the dark night sky.

“It’s beautiful out here... the city... the water.” She takes a deep breath and I can see her shoulders relax. We sit in comfortable silence for a while, taking each other in before the waiter brings us our first course.

“Here we have pan-seared scallops nestled on a bed of creamy, saffron-infused risotto.” The waiter sets the dish down in front of us. “Topped with a delicate champagne butter sauce and a garnish of microgreens to provide a pop of freshness. Enjoy your meal.”

Maya takes a small bite of the scallops, her eyes widening in surprise as she savors the flavor. “This is phenomenal.” I love to see her senses light up with pleasure, and I can’t help but feel like I want to devour her right here on the table.

“Maya.” I break the silence. “I’ve been meaning to tell you that you were excellent at the meeting with Bennett the other day.” My fingers tap on my wine glass. “The way you handled Bennett’s curveballs was impressive. You were poised, articulate, and quick on your feet.” I pause for a moment,

letting my words sink in. “Your input made a huge difference to the outcome of that meeting. So, thank you.”

Her cheeks turn pink. But of course, she doesn't miss a beat to bring in some sass. “Well, you were pretty tongue-tied. So, someone had to step up,” she teases me, but she's not wrong. I was tongue-tied. In more ways than one.

I never let myself get to the point where I cannot perform at 100% in a meeting, especially an important one like that. And the fact that she was able to step up showed me how perfect she is for this position.

Taking another bite of her scallops, Maya looks up at me, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. “It's my turn to ask something...” she begins slowly, “I've been wondering. You're a billionaire, with many philanthropic ventures, I'm sure. But the youth club... Why there? What's the story behind it?” She sets her fork down, her gaze steady, inviting a deeper conversation.

I look away from her, staring out at the water, thinking of how best to answer her question.

“You're right. There are many organizations I donate to. But the youth club, that's different. It's... It's personal.” I run a hand through my hair, a habit that comes out when I get nervous. “Kaitlyn... she loves it there. She's been going since she was a little girl. It's a place where she feels safe, loved, happy. It was a place she could escape to when her mom and I were going through the divorce.” I pause, not wanting to talk about my ex. I vere the topic. “You know how much she loves it there.”

I take a deep breath, looking down at my food. “I can't always be there for her, you know? My work... it takes me away from her more than I'd like. Investing in the youth club, it's my way of making up for that. It's my way of showing her that I love her.” I look up at Maya, hoping she understands. “It's not perfect, but it's something. And something is better than nothing, right?”

“Kaitlyn adores you, Hunter.” Her voice is soft as she looks out at the night sky. “You're an amazing father to her.”

“I appreciate that, Maya.” I gulp down the rest of my wine, welcoming the slight burn in my throat. The topic makes me uncomfortable. It’s too close to home, too raw. But Maya has a way of making me open up, even when I don’t want to. She has this ability to unravel me, piece by piece.

I shift the focus, eager to steer away from my unease.

“Now, enough about me and my baggage... What about you, Miss Maya? Why do you volunteer at the youth club? Is it the sense of community service or maybe a secret love for chaotic environments?” My tone is light but pressing. I think there is some truth to the later but I’m curious what she will share with me.

Maya laughs. “The chaos is actually the most fun part,” she confesses with a playful smirk. “But really, I volunteer because of the kids there. They are so full of life and energy...”

Maya’s smile turns soft, nostalgic almost, her eyes shimmering in the dim light. “You know, I have siblings with a wide age gap. My younger brother is 15 years younger than me.” She lets out a small laugh, shaking her head at the memory. The chaos, the noise, the laughter... it all reminds me of home. It’s comforting and familiar.” She glances at me, her eyes full of warmth and openness.

I pick up on something in the conversation. “So, age gaps aren’t uncomfortable for you... Interesting.” I raise an eyebrow suggestively, letting the implication hang in the air. She knows what I mean — there’s no denying our connection. Her cheeks flush as she smiles into her glass of wine. We both know that we can’t keep ignoring this, not anymore.

“Age is just a number... As long as two people feel the same thing for each other, why should we care what society thinks or says?” She looks up at me, her blue eyes are soft in the moonlight.

“Hmm, that’s a wise outlook.” I lean back in my chair, the soft glow from the city lights casting a seductive sheen on Maya’s face. “So, hypothetically speaking, if there were, say, a man, who was totally captivated by a woman much younger

than him... you'd see nothing wrong with that?" I watch a playful smirk dance on her lips, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Depends on how 'totally captivated' he really is," she retorts, her voice dropping an octave lower, her gaze never leaving mine. I feel the temperature between us elevating, our playful banter escalating.

"Let's say, for argument's sake," I lean in closer, dropping my voice to a barely-there whisper, "this man is captivated to the point of distraction. He can't eat, he can't sleep, and all he thinks about is this woman. Would that be 'totally captivated' enough for you?" My gaze holds hers, the air between us sizzling with tension.

She licks her lips involuntarily, her eyes darkening with desire. "That... That seems 'totally captivated' to me."

"Good." I lean back, a triumphant smile on my face as I feel my cock harden from the playful tension in the air.

Her breath hitches, her eyes widen, before a sly smile pulls at her lips. "Well then, Hunter," she says, as she finishes her drink and slides out of her chair. "Maybe we should continue this conversation somewhere more private. Your place, perhaps?"

"My thoughts exactly."

Maya stands and starts to walk away, I quickly finish my drink and follow suit.

There's something about the way she's taking control, the confident sway in her hips as she walks ahead, that drives me wild with desire. I've dealt with many women in my life, but she... she is something else.

A kind of intoxicating power play. It's wildly sexy, but it also stirs a primal desire within me to take the power back. I watch her, my eyes taking in every detail, my mind spinning with images of how I'd dominate her, of how I'd bring her to the point of surrender. My blood heats, my cock hardens at the thought and the anticipation of getting her alone sparks a thrill inside me.

As we walk off the yacht, I can't help but pull her a bit closer to me. The feel of her by my side, the sweet, dizzying scent of her perfume...it takes every ounce of my self-control not to take her right there on the sidewalk. We walk the few blocks to my penthouse in silence — the tension between us as thick as fog.

MAYA

You need to loosen up.

Kaitlyn's words ring through my mind as we walk back to Hunter's penthouse.

The thought of ruining my friendship with her wars with the insatiable pull I feel towards Hunter.

You're in too deep now.

My instincts scream at me to keep my distance, to keep the boundaries there should be between us. But there's something about him. He stirs something within me, an urge that I can't tame.

I feel Hunter's hand on the small of my back as he guides me to turn left into the lobby of his building. The floors are glossy marble and reflect the glow of the chandelier that hangs from the ceiling.

A concierge desk of rich mahogany sits to the side, manned by a uniformed attendant who greets Hunter with a nod.

As we cross the room, my heels click on the marble floor all the way to the elevator. The doors slide open with a hushed swoosh. We step in and I get instant flashbacks of the last time we were in an elevator together.

Hunter is thinking the same. He looks at me and gives me a small laugh.

God, his smile is gorgeous.

The desire I have for him builds. The air in the elevator feels heavier, making my breath catch in my throat. His eyes trail over my face, a mixture of curiosity and hunger. I can't help but let out a shaky laugh, my fingers playing with the hem of my red dress.

The soft ping as the elevator reaches the top floor snaps me out of it. Hunter guides me through the entrance of his penthouse into the open living space.

I walk in and make a bee-line toward the windows. They are floor-to-ceiling windows with the most breathtaking view of the city's skyline.

“Hunter. This is beautiful!”

He follows behind me and puts his hands on my waist.

“You're beautiful.”

He kisses my neck as I lean to the side letting him in even more.

He turns to the wall and pushes a button as the fireplace lights up, its flames dancing and throwing a warm, inviting glow across the room as soft music plays in the background.

His hands return to my body, tracing my curves through my dress. I can feel the heat of his skin through the fabric. Slowly, he slides his hands up, his thumbs grazing the sides of my breasts. His palms flatten against my ribcage, fingers splayed, pulling me closer to him. I can feel his chest against my back, a solid presence. His hands travel lower, resting on my hips, his fingers slipping under the hem of my dress, brushing the skin of my thighs.

His hands are everywhere - exploring, claiming, stoking the fires of passion between us. It's intoxicating, it's overwhelming, and I can't get enough of it.

“Maya...” He turns me to face him as his hands find mine, guiding them up to rest on his broad shoulders, his fingers playing with mine.

“What do you want?” His breath is hot against my ear. I swallow, my heart pounding in my chest.

“I want... you.”

I can feel his breathing growing shallow. His hands cup my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” His voice is rough with desire.

I nod as I take a step closer. He leans in, his lips brushing mine in a feather-light tease before he pulls back, his eyes searching mine.

“Yes.”

Our eyes lock, my body aching with need, my pulse pounding.

“I want to taste every inch of you, to hear you moan my name. I want to make you lose control.”

“And what if I want to make you lose control?” I tease, my hands roaming his chest, feeling the hardness of his muscles. “What if I want to see Hunter Holmes brought to his knees?”

His eyes darken with desire, a wicked grin tugging at his lips. “Then I guess you’ll have to try your best, won’t you?” He growls, pulling me against him, his lips crashing against mine in a searing kiss.

Our lips meet in a fierce kiss, Hunter’s hands are tangling in my hair as he pulls me closer, my body pressed against his. He breaks away, looking at me like he’s hunting his prey.

The next thing I know, he puts his hand on my hips and lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his waist. I gasp as I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him back in for another heated kiss. He carries me to the bedroom and lays me down on the bed.

He is standing above me, looking at me with a hunger that I’ve never seen before. His fingers trace circles over my skin, sending ripples of pleasure through my body, and I can feel myself getting lost in the sensations.

He undresses me, his hands tracing over every inch of my skin, his touch both gentle and possessive. Then he divests himself of his clothes, his muscular body on full display.

He climbs onto the bed, his body hovering over mine. His lips find mine again, his kiss passionate and demanding. His hand finds my breast, his touch firm but gentle, his thumb brushing over my nipple causing me to moan into his mouth. He moves lower, his lips trailing over my stomach, his fingers teasing the edge of my panties. With a smirk, he pulls them off, his eyes never leaving mine.

His fingers explore me, his touch sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body. He takes his fingers to my entrance, teasing me before finally pushing inside. I cry out in pleasure, my body trembling. Hunter takes his tongue to my clit and I moan louder.

“Fuck... Mmmmm... Hunter...”

He pulses his finger faster and deeper, the intensity of pleasure growing until it explodes throughout my body. I’m lost in a world of pure ecstasy.

He softens his tongue, peeling it away from my clit as he looks me in the eye.

“You like that? Do you want more?”

I can only nod. He smiles as he moves his body up to mine, our lips meeting in another passionate kiss.

“Yeah? You want more? I didn’t hear you.”

I nod again. But he pulls away, looking at me with a playful smirk.

“Say it,” he demands.

“I want more.” I look him in the eyes, bringing my confidence back.

Hunter laughs, his fingers brushing my chin until our eyes meet.

“I like when you’re assertive.”

“Oh yeah, mister billionaire?” I tease, my fingers tracing down his chest, and push him back onto the bed, climbing on top of him.

I begin to tease him, my fingers trailing down his chest, over his stomach, lower. He moans, his hands gripping my hips tightly.

But then, with a swift movement, he flips us over, pinning me beneath him again. His eyes burn with passion and dominance. “Nice try, sweetheart.”

Before I can respond, his mouth claims mine in a passionate kiss, his hands roaming my body, owning every inch of me. I wrap my legs around him, desperate for more.

He thrusts his cock into me, his movements strong and steady. His name escapes from my lips in a breathy whisper, and he kisses me deeply, muffling my cries of pleasure, as I totally lose control.

He takes me with a passion that I’ve never felt before, each thrust sending me closer to the edge. He reaches down, his hand finding my clit, his touch pushing me over the edge. I come undone beneath him, screaming his name as waves of pleasure crash over me.

Hunter follows suit, his body tensing as he finds his release. He collapses on top of me, both of us panting. Pulling me closer, he wraps his arms around me as we come down from our high.

Hunter pulls back, his gaze intense and his breath still ragged. He brushes a loose strand of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear.

“You know... I’ve been around the block a few times, and I’ve been with many types of women.”

I tilt my head to the side.

Where is he going with this?

“But there’s something about your confidence.” His thumb traces the line of my jaw. “That I find sexy.”

I laugh. “Is that so?”

He nods. “It’s magnetic, irresistible. It’s...” He struggles for a moment, searching for the right words. “It’s you, Maya. Your confidence, you draw me in.”

I smirk, looking into his eyes as I run my hand down his chest. “Well, I’m glad you appreciate my confidence. Because it’s not going anywhere.” I pause for a second. “Trust me, I’ve tried to get rid of it.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Really? Never thought of it as a curse... I’m intrigued.”

“It hasn’t always been a blessing, Hunter.” I shift, propping myself up on an elbow. “I mean, sure, it’s empowering, but it gets me into trouble.”

I’m not sure if I should continue. It feels vulnerable. But I do anyway.

“I’ve lost jobs because I refused to keep my mouth shut. My parents... they don’t always understand. They wish I was more... subdued, conventional...”

Hunter’s fingers trace patterns on my arm, a comforting touch.

“But that’s not you,” he says, his voice low, steady. “You’re fiery, bold, unapologetically yourself.”

I laugh, though it’s half-hearted. “Not everyone sees it that way. It feels like it’s me against the world sometimes. It gets... lonely.”

His grip tightens. And for a moment, we lay in silence, our breathing synchronized in the dim, fire-lit room. He pulls me closer.

“I understand.”

I feel the recognition. It is as if he, too, knows what it’s like to stand alone in a crowd, to be misunderstood, to be different. I see a reflection of my own struggles, my own loneliness.

He lifts my chin, his gaze softening as it meets mine. “Let’s get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Hunter sits up, pulling the blankets over us. He lays down again, positioning himself behind me, his body a warm, strong shield against the cold world outside. His arm wraps around my waist, holding me against him. His other hand comes up to

my face, thumb tracing my cheek before he plants a soft kiss on my forehead.

“Goodnight, Maya,” he murmurs against my hair. My body molds itself against his. I feel safe as I let go of the loneliness that has been weighing me down.



THE SUN PEEKS through the glass windows into the bedroom and I hear Hunter’s voice whisper, “Good morning, sunshine.”

“Mm,” I murmur, nuzzling into the crook of his arm and stretching lazily. “Do you always get up this damn early?”

“I do.” He laughs, running his fingers through my hair before reaching over to the bedside table and picking up the phone. “And what would madam sleepy-head like for breakfast?”

I peek over the covers. “I don’t know? Coffee... For sure coffee... and bacon. Definitely bacon...”

He laughs again. “Got it. Coffee... and bacon. Can I get you some French toast, berries, maybe some eggs?”

“Perfect. But only if you promise to share it with me.”

“Deal.” He dials down for room service.

As he wraps up the order, his work phone buzzes. And it doesn’t stop.

“Sorry.” Hunter looks guilty like he doesn’t want to answer it, but he does.

“Yes?” he says as he brings the phone up to his face. His eyebrows furrow as he listens and his free hand unconsciously clenches into a fist.

I watch him, trying to read his expression. He always has this guarded look when it comes to work like he’s preparing for a battleground. He ends the call and looks down at me.

“Change of plans.”

“Change of plans?” I echo, pushing myself up on my elbows.

“Yes.” He pauses for a moment, a strange, almost excited light in his eyes. “Pack your bags. We’re taking the yacht to the Mediterranean.”

HUNTER

I pull up in front of Maya's apartment as she walks out from the entrance, her hair tousled by the wind. She's been rushing. I kind of threw her a curveball with this trip, so it's not surprising.

"Ready for some sun and sea?" I get out to help put her bags in the black SUV. She looks stunning standing there, her small suitcase next to her.

"Only if you promise to apply my sunscreen."

I laugh, shaking my head at her sass. "That's not a bad deal." I open the car door for her. "Let me get that." I reach for her suitcase.

"Nope, I got it," she retorts, hoisting the suitcase into the trunk with a huff.

"Tough girl... I like it." I close the trunk before getting back in.

The drive to the marina is quiet but comfortable. Maya is lost in thought and I can't help but steal glances at her when she isn't looking.

"So... when are you going to tell me what this trip is for? Or are you still going to keep me in suspense?" she asks, her voice teasing.

"I'll fill you in on the yacht."

She raises an eyebrow at me. "It's a good thing I trust you."

Finally, we arrive at the marina. I get out before her and this time, I make it to her bags in time to pull them out for her before she can. She grins, shaking her head as she takes my arm and we walk together to the yacht.

Maya's eyes widen when she sees the boat bobbing up and down on the waves. It's one of my biggest boats: a sleek white yacht with two decks. Her mouth drops open as she looks up at me.

"I know I was just on this thing, but it looks even bigger in the daylight."

I laugh and take the lead, showing her onto the deck where a few crew members are waiting to greet us.

"Welcome aboard!" they shout in unison, tipping their hats as we pass.

Maya takes it all in, looking around like a child in a candy store. I can't help the smile that spreads across my face as I watch her.

She seems to have this effect on me. She makes me feel like I'm doing something special for someone instead of just another business deal. I like doing these things for her.

"Maya, let me introduce you to some of the people who will make this voyage possible." I wave over a middle-aged man with a wide grin. "This is Charlie, our captain. He's been sailing with me for over a decade, knows this yacht like the back of his hand."

Charlie tips his hat. "Pleasure to meet you, Maya. You're in safe hands."

I laugh, patting him on the back.

"Meet Rosa, our head stewardess." I gesture to the petite woman with a warm smile approaching us. "She makes the best mojitos. And if you're in the mood for some comfort food, she whips up a mean lasagna."

Rosa laughs, extending her hand to Maya. "Buenos días, señorita. Welcome aboard."

“And this is Max.” He’s a young man with bright blue eyes and tousled hair. “He’s our engineer. If anything goes wrong, which it never does, Max is our man.”

Max nods in our direction, all business. “Nice to meet you, Maya.”

I can’t help but smile at the interaction, watching Maya’s expressions, her eyes sparkling in amusement. This crew, they’re more than employees. They’re my family out here on the sea.

We take a tour around the boat, checking out the cabins, the gym, and the observation deck. The upper deck has a small hot tub with lounge chairs and a bar. Maya gasps in admiration as she takes it all in.

“You know, I’m kinda starting to understand why you love work so much.” She turns to me with a mischievous glint in her eye. “I mean, come on, you get to spend your days here?”

“It’s one of the perks.” I shrug, feeling my own admiration rising for this girl.

“Well, I’m not complaining.” She jokes with me.

“Come on, there’s one more space I want to show you,” I tell her, leading her toward the bow of the yacht. I open the door to the master suite and watch in amusement as her eyes widen.

The room is luxurious, with a king-sized bed, a walk-in closet, and a private bathroom with a Jacuzzi. Large windows display a panoramic view of the water.

“This is your room,” I say, sweeping my arm around the space.

Maya gasps, her eyes darting around the room, finally landing on me. “Hunter, this place is... It’s gorgeous.”

“Only the best for you.”

She shakes her head, looking around the room again. “Am I dreaming?”

“You’re not, sunshine.” I lead her toward the bathroom. Inside, there’s a shower, a Jacuzzi tub, and a vanity filled with high-end products. “You can freshen up here. We have a meeting in two hours.”

She nods, her excitement evident. “This is surreal.”

“Welcome to my world... I’ll see you later.” I give her one last look before closing the door behind me.



THE DOOR to the boardroom on the yacht opens, as Maya walks in, her hair twisted into a neat bun, a stack of papers in her hands. She’s traded her casual attire for a crisp white shirt and navy pencil skirt.

God, she’s beautiful.

I’m seated at the head of the conference table, surrounded by a handful of associates, all watching as Maya walks in and takes her seat. She offers me a small nod of acknowledgment before turning her attention to her documents, her eyes scanning the pages.

As the room settles into silence, I lean forward, “Let’s get started on the briefing for this meeting.”

My project manager looks at both of us. “To kick things off, we’re dealing with Maven & Moresby, a high-profile investment company with a large portfolio in the restaurant industry.” He clicks his pen on the table. “They’re looking to venture into the Mediterranean region and want to leverage our expertise.”

I raise an eyebrow, “A large number of restaurants, huh? Sounds like the big fish are biting. Maya, do we have any info on their investment strategy?”

She is already doing her research on the laptop in front of her. “It seems they have a taste for Mediterranean cuisine. As for their strategy, they’re looking for sustainable, high-growth businesses with a focus on local authenticity. They want our help to make sure they invest in the right places.”

The meeting continues, the room loaded with discussions around the contracts and financials. I watch as Maya listens, her pen darting across her notepad, jotting down questions.

Sometimes I still can't believe how perfect she is for this position. Watching her navigate this business meeting with such poise and confidence... It's a side to her I never thought I'd see of her.

But I admire it.

I admire her.

It's clear she's more than an assistant, she's a businesswoman who understands complex situations.

As the meeting wraps up, Maya gathers her notes, her eyes meeting mine across the table. The others filter out of the conference room. Maya and I are alone. I lean back in my chair, running a hand over the stubble on my chin, watching her tidy up her papers.

"You seemed pretty confident in there... Are you sure you're ready for all this?"

She looks at me with a smile on her lips. "Ready?" she repeats, pushing her chair back and standing up. "I was born for this shit."

"The big fish, Maven & Moresby, don't intimidate you?"

Maya chuckles, picking up her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. "Intimidate me? Please, they're a bunch of men in suits with more money than sense. I eat investment strategies for breakfast."

I can't help but laugh, her confidence is infectious.

This girl is something.

Before Maya walks out of the conference room, I stop her.

"Maya. Be ready for dinner by 8. There's something for you to wear back in your room."

She pauses, turning around to face me. "See you then."



IT'S 8 o'clock at night and Maya is standing on my yacht deck, gazing out at the horizon. She doesn't see me coming behind her and I take in her beauty and innocence before I let her know that I'm here.

As she turns around, my breath catches in my throat. There she stands in the moonlight, wearing the designer dress I had left in her room for her earlier in the evening.

Designed by the most sought-after fashion house, the dress accentuates her slender figure, flowing down her body like a waterfall of silk and hugging her curves.

The dark maroon sequined fabric contrasts with her bright eyes. Seeing my usually feisty assistant looking so exquisite, pulls at something deep inside me. She's always been beautiful, but tonight, she's a vision that could make a saint sin. It's dangerous.

"Maya. You look... incredible," I say, my voice a whisper.

She blushes and looks away, almost as if she's embarrassed by the compliment. It's rare that she gets this way. It's adorable.

She takes a few steps closer to me and I can feel her presence like an electric current running through my body. Our eyes meet for a split second before she averts her gaze again.

"This dress is stunning, Hunter."

"It's all yours."

"Really?" she stammers. "This must have cost a fortune, Hunter. I... I don't know what to say..."

I can see the emotions playing out on her face — surprise, disbelief, and then a rush of gratitude. "Thank you, Hunter." Her voice is warm and sincere.

I take a step closer, slip my arm around her waist and pull her in. I watch the surprise on her face as she looks up at me, speechless - wondering what's going through my mind right

now. At this moment, all I can think about is how much I want to kiss her.

“You deserve it. And you deserve more,” I whisper, my lips inches away from hers.

I guide Maya to the area where we have dinner set. A table for two, draped in white linen, with rose petals stands waiting for us. It’s surrounded by a sea of candles.

“This... This is beautiful.” I can see the wonder in her eyes as she takes in the scene before her.

As we start our meal, the conversation flows like water.

“So, Maya. What’s your latest literary obsession?”

Her eyes light up as she starts talking about the book she’s reading. It turns out to be a novel set in the 1800s about a woman who defies societal norms to follow her passion for art.

“I love how the author paints the picture of society back then, and the protagonist’s courage is inspiring.”

I steer the conversation to a more personal realm. “You’ve been in this city for a while now. Any secret spots you hide out beside the youth club?”

“Promise you won’t spill the beans?”

She starts to describe these hidden places she’s discovered. A quaint bookshop tucked away in an alley, a botanic garden, a café that has the best hot chocolate she’s ever had, and a quiet spot by the lake where she loves to sit and read.

I find myself captivated by her, but not just her beauty, her spirit, her passion, and her intellect.

“You know, you’re full of surprises too, Hunter.” Her eyes are full of curiosity. “You’re not quite the tough and serious businessman everyone makes you out to be.”

“Don’t let anyone know,” I joke with her. “Only you get to see this side of me.”

“So, what about you? Any quirks or secret hobbies that the world’s ruthless billionaire indulges in when he’s not conquering the business world?”

I laugh at her question, finding it both amusing and endearing. “Well,” I begin, trying to search for an honest response, “I play the piano when the world gets too noisy. It’s therapeutic.”

Maya’s eyebrows arch slightly. “You play the piano?”

“Yes. I like gardening too when I have the time. Nothing fancy, just a few herbs and a handful of plants.”

“That’s quite... unexpected. I never imagined you playing the piano or taking care of...plants.” There’s a moment of silence, then she reaches across the table to place her hand on mine. “Thank you, Hunter,” she says. “Thank you for this wonderful evening.”

I look at her, lost in her eyes, and for a moment, I forget about everything else.

“You’re welcome. I have one more little surprise for you... The meetings tomorrow should wrap up by afternoon.” I spear a piece of steak. “I thought we could... take off somewhere for the weekend.”

Maya looks at me, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “Really? And where exactly would that be?”

“Now, where’s the fun in telling you that?”

Her eyes narrow a bit, but the smile never leaves her face. “I promise you’ll like it. It’s a place you’ve never been, and I think you’ll find it... interesting.”

“You’ve got me intrigued.”

We finish our conversation before wrapping up our dinner. It’s been a long day and I can see Maya’s eyes growing heavy.

“Shall we call it a night? It’s been a long, busy day.”

She nods in agreement. “Just one more thing before I go,” she says as she turns to face me. There’s something in her voice that sends my heart racing. She takes a step closer, placing both hands on either side of my face. I feel the warmth of her hands on my skin, and the electricity between us.

Before I can say a word, she stands on her tiptoes and kisses me on the lips — a slow, lingering caress that leaves me breathless.

“See you tomorrow,” she whispers and with that, she walks down to her room.

This girl has a spell on me.

MAYA

I can't believe this is my life right now.

I watch the morning sun come through the cabin windows until it hits my face. I throw my hands above my head and yawn as I stretch my body out in the bed.

My mind takes me back to last night's kiss with Hunter. I can't believe how lucky I am right now, here on his yacht, heading off to some secret destination for the weekend.

After showering and getting dressed, I start prepping for the big meeting today.

I run my curling iron through my hair while reviewing my notes in my head when I hear the sound of my phone buzzing on the counter.

A text from Kaitlyn pops up.

Hey, girl! Let's get dinner Friday! Juno?

My heart sinks a little. We haven't talked since I boarded the yacht with Hunter. I haven't even told her where I am or who I'm with. Guilt eats at me. I've been enjoying this time with Hunter, without even hinting to her about what's been going on.

She's my best friend and the idea of keeping this from her haunts me. I take a deep breath, staring at the phone before finally texting back.

Kitty Kait!

I'm so sorry. Been MIA.

Forgot to tell you... I'm out for work right now.

Your dad needed me out here for a big meeting.

We took the yacht.

A pang of regret comes as I send the message, but I can't lie to Kaitlyn. Besides, maybe it'll make her happy that Hunter and I are bonding. I take a deep breath and hit send before turning my attention back to getting ready.

I hear my phone buzz again.

The nerves hit me as I pick up my phone to see her response.

Oh, okay.

Wish you'd told me earlier.

Have a great trip and good luck with the meeting.

Let's catch up when you're back.

I read the words over and over again. Her disappointment stings. I text her back to try to lighten up the mood.

I will!

Miss you, girl. See you soon.

I hit send and set my phone down, feeling the weight of guilt on my shoulders.

But I can't let it get to me: I have an important meeting to prepare for.

I take one glance in the mirror and give myself a pep talk.

I got this. I'm a boss bitch and I eat businessmen for dinner.

As I'm placing a few last bobby pins to keep my hair pinned back, Hunter knocks on the door and I jump. I turn as he walks in, his eyes running a quick scan over my body. He's in a black business suit, looking every inch the powerful man that he is. His gaze is intense with a hint of softness.

"You ready?"

I nod, unable to find my words. He gestures with his hands for me to follow him and I do.

The yacht's engines hum to silence and I can feel the lurch as we make contact with the dock. Hunter leads the way, a hand touching my back as we move from the yacht onto solid ground. The marina is buzzing with life, but it all seems to fade away as I walk. I'm only focused on the meeting.

We make our way to the dock's exit where a sleek, black car is waiting for us. Hunter opens the door for me and I slide into the cool leather seat. He takes his seat next to me and the driver pulls away from the curb, the ocean whizzing by through the tinted windows.

We approach the conference center. It's a massive, modern building, all glass and steel. The conference room is on the top floor, with panoramic views of the ocean. It's breathtaking. The room is already bustling with activity when we enter. Everyone is in their seats around a large, round table. As we take our seats at the head of the table, I take one last deep breath.

This is it.

"Hunter, why don't you kick off the meeting?" Robert Romero, the CEO of Maven & Moresby, gestures to Hunter.

Hunter nods, clears his throat, and begins, leaning on the table for emphasis. "Good morning, everyone. Let's get down to business..."

Throughout the meeting, Hunter and I worked in tandem, commanding the room. As he would make a point, I would jump in to provide supporting evidence.

I would occasionally stand back and watch Hunter do his thing. He is so brilliant. When he speaks, everyone listens.

But sometimes, he is too smart for his own good. What he says doesn't always land with people and I can see it in their faces. I take it as my invitation to help clarify and bring an element of simplicity to the table.

"What Hunter is trying to say in a roundabout way is that this strategy reduces both costs and risks... and puts you in the

right locations.”

Hunter smirks at me. “Exactly.”

The room breaks out into murmurs of agreement and nods.

But that’s not the thing I love most about Hunter. He understands me equally as well. When I get stuck or nervous or start tripping on my words, he’s somehow always there to guide me back.

“Could you clarify the impact of this strategy on our operational efficiency?” The question catches me off guard and my mind starts racing as I try to find a response. I must have been quiet longer than I realized. Hunter jumps in.

“Maya knows these numbers like the back of her hand, but allow me to jump in here.” He interjects, flashing me a quick, encouraging smile before turning back to the room. “What she’s been detailing is a strategy that will streamline your operations, freeing up resources for further growth and expansion. Maya, would you like to add anything to that?”

His words offer me a lifeline and I find my footing again. I can’t help but shoot him a grateful look before continuing, “Exactly what Hunter said. The goal is to create a more efficient operation which will lead to improved services and productivity.”

The room breaks out in conversation, discussing the aspects of the strategy that Hunter and I have outlined.

After a while, everyone quietens down and Romero, sitting tall at the other end of the table, clears his throat. “Well, I must say, this has been enlightening. ” His eyes shift between Hunter and me. “I appreciate the level of detail that went into this strategy. It seems quite promising.”

Hunter smiles at him, “Thank you, Romero. We believe it will drive the largest growth for Maven & Moresby.”

I chime in as well. “And we’ll be there to support every step of the way, ensuring the plan rolls out smoothly.”

Romero grins, standing up from his chair and extending a hand across the table. “Tomorrow morning, we will meet again

with a final decision. I look forward to it.”

Hunter and I shake his hand and the meeting ends. We make our way out of the conference room, back to the car outside. The ocean breeze hits me again as we walk toward the car, reminding me that I’m somewhere far from home. He opens the door for me before climbing in himself and I can’t help but smile.

As the car pulls away from the curb, Hunter finally relaxes into the seat beside me. One of his arms stretches along the back of the seat behind me. His body is close to me and I can’t help but lean a little into him. I catch a whiff of his cologne, a rich, woody scent that I’ve come to associate with him. It’s comforting.

“We nailed it today!” I finally break the silence.

“We really did.” His acknowledgment sends a shiver down my spine. “You were fantastic in there. Maven & Moresby didn’t stand a chance. They’re going to eat up our strategy, I know it.”

He’s beaming now, his excitement contagious. It’s moments like these, where he lets his guard down and shares his enthusiasm, that remind me why I’m falling for him.

“One more event today before we get a weekend to ourselves after all this.”

“Where are we going now?”

“It’s a gala. We’ve got a room full of big-time investors that we need to mingle with tonight. It’s not all spreadsheets and conference rooms in this line of work, Maya. Sometimes, we get to play dress-up too.”

“I don’t have anything to wear, Hunter! I can’t wear this!” I look down at my outfit. It’s business attire. Definitely not gala attire. “And where are we going to get dressed?” I start thinking about all the details before he stops me.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it all taken care of.”

After a while of driving, the car slows down as we approach the heart of Milan’s fashion district. The streets are

lined with fashion boutiques from the world's most renowned designers. As we pull up in front of a charming shop, Hunter grins at me. "Let's get you something to wear."

The shop is a haven of luxury. Gowns of silk, lace, and velvet grab my eyes, their colors vibrant and glimmering.

"You must be Hunter!" a woman with silver hair greets us. She has a kind face. "It's lovely to meet you." The woman introduces herself as Madam Dior, the owner of the shop. She disappears only to return with a garment bag, revealing a stunning gown waiting for me.

It's breathtaking – a deep purple number, intricately beaded, with a silhouette to die for. A blend of sophistication and allure. I can't help but gasp as I run my fingers over the delicate beads.

I look at Hunter. "Really? For me?"

"You deserve it."

Madame Dior helps me put it on and when I see myself in the mirror, I can't believe it's me. The gown hugs every curve perfectly and it makes my skin look like porcelain.

Hunter's smile is wide as he looks me up and down. "You look stunning, Maya."

My heart swells with happiness as I take in the sight of Hunter in his tuxedo, looking handsome as ever. We look like a power couple ready to take on the gala tonight.

As we exit the boutique, draped in elegance, the sun begins to set.

Hunter offers his arm, his eyes never leaving mine, as we make our way to the car. As we approach the venue of the gala, I can't help but feel a rush of adrenaline. Hunter seems to sense it as he squeezes my hand. It's comforting.

Arriving at the gala, there are chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The sound of a string quartet fills the air. It's the most elegant event I've ever been to.

The sea of faces seems to stop and stare as we make our entrance. Hunter wraps his arm around my waist, guiding me

through the room. I find myself relaxing in his confident arms.

As we navigate through the bustling crowd, Hunter sees a familiar face and leans into my ear. “There’s David. He’s a real shark out there in the investment world. Good guy, very blunt.”

“Hunter!” David walks closer extending a hand to each of us.

The conversation starts with business. They discuss the potential investments they are working on and the state of the market. I see what Hunter was saying about him. He is very sharp.

Finally, David changes the topic. “I must say, you two make quite the pair tonight. I couldn’t help but notice the chemistry between you. Are you two...?”

His words trail off, but the insinuation hangs in the air. My cheeks flush and I glance at Hunter who also seems caught off guard.

“Well, um, David, she...” Hunter stammers, a rare sight.

“Yeah, we...” I pick up but find myself at a loss for words.

“She’s just my new assistant,” Hunter blurts out, looking away.

I feel a bit disappointed and the silence falls between us again. David moves on to another topic, but I can’t help but feel an awkwardness now lingering in the air between us.

Just his assistant.

His words echo in my mind for the rest of the night.

HUNTER

As the night progresses, I notice that something seems off with Maya. There's tension in her smile, a certain distance in her eyes that wasn't there before. I watch her make her way through the crowd, her laughter ringing out as she converses with people she has met. But I can tell something is bothering her.

Finally, I find Maya standing alone, looking out over the balcony.

"Maya... is everything all right?" I take my fingertips to her shoulder strap.

She turns to me. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?" Her voice is full of forced cheerfulness.

"You seem... distant," I press. "Something's not right."

She gives me a playful shove, her laughter a little too high-pitched. "You're imagining things, Boss. It's been a long day, that's all."

I look at her, unconvinced. There's a moment of silence between us. Finally, she lets out a sigh, a mixture of frustration and sadness.

"Okay, fine!" She crosses her arms over her chest. "You hurt my feelings, all right? There, I said it!"

Finally, she let it out.

"What did I do?" I am careful to keep my voice gentle so she doesn't spin out into a tornado of emotion. I know how

women are.

She glares at me for a moment. “You said I was *just* your assistant, Hunter.”

It takes me a few moments to understand what she’s trying to say. I find myself replaying our conversation with David. My words replay in my mind. “*She’s just my new assistant.*”

I hurt her feelings? I didn’t mean it that way, of course. It was just... easier that way. Less complicated. I was caught off guard.

“Maya... I... I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. You’re more than an assistant to me.”

She’s not convinced.

“It’s just... It flew so effortlessly out of your mouth...”

I notice that her voice is a little shaky.

“I was caught off guard. I didn’t know how to respond. I... I panicked a little.” I admit, my eyes dropping to the floor. “How about we talk about it tonight when we get back on the yacht?”

“Promise?”

I give her a nod. “I promise.” I take a deep breath, deciding to try to lighten the mood. “Besides, you can’t stay mad at a guy who got you a Dior gown, can you?” I say, raising an eyebrow at her.

She raises an eyebrow back at me in retaliation. I knew that’d get her riled up. “That is a low blow, Hunter. Using the gown to your advantage.”

“Hey, I’ll use whatever I can to get back on your good side and off of your sass list.” I give her my best charming look.

“All right, all right.” She shakes her head, fighting back a smile. “We’ll talk about it tonight. For now, I’m still mad at you.”

“Fair.” I extend my hand out to hers “Ready to ditch this party and make our own?”

She rolls her eyes at me but puts her hand in mine. “Only if you promise to keep that charming wit of yours in check.”

“No promises, darling.” I wink at her, leading her toward the exit, slipping out so nobody sees us.

As we’re about to slip away to the car, a voice stops us. “Hunter, Maya!”

We both freeze, turning to find none other than Romero, walking toward us. He looks intense, and Maya’s body gets tense beside me.

“There’s something we really need to discuss.”

“Romero.” I keep my voice steady. “We were just about to...”

“I know, I know. Leaving early.” His voice has an edge to it. This is not looking good. “Before you go, I have something to tell you.”

“Yes, of course. Is it about the meeting tomorrow morning?” I ask, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Actually, yes.”

I brace myself for a reprimand. But instead, a smile forms on his face. “You know, I’ve been thinking about your proposal all evening.”

“That’s great.” Maya’s grip on my hand tightens. “Does that mean you’re—”

“Yes, Hunter, I’ve decided to take the deal.” I look at Maya to see her reaction. She’s trying to play it cool. “Call off the meeting tomorrow and take the day off.”

“Thank you, sir.” I shake his hand. “You won’t regret this.”

“I know I won’t, Hunter.” He pats me on the shoulder. “Enjoy your evening, you two.” He turns and walks back into the crowded party.

Maya and I exchange another glance, before bursting into relieved laughter.

“Well, that was a surprise.”

“Now, it’s really time to celebrate.” I pull her hand, guiding her to the car. “Ready for dessert?” I wink at her.

“I always am.” She smiles back at me.

The night sky is lit up with stars as we make our way to the yacht. I take Maya’s hand, intertwining our fingers together. I can feel her looking up at me with desire in her eyes.

As we step onto the yacht, the cool breeze of the ocean hits, the scent of salt and sea filling my nose. Crew members are bustling around taking care of their tasks to wrap up for the night.

“Follow me.” I take Maya’s hand and lead her down a secluded corridor.

The sound of the waves crashing against the yacht in the background sets a sensual atmosphere. I pull her toward me, my arms wrapping around her from behind. I start kissing her neck as she leans her head back. My hands explore her body, tracing her figure, eliciting a soft moan from her lips.

“Shh...” I whisper a playful warning, reminding her to keep this a secret from the crew. I turn her around to face me as I grab her face and pull her to me. Our lips meet in a passionate but silent kiss.

Our kiss deepens, pure passion between us. “Maya,” I groan against her lips, “you drive me absolutely wild.”

“I can say the same about you.”

I pull her closer, my hands roaming over her curves. “Your lips...they taste like heaven.”

“And your kisses,” her fingers trace the line of my jaw, “they feel like sin.”

Our lips meet again. The taste of her, the feel of her, the scent of her, all of it sends me spiraling.

We keep our sounds of pleasure hushed; our passion hidden within the secluded spot. The thrill of our secret. The fear of getting caught. The intensity of the moment. It starts to build.

The echo of footsteps down the corridor has us pulling away from each other. A crew member comes walking rounds the corner, and we shift from our intimate embrace. Maya tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and laughs at a joke I hadn't told.

"Hahaha... Hunter, you're so funny." She widens her eyes at me as if it was my fault we almost got caught.

I lean against the wall, attempting to look like we are in casual conversation.

The crew member nods at us before he continues on his path. Once he's out of sight, we break into suppressed laughter.

"That was close."

I can't resist but pull her close again. "Follow me." I lead her further down the corridor.

"Where are we going now?"

We sneak into my private suite. I look back behind us to make sure no one is watching as we disappear into the room, ready to continue our secret rendezvous.

"Somewhere even better." I smile down at her.

"Wow, Hunter..." Her eyes are wide as she takes in the room. "This is... incredible." She steps further into the suite. High ceilings, walls with artsy paintings, and a king-sized bed with silk sheets. "I feel like I'm in a movie. I didn't even know rooms like this existed in real life!"

She walks over to the gigantic window that shows off a stunning view of the moonlit ocean. "And this view... it's breathtaking!"

"I hate to break it to you, but the view gets even better." Her eyes light up as she turns around to face me, her curiosity piqued.

"Better than this?" she asks, gesturing towards the glittering ocean outside the window.

“Come with me.” I lead her towards one of the suite’s less obvious doors. As I push it open, the humid air hits us immediately, the sound of water reaching our ears.

Her mouth falls open as she sees the hot tub nestled in a secluded corner of the yacht, the area lit by a string of lights.

“Hunter... This... This is something else.”

I switch on the hot tub and I turn to her. “Ready?”

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit, Hunter.”

“I know.” I stare into her eyes as I begin to unzip her dress. Her eyes widen as it slips to her hips, revealing her bra and her bare torso.

“I... What are you...” Her words falter as she watches me.

“I’m helping you.” I move closer, my fingers tracing the outline of her bra. “Need help?”

She swallows, her eyes meeting mine. She nods, allowing me to unclasp her bra, letting it fall to the floor.

My hands trail down her body, reaching for her dress again. “Need help with this too?” I whisper into her ear, my voice husky with anticipation.

She nods, her eyes never leaving mine as I slide the zipper down the rest of the way, exposing her in her lingerie as her dress falls to the floor.

“Your turn.” She slips her fingers into my belt, her touch sending electricity coursing through me. I let her unbuckle my belt and then she’s unzipping my pants, her hands shaking.

I can’t help but let my eyes wander over her, drinking in the sight of her in the moonlight.

She pushes my pants down and they pool at my feet. I kick them aside, leaving me in my underwear. She’s staring at me now, a mix of desire and curiosity in her eyes. I can’t help but smirk.

“Your turn.” My finger hooks into the seam of her underwear. She nods, her breath hitching as I slide them down around her hips, dropping the garment to the floor.

She reaches for my underwear, her hands shaking even more now. She slides my briefs down, leaving us both completely bare under the moonlight. Our eyes meet, the air between us thick with anticipation and desire.

“Come.” I offer her my hand, and the both of us step into the hot tub. The warm water relaxes our bodies as I kiss her forehead.

There’s a moment of silence between us, our eyes locked onto each other. The only sounds are the waves and the distant hum of the yacht’s engine. Then she breaks the silence.

“So, when David asked about us... That was awkward.”

I agree, the image of David’s face appears in my mind. His observant question about our friendly behavior put us in a tough spot.

“You looked so panicked.”

“I was panicked... I mean, how do you even begin to explain something like this?”

“Yeah... I get it...” She pauses. “You know... It hurt when you introduced me as just your assistant to David. Not because I’m ashamed of my job, but because I felt like... what if that’s all I am to you?”

“Maya, I—” I start, but she raises a hand to stop me.

“I know, Hunter, I know. You didn’t mean it that way, and it’s not your fault. It’s just... this.” She gestures between us. “It’s all so new, so intense. I don’t want to ruin this by pushing for more, yet I can’t help but want more.”

I reach for her hand. “I get it, Maya. I want more too. But we don’t even know where to go from here yet.”

A soft laugh escapes her lips. “That’s an understatement.” She pulls a face, trying to inject humor into the situation. “Seriously, how do we explain this to people? Your employees, my best friend... your daughter.”

I grimace at the mention of my daughter. I hadn’t even begun to think about how to approach that conversation.

“We should keep it a secret? Until we figure things out...”

She hesitates, chewing at her lower lip. “Maybe you’re right... for now. But Hunter, we can’t hide forever. Eventually, we’ll have to face the facts.”

I take her in my arms, feeling the warmth of her body against mine in the water. “So, let’s make the most of this secret we have for now.”

She breathes before pressing her lips to mine.

MAYA

As I press my lips to his, my thoughts swirl.
A secret. We're a secret.

Well, at least we're a fucking hot one.

Something about it all sends a thrilling shiver down my spine. It's intoxicating, like a heady glass of red wine. I can taste the danger, and the excitement, and it scares me a little.

I feel his hand on the small of my back, pulling me closer to him in the warm water. But beneath this rush, a knot forms in my stomach.

What are you doing, Maya?

You know this isn't going to end well.

My thoughts invade.

Secrets are shadows — looming and creeping. They're a temporary safe house, not a permanent home.

You're going to get hurt.

I will the thoughts out of my mind and kiss him deeper, losing myself in his taste. I enjoy the feeling of his hands on my back with the warm water lapping against us. It's like we're in a world of our own, a bubble that no one else can pop.

His hands move lower down my back. And as they do, I feel the difference in our skin. His, weathered by time, mine,

still soft with youth. The thought of our 20-year age gap strikes me like a lightning bolt.

The weight of the years between us suddenly feels like a chasm. I get in my head. I pull away, my breath ragged and my heart pounding against my chest. He looks at me confused.

“Hunter, do you ever think about... our age difference?” My eyes fall on our entwined hands.

“Maya, are you okay with this?” He takes his thumb and strokes my hand.

“I am... Really, I am. It’s just... different.” I pause, wondering if I am trying to convince him or myself. “But different doesn’t necessarily mean bad, right?” I give his hand a squeeze, trying to fake my certainty.

“Yeah, different isn’t bad...” He pulls me closer into his arms, our bodies molding together in the warm water.

Inside my mind, a different narrative is playing out. The words ‘different’, ‘20-year age gap’, and ‘best friend’s dad’ spin around in my head like a broken record. My heart pounds against my chest as I tuck my head into his shoulder, trying to quiet the raging thoughts.

“Hunter,” I whisper into his shoulder. “Are you sure about us? About me?” I feel his fingers tracing small circles on my back, comforting my spiraling thoughts.

“Maya, look at me.” He lifts my chin until our eyes meet. His gaze is sincere, revealing a vulnerability I’ve never seen before. “Age, titles, what people might think... none of it matters. What matters is what’s happening between us. I haven’t felt this way about anyone in a long time and I’ve lived a lot more years than you.”

I look at him, seeing the raw honesty in his eyes. I feel my doubts fading away and my confidence coming back online.

I needed to hear that.

There’s a fire in me now. A need to take control and get what I want. I allow my eyes to linger on him, taking in his

strong features. His eyes are searching mine. He's trying to figure out what has shifted in me.

"Maya?" It's unusual to see him like this, unsure and vulnerable.

I lean in and kiss him again. But this kiss is different from our previous ones. It's bold and confident. I don't just need him. I know he needs me too. He shifts under me, responding to my assertion.

His hands find my waist, trailing up my wet body until they're tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. I'm not just his assistant to him right now. I'm a woman who knows what she wants, and right now, it's him.

"Hunter," I whisper against his lips, my hands moving to the front of his chest. I trace my hands across his skin, feeling his muscles beneath my fingertips. His heart is pounding. He tenses under my touch. He doesn't usually let this assertive side of me last long, yet he doesn't pull away. Instead, I see desire burning in his eyes.

"I like this...."

His voice is low and gravelly. It's so hot.

Hunter's hands move up, cupping my face, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. "But let me put your mind at ease." With a swift move, he flips us over in the water, taking control, leaving me breathless.

He takes his hands down under the water, to my thighs, teasing me as his lips trail down my neck. His thumb rubs circles around my clit as a moan escapes my lips. Then his fingers find my entrance. Teasing me, taunting me, before finally, he plunges them inside of me, filling me completely. His movements are slow, controlled, each thrust of his fingers drawing out my pleasure. His thumb finds my clit again, rubbing it in tight circles and sending wave after wave of pleasure crashing through me.

I moan louder, my fingers clawing at him. My body is aching for release until a shattering climax leaves me gasping for air.

I can feel the heat between us building as his cock gently rubs against my stomach.

“I want you,” I whisper against his neck. ” I want you inside of me.”

A grin spreads across his face. “Yeah?” He takes his finger inside of my mouth pulling my lower lip down as I suck.

“I need it.” I can hear the conviction in my voice. I want him.

Hunter takes his hands back down to tighten them around my thighs, his eyes burning with desire. I see him swallow. He pulls his lower lip between his teeth. His breath is hot against my lips.

He guides himself inside me. A moan falls from my lips, my back arching so much that my nipples rub against his chest. He’s slow, gentle, giving me time to adjust. His hands soothe my thighs, tracing patterns on my skin, as he starts to move.

It’s slow and sensual and our breaths are steady. He’s looking into my eyes, the intensity of his gaze making me feel desired, treasured. He is completely focused on me. Thrusting and filling me as I moan into his ear.

“You feel so good.” He continues to thrust and thrust and thrust. And with one more deep push inside, he holds himself still as he turns us both back around. Now I am on top with Hunter still inside me.

I move my hands up his chest. He watches me as I gather all my strength, put my hands on his shoulders, and push myself up. His hands immediately move to my waist, helping me find my balance.

I place my hands on his chest for support. I like the view from up here. Hunter’s eyes are darker now, filled with an intensity that I can almost taste. I start moving, setting a slow pace at first, feeling him inside me. His hands move up and down my body, feeling every inch of my curves.

Seeing Hunter underneath me, at my mercy, is empowering. His age, his wealth, his status, they all fade

away. He's just a man. My man. His breath deepens in his throat as I quicken my pace. I lean down, my hands on either side of his head, my hair falling around us like a curtain, creating our own private world.

"Do you like it when I'm in control?" I ask.

He lets out a low chuckle, his hands on my back encouraging me to move faster. "I like it."

I move faster and faster, riding his cock like I can't get enough, leaning forward so our chests are pressed together. His hands find my hips now as he helps set the rhythm. My breathing deepens as my head falls back in ecstasy. Hunter's arms wrap around me, pulling me closer into him.

"Mm. I'm close." He leans back enjoying the view of me. His grip on me tightens and I feel him stiffen beneath me.

His words do something to me as I moan in pleasure knowing I'm not far behind.

The worries about our age difference, about being his employee, about being his daughter's best friend — all those thoughts fade away. They're replaced by the sheer intensity of being in this moment.

I hold onto him, my nails digging into his shoulders as our climaxes hit simultaneously, exploding in a wave of pleasure that leaves us both breathless. I feel his hands on my back, pulling me down onto him as we ride out the waves together. He kisses the top of my head, his grip on my thighs tightening before I collapse onto him.

We lay there, our bodies entwined in the warm water. His breath on my neck, his heartbeat under my hand, his body heat. I take it all in.

We sit there, the silence filling the space. As I lay on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart, a sense of peace settles over me.

But like a shadow creeping up in the dark, the reality of our situation sets back in.

I sit up, water wrapping around us, and look at him with longing as I try to hide my worry.

How the hell are we going to make this work?

HUNTER

Traveling home felt surreal after a long weekend in the tropical sun with Maya.

I had whisked Maya away to the Maldives - with crystal clear waters, and pristine white sandy beaches. We stayed at a secluded, luxurious overwater villa that came with its own private pool and direct access to the lagoon.

It was like waking up from a dream. I couldn't get her out of my head. The time we had spent together made me realize how deep and real our connection was.

But back in the city, reality set in again. Our age difference still lingered between us, although it didn't seem to bother either one of us as much anymore. But there was something else that had kept nagging at me: Kaitlyn.

I walk into the living room to find Kaitlyn curled up on the couch, engrossed in her book. Her dark hair is pulled into a messy bun; her glasses are perched on the tip of her nose.

"Hey, pumpkin."

"Dad, don't call me that. I'm not five anymore." She doesn't even look up from her book. Something is bothering her. I sit down next to her.

"Kaitlyn, we need to talk."

She finally looks up at me. "About what?"

I rub the back of my neck, a nervous habit. "I've noticed you've been acting a little... off since I got back."

Kaitlyn's brow furrows. "Off? How?"

I hesitate, trying to find the right words. "You seem... suspicious. Like you're constantly looking for... something."

Kaitlyn doesn't respond immediately. She bites her lip, her gaze shifting to the floor. "I don't know, Dad... It's just... you and Maya seem... really close." She shrugs, her tone casual, but her eyes betray her. They're filled with uncertainty.

"Kaitlyn, Maya and I are just... co-workers," I reassure her, shocked at my own words. They sound so hollow, even to my own ears.

She nods, but I can tell that she isn't buying it. She picks up her book, already engrossed in her novel again.

I stand up, give her shoulder a squeeze, and leave it alone for now. As I walk away, I can't help but think that Kaitlyn knows more than she's letting on. But I'm not ready to face it yet.



THE NEXT MORNING, I walk into the office and I can sense something is off. The usual chatter has been replaced by hushed whispers that die down as I pass by. I make my way to my office, but before I can even sit down, my publicist, Grace, storms in.

"Hunter, we have a problem." She is usually very composed, but right now, I sense the urgency in her voice. She throws a tabloid onto my desk.

The headline screams, 'Hunter Holme's Scandalous Office Romance?'

I skim the article, my heart pounding in my chest. The article is full of speculation and anonymous quotes about me and Maya. Photos snapped during our recent trip are plastered all over the pages.

I throw the tabloid down, rubbing my temples. "Where did they get these photos?"

Grace shrugs. “Paparazzi. They’ve been tailing you for a long time, Hunter. You should have been more careful.”

“So, what do we do?”

Grace sighs, pulling out her phone. “Damage control, Hunter. We need to release a statement denying the rumors. We’ll say that you and Maya are just friends and colleagues.”

I hesitate, swallowing hard. “And what about Maya? She doesn’t need this kind of attention.”

“We’ll make sure she’s protected,” Grace assures me.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I nod, my mind racing. The last thing I want is for Maya to be dragged into this mess. I pick up the phone to call her, needing to hear her voice, needing to reassure her.

As Grace leaves my office, I can’t help but think that things are about to get a lot more complicated.

I dial Maya’s extension. “Maya,” I say as soon as she answers, “I need you in my office. Now.” My words are rushed. The urgency in my tone must have gotten through to her because she gets here within seconds.

I hand the tabloid to her, pointing to the headlines. “There are rumors... about us.”

Her eyes go wide as she takes in the information, her knuckles going white as she grips the paper. “Oh my God,” she cries her eyes darting from the photos to me. “What are we going to do, Hunter?”

Maya swallows hard, her eyes welling up with tears. “Hunter... what if Kaitlyn finds out about this? She’s my best friend. She’s going to hate me...” Her voice trails off. She wipes at her eyes, trying to brush away the tears.

I hate to see her like this. It’s killing me.

“And my parents,” she stammers on, a fresh wave of panic washing over her. “They’re going to be so upset.” Maya’s eyes are pleading for reassurance. “They’ve always been so upset

with me... I just always seem to get myself into drama. But this? I don't know if they can handle this."

She wipes her eyes again, her breath hitching as she tries to keep her composure.

"And... and there's something else, Hunter. My dad's been diagnosed with cancer." She chokes on the words, the weight of them heavy. Her tears spill over now, a river of fear and grief. "This... This could push my parents over the edge," she whispers, her face a portrait of fear, her eyes wide and vulnerable. "They're already dealing with so much. I... I don't know how to tell them about us, about the rumors. I don't know if they could handle it."

Her dad has Cancer?

"Why... why didn't you tell me, Maya?"

"I... I didn't want you to feel sorry for me, Hunter, or my family," she whispers. "You already have so much on your plate, I didn't want to add to that."

I rise from my seat, circling the desk to pull her into my arms. "I'll figure all of this out. I promise."

I will take care of all this for her. I'll make sure she won't have to face any more pain. I brush a stray tear from her cheek with my thumb.

"I mean it, Maya." I can feel her trembling beneath my touch. "I will handle all of this, okay? You don't need to worry about the rumors or the tabloids or anything else." I give her a small but reassuring smile.

"You just need to keep doing what you do best. Focus on your work, keep being the brilliant woman I know you are." My eyes don't leave hers. I pull her closer, wrapping her in my arms again, trying to shield her from the storm that's about to hit us.

"Everything's going to be okay, I promise," I whisper into her hair.

I feel her nod against my chest, a small sigh escaping her lips.

I take a step back from her and look her in the eyes with my hands on her shoulders. “Why don’t you go home, Maya.” My voice is firm. “Take the rest of the day off. I will send some dinner over to your place. Take a bath and relax, okay?”

Maya looks as though she might argue, but then she nods.

Once I hear the click of my office door closed, a switch flips inside me. Adrenaline courses through my veins and I’m on the phone in a second. I call several PR firms, lawyers, anyone who can help me put an end to this. The conversations are frustrating, filled with non-committal phrases like ‘maybe’ and ‘we’ll see what we can do’. But I keep dialing. I need to fix this. For Maya, for Kaitlyn, for her parents, for me... I need to fucking fix this.

Hours pass and I’m left alone in the near-dark office. The only light is the glow from the city outside my office windows. Tired and frustrated, I finally hang up the phone. It’s been an endless day of conversations and I’m no closer to a solution than I was this morning.

Then it hits me.

I pick up the phone and start dialing.

“Bennett,” I greet, my voice heavy with exhaustion and worry.

“Hunter?” Bennett’s familiar, confident voice fills the line. “What’s up, it’s late. Everything okay?”

“No. I’ve got a mess on my hands,” I confess, running a hand through my hair. “You’re the best in the business and I need the best right now.”

“What happened?”

“Rumors about me being with Maya. It’s all over the tabloids.”

Silence on the other end. “Maya? Fuck... I see.” I can hear the gears turning in his head over the phone. “It’s not going to be easy, Hunter. But I think I have a plan that could work.”

“I need this to go away, for everyone’s sake.”

“I’ll take care of it. Let me get back to you.”

“Thanks, Bennett.” I hang up the phone and let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding. I’m not sure what Bennett has planned, but if anyone can fix this mess, it’s him.

I drag myself home, exhausted from the day. The house is quiet, the only sound is the echo of my footsteps on the polished marble floor.

As I make my way to the kitchen for a much-needed drink, I freeze at the entrance.

“Kaitlyn? What are you doing here, sweetheart? It’s late.”

Kaitlyn doesn’t answer my question. She’s seated at the kitchen island with this morning’s paper spread out in front of her.

Shit. She knows.

She lifts the news and gives it a little shake. I can see the headline, bold and brutal, screaming back at me. And I can only imagine the storm of emotions wreaking havoc in my daughter’s mind as she looks at me.

She’s waiting for an explanation, a denial... something, anything.

But nothing is coming out.

MAYA

The following two weeks are a blur of endless meetings, deadlines, and sleepless nights. Hunter and I work like machines, our days filled with back-to-back tasks leaving us with barely any breathing room.

As I'm scurrying towards the copy room, a strong hand grabs my arm and pulls me sideways. I nearly drop the stack of papers in my hand. I glance sideways and find myself staring into Hunter's deep blue eyes.

"Hunter!"

"Hi, beautiful."

"You scared me!" I hit him in the shoulder. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were in a meeting."

"Just taking a break." He wraps an arm around my waist and places his other hand on the small of my back.

I blush.

Lately, we've been so busy. It's almost as if we're two ships passing in the night, our schedules never coinciding. We only manage to catch fleeting glimpses of each other in passing, short exchanges, a silent nod here, and an acknowledging smile there.

I miss him. I miss his touch.

He looks me up and down. "You look like you could use a break. You look exhausted, Maya."

I am exhausted. I've been waking up in the mornings feeling sick. Probably from stress from the rumors. They're still flying around.

Every look, every word, every silence between us is twisted and magnified around here. The whispers have grown louder, the curiosity stronger, and the pressure has been building.

"Just trying to keep up with you, boss." I wink at him.

"Oh yeah? Well, maybe you're pushing yourself too hard."

I raise an eyebrow at that. "Are you telling me to slack off, Mr. Holmes?"

Hunter chuckles. "I only want what's best for my star employee."

"Thanks for the concern, but I can handle it."

He looks at me for a moment, his eyes softening. "I know, Maya. I know you can." He lets go of my arm and walks away. I watch him disappear around the corner. And I start to miss him again.

I make my way back to my desk, my mind still lost in the warmth of Hunter's touch. I shake off the lingering emotions and focus on what I need to get done. I take a deep breath and pull out my phone, scrolling through my contacts until I find Kaitlyn. I pause. My fingers hover over the screen.

It's been two weeks of silence between Kaitlyn and me. Since I got back from the business trip to the Mediterranean, she hasn't been responding to my texts.

I'm trying to give her space, but the silence is deafening and I can't stand it any longer. I type a message, my fingers trembling as they move over the keys.

Hey Kait. It's been a min.

I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing.

Can we talk?

Miss you.

I hit send before my courage wavers.

I put my phone down, the unease settling in my stomach. I hope she responds. I miss our friendship, the non-stop laughing, the secrets, and the late-night talks.

I miss her.

I lean back in my chair, staring at the blinking cursor on my computer screen, waiting for Kaitlyn's response.

Nothing.

Maybe she heard the rumors?

I hate the idea of that. The rumors about Hunter and me could have gotten to her. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt, even shame, imagining Kaitlyn picking up one of those damned tabloids. Seeing her dad's face splashed across the front page, alongside mine... Maybe that's why she won't talk to me.

I never intended to hurt her or betray her trust. But I can't deny what is happening between Hunter and me. There's a connection that has grown between us.

I close my eyes, wrestling with the uncertainty. It's the silence that's worse than any confrontation. I wish she would scream, shout, and tell me how terrible I am. Anything is better than this quiet isolation.

I'm hunched over my desk, lost in my thoughts when a familiar scent fills the room. I don't have to look up to know it's him. Hunter leans against my desk, his gaze focused on me. I can feel the heat of his stare as he observes my face.

"Hunter."

"Maya." He reaches out and lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him. His blue eyes search mine. "You're worried about the rumors, aren't you?"

I nod, unable to find my voice. He sighs, running a hand through his hair.

"Maya, you've got to stop worrying about what other people are saying." There's a softness in his gaze. "You know,

it's our lives, not theirs.”

“But what about Kaitlyn?” I ask, my voice shaky.

He takes a moment to respond. “We’ll deal with Kaitlyn. She’s strong. She’ll understand... eventually.”

“And what if she doesn’t?”

Hunter’s hand, still on my face, moves to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. He looks at me, his gaze serious. “Then we will give her time, as much as she needs. We can’t control how others feel, Maya, but we can’t stop living our lives either.”

Why is he talking this way? She must know. He must know that she knows.

“She knows, doesn’t she?”

Hunter looks sad. “Yeah... she knows.”

I fucking knew it.

I can feel my heart in my chest, like it’s trying to escape, to run away from the reality of the words he’s spoken. “And she hasn’t said anything to me? She hasn’t... She hasn’t even acknowledged it.”

“She found out around the same time the rumors started. I hadn’t told her before, I... I wanted to, but I was trying to find the right moment, the right words. I guess the media beat me to it.”

The room feels so cold all of a sudden. Guilt stabs me in my heart. My best friend has been hurting because of me. Because I’m so selfish. I can’t help but feel like I’ve failed her like I’ve failed our friendship.

I look down, my heart aching. “I can’t believe I didn’t even tell her. I’ve been such a shitty friend.”

Hunter reaches out, his fingers lifting my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze again. “Maya, you’re not a shitty friend. This is a complicated situation. There’s no right way to handle it.”

“But I should’ve told her... I should’ve told her.”

Hunter's hand leaves my chin, rubbing my arm in an attempt to comfort me. "We can't change the past, Maya. All we can do now is try to make things right and keep moving forward."

His words don't comfort me. They can't. Because right now, all I can think about is Kaitlyn. And how much this whole situation must be hurting her.

"Maya, listen to me, this storm we're in... it won't last forever. Nothing does." He pauses, searching my eyes as if looking for some kind of assurance that I'm hearing him. "It's hard now, and it might be hard for a while, but eventually, it will all blow over. Things will go back to normal."

His hand finds mine, the warmth of his touch easing my emotions. "We have to hold on and weather the storm a little longer. Can you do that?"

I swallow hard, nodding. It doesn't seem possible, but right now, his words are the only thing offering me a glimmer of hope.

"I've got to get back to work." He leans down and presses a tender kiss to my forehead. "Relax a little, okay?" He gives me a small smile before turning to leave.

Alone again, a wave of nausea washes over me, a physical manifestation of the emotions inside me. It's too much. I need to take the rest of the day off. I send an email to the team, letting them know I'm not feeling well and that I'll be clocking out for the day. Hunter will understand.

As I grab my bag, I feel guilty for leaving early. It's not like me to not want to work. At all.

Work has always been my thing. A place I can lose myself in the whirlwind of tasks, deadlines, and achievements.

But now, as these rumors swirl around, my world feels like it is crumbling. Every email I send, every meeting I attend, I can't help but wonder if my colleagues are whispering behind my back, questioning my integrity, my professionalism. My hand trembles above my mouse as I click 'send' on my out-of-office email.

Have I ruined more than my friendship with these rumors? Have I jeopardized my career, my sanctuary? It's a new territory for me, this uncertainty, this anxiety. I've always been the one in control, the boss bitch with a plan. But now, it's like I'm free-falling.

I leave the office and make my way to the nearest drugstore, hoping to find something that will help ease the nausea.

As I walk in, the bright fluorescent lights seem harsh against my eyes. I blink a couple of times to adjust and make my way towards the counter where a middle-aged woman with a kind smile greets me.

"Hi, can you point me to some anti-nausea medication?"

She gives me a sympathetic look. "Sorry to hear you're not feeling well, dear. Is it just nausea or anything else?"

"Just nausea, mostly in the morning, and some dizziness."

"Well, you know hun, those can be symptoms of... Well, it might be nothing, but could you be pregnant?"

The suggestion hits me like a punch to the gut.

Pregnant?

Hell no.

The idea is so outrageous that I can't help but laugh. But it's an empty laugh, a hollow sound.

"I... No, that's... It's not possible."

At that instant, I remember that my period is late.

It's because you've been so stressed out.

I talk myself out of it.

The woman shrugs at me and smiles as I walk down the aisle toward the nausea treatments. I grab a box of medication off of the shelf and head toward the counter. As I pass the aisle with pregnancy tests, I shake my head and continue walking.

You're not pregnant. There's no way.

I continue walking, but a nagging feeling is in the back of my mind. I stop in my tracks, staring at the candy bars and chewing gum at the checkout counter. With a sigh, I turn around and walk back to the aisle I just passed.

There they are, pregnancy tests in all shapes and sizes, staring back at me. I laugh again, but it's a nervous laugh this time. I scan the shelves, my eyes landing on a small pink box.

'Early detection.'

I stare at it for a while. Finally, with a shaky hand, I reach out and grab the box. I walk back to the counter. I pay for my items and walk out of the drugstore, clutching my bag like a lifeline. As I step outside, I take a deep breath.

I'm not pregnant. It's not even possible.

Yes, it is, idiot.

You fucked your boss, remember?

I make it back to my apartment, continuing to repress any thought that I could possibly be pregnant. I throw my bag on the couch before heading straight to the bathroom. I rip open the box. The instructions are simple: pee on the stick and wait for the results.

I pee on the stick and put the pink cap back on.

Two minutes. That's all it takes. Two minutes to know whether my life is about to change forever or if this is a cruel joke. I set the test on the countertop and take a step back, my heart pounding in my ears. I glance at my phone, the time taunting me.

I look down at the test, my eyes glued to the little window.

This can't be happening.

Two pink lines.

I'm pregnant.

HUNTER

I've noticed a change in Maya's demeanor over the past few days. I can't quite put my finger on it, but she's been... different. More distant, more guarded. She's always been independent, but this feels different. It feels colder.

She hasn't looked me in the eyes in days. Every time I try to engage her in conversation, she replies in short responses and changes the subject. She is physically here, but emotionally, she's a million miles away.

It's because of everything that's been going on. The rumors, Kaitlyn... It's a lot for anyone to handle. She's always been strong, but even the strongest people have their breaking points. Maybe she's close to hers.

I make my way to my office, my head down and mind preoccupied. But as I'm walking past the break room, I catch a glimpse of her.

She's standing by the coffee machine, her back facing me. I can tell she's lost in thought, the way she's hunched over, her arms wrapped around herself in protection.

I should walk away, but my feet have a mind of their own.

"Maya."

She jumps as she turns around to face me, her eyes wide and her face pale. She's a mess. Her hair is up in a haphazard bun, her clothes are creased, and there are dark circles under her eyes. She looks like she hasn't slept in days.

“Yeah?”

Images of our nights together flash through my mind, the contrast between this Maya and the Maya I know is so vivid that it physically hurts.

She looks down, avoiding my gaze.

“Are you okay?”

She nods, her shoulders shaking. She reaches for her mug and pours herself a cup of coffee, her hands trembling. “I’m fine.”

All men know what that means.

“You’re distant lately, Maya. Is there something on your mind you want to talk about?”

“I’m just tired, Hunter.”

I step closer, my hands resting on her waist. “You know you can talk to me, right? No matter what it is.” I am searching for a hint of what’s bothering her.

But she looks down and gives a bitter chuckle. “Sometimes, it’s just easier to keep things to myself.”

“Maya, we’ve been through a lot and I—”

She interrupts me, “And I need some space, okay?” Her words cut through the silence like a knife. She pulls herself out of my grip and walks away, leaving me standing alone at the coffee machine.

I wish she’d talk to me, let me in. But every time I try, she shuts me out. It’s like she’s put up this wall around herself and I’m on the outside, looking in.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the room as my mind wanders. I’ve always been a man who went after what he wanted without hesitation, but now... Now, I can’t help but wonder if I’ve made a mistake.

You should have kept it in your pants.

Now look. You’ve ruined her.

I care for her, more than I want to admit. I think about our age difference, my role as her boss, and the fact that I'm her best friend's dad. Each thought adds weight to my conscience.

I'm torn between the undeniable pull toward her and the growing realization that my impulsiveness may cost me more than I am willing to pay.

I can't help but be reminded of another time, another life. It seems like a lifetime ago at least. A time when I acted on impulse, just like with Maya. A time with my ex-wife.

The coffee smell takes me back, back to mornings filled with laughter and love, and afternoons and evenings filled with shouting and slammed doors.

We were young and we were in love. Or so I thought. I was a young successful man and she was beautiful. It seemed like the perfect match. But underneath the surface, we were a ticking time bomb.

I was just as impulsive back then, always opting for what I wanted in the moment without thinking about what would happen after. I proposed after three weeks of dating.

Three fucking weeks.

Who does that?

The marriage was a whirlwind of ups and downs, of happiness and heartbreak. My impulsiveness led to a messy divorce that left emotional and financial scars.

Now, as I stand here, staring at the empty spot where Maya stood moments ago, I can't help but wonder. Am I repeating the same mistake? Am I letting my desires override my judgment? Just like with my ex-wife, I didn't think about the long-term effects, about the possible fallout. I acted on impulse, and now it seems like I might pay the price again.

I pour myself a cup of steaming hot coffee.

How am I going to get myself out of this whole mess?

How am I going to get her out of this mess?

I run a hand through my hair, regret settling in my stomach. It's a bitter pill to swallow. I've always been a man of action, of impulses, but now I'm left questioning every decision that has led me to this point.

Maybe I need to end this with her. Maybe that will solve this all.



THE NEXT MORNING, I am at my desk, looking over the company's latest financial statements when I call Maya into my office to discuss numbers before a big meeting in a few hours.

She comes into the office on a rampage.

"Hunter, we need to rethink our strategy for the upcoming product launch."

The statement is totally off-topic and not something I want to deal with right now.

I glance up at her, my eyes lingering on her for a moment. "Maya, you're brilliant, but it's my decision. I've been in this business for longer than you."

"I know and that's why you hired me, isn't it? To bring fresh perspectives and ideas to the table?"

I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. "Yes, but at the end of the day, I'm still the boss. And this time, I need you to trust my judgment," I snap, struggling to keep my emotions in check. "Maya, you've got to listen to me. This isn't about fresh perspectives. I have other business I need you to take care of right now." My voice is stern, an unusual tone for me with her.

She recoils back, tears brimming in her eyes. "I'm not a child, Hunter. I deserve to be heard, not silenced by your 'experienced' ego!" Her voice shakes as she waves her hands passionately, her defenses crumbling.

“Hold on a minute, Maya,” I say, uncrossing my arms and standing up. “This isn’t like you. You’re not usually so... emotional. What the fuck is going on?”

She inhales, looking away as a single tear spills down her cheek. “I... I’m just overwhelmed, okay?”

“Maya, if you don’t talk to me, I can’t help you.”

“I just... I don’t understand your lifestyle, Hunter!” she blurts out suddenly, catching me off guard. “All these high-end galas, absurdly expensive suits, and the endless power play. I... I can’t keep up!”

She’s pacing my office now, her slender form silhouetted against the morning sunlight streaming in through the large windows. “And then there’s this job.” She looks at me, her eyes filled with a blend of frustration and desperation. “I thought I’d love it. I thought it would be this amazing opportunity. And it is, I guess. But it’s more work than I ever anticipated.” She continues. “The stakes are so high, the expectations are constant, and the workload is just... It’s overwhelming, Hunter. It’s completely fucking overwhelming.”

Where the fuck is all this coming from?

A memory flashes in my mind, with *her*. My ex-wife, a whirlwind of fiery passion and fierce independence, just like Maya. We used to work together, side by side. I remember one particular incident as if it were yesterday.

We were on the brink of securing a huge business deal, one that could have secured our company’s future for years. Just as I was about to shake hands with our potential investors, *she* burst into the room, her cheeks flushed and eyes ablaze. “Hunter, you can’t do this!” she yelled, ignoring the shocked faces around the table.

Her emotions were raw and unchecked, her words running at full speed, derauling my carefully planned business deal.

Despite the professional setting, she allowed her personal beliefs to cloud her judgment, to bring her emotions into work. And her timing and execution were far from ideal. Our

potential investors recoiled, their faces a blend of discomfort and shock. We lost the deal that day, and it wasn't the only time her heated outbursts cost us.

This flashback suddenly brings clarity. Maya's passionate outburst was eerily similar. The fear of history repeating itself creates a knot in my stomach, and I find myself wondering if Maya's intensity is a liability for the business.

I try to digest what she's unloaded on me. It's unexpected. I'd always seen her as this confident, self-assured woman who loved a challenge.

"You know, I thought you were different. I thought you could handle it. I guess I was wrong," I snap, the venom in my voice surprising even me. "Maybe you're just not cut out for this job or for this life. Maybe this was all a mistake."

She reels back, staring at me as though I've morphed into a monster. The hurt in her wide eyes is palpable. For a moment, she stands frozen, her lips trembling. Then she spins on her heel, fleeing my office with a sob as the door slams shut behind her.

MAYA

I can hardly see through the tears that blur my vision as the harsh words Hunter had flung at me echo in my mind.

I push through the revolving doors of the building, the cool city air hitting me like an icy shock. I stumble toward the parking lot.

With trembling hands, I fumble for my keys, my sobs coming in uncontrollable waves now. I unlock my car, falling into the driver's seat. I slump against the steering wheel, letting the turmoil within me spill out.

What a fucking asshole.

I should have known better.

My body shakes with each sob, my heartache is so intense it feels like physical pain. The leather steering wheel is cool under my forehead. At least that is somewhat relieving.

I cry for what feels like forever, releasing everything that I've been bottling up.

Stupid, stupid girl.

You thought he would love you?

He just wanted to get you in bed.

All you were was excitement to him.

Now you're going to be a single, broke mom.

My phone vibrates, breaking me from my self-imposed misery. I wipe my tears away, before answering the call.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Maya?” a kind woman asks from the other end.

“Yes, speaking.”

“This is Doctor Harper’s office. We’re calling to schedule your first ultrasound appointment. Does three weeks from today work for you?”

I clamp a hand over my stomach, the reality of my situation washing over me. “Yes, that would be great.”

“Wonderful, Maya,” she says cheerfully. “And how have you been feeling? Any irregularity?”

I stop and think about the shit show my life has been.

Irregularity?

You mean like the fact that I am pregnant with my best friend’s dad’s baby?

That’s pretty fucking irregular.

Or how about that I quit my job because my boss — aka my baby daddy — was being a complete fucking jerk?

Or the fact that my morning sickness seems to be all-day sickness?

Or the way my clothes already don’t fit right?

Or that my emotions are a roller coaster ride to hell?

Is all that considered ‘irregular’ enough?

I pause.

“Just some nausea and a little cramping at night...”

But my thoughts continue.

Oh, and let’s not forget the part where I’ve started talking to the little peanut in my belly, asking him or her for advice. You know, because a fetus would totally have all the answers to my messed-up life. Yeah, I guess you could say things are a bit... irregular.

And sleep? What's that? Oh, you mean those few hours of rest between tossing, turning, and trips to the bathroom because apparently, my bladder has shrunk to the size of a pea.

And don't even get me started on my food aversions. The mere thought of my favorite chicken noodle soup now has me running for the bathroom.

But hey, other than that, everything is perfectly fuckin' regular.

"That all sounds pretty normal! Regular meals can help keep nausea at bay. So, try and eat small meals often, okay?"

The warmth and concern in her voice are comforting to my pessimistic attitude and for the first time in what feels like ages, I feel a little hope. I know she's trying to help. I should be grateful.

"I'll try."

"You've got this," she replies, the sound of her smile evident in her voice. "Oh, and Maya, congratulations. Pregnancy is a beautiful journey. It may not always be easy, but it's worth it. And we are by your side the entire time, okay?"

The call ends, leaving me in silence. I hang up, cradling my stomach.

I'm going to be a mom.

Oh my God. I'm going to be a mom.

I run my fingers over my stomach.

For the first time, instead of thinking about the drama of being pregnant, I think about who this baby might become. Would they have Hunter's stubbornness or my sass? Would they have his piercing eyes or my wide, infectious smile?

I'm going to be a mom and despite the chaos of my current life, the realization fills me with warmth. I let out a soft, shaky laugh, my hand still resting on my belly.

As if the baby was speaking to me already, my stomach growls.

I'm hungry.

Again.

As I drive up the street, I spot a cozy Italian restaurant I've been dying to try and stop in. The smell of garlic and tomatoes hit me as I walk in.

I make my way to a secluded table in the back of the restaurant and I freeze. An all too familiar face hits me from a nearby booth.

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

It's Christy. Hunter's ex-wife and Kaitlyn's mom.

She notices me and a cruel smile stretches across her face as she walks toward me.

"Well, if it isn't the office clown." She stands, staring at me with a predatory look in her eyes. "I've seen the tabloids, darling. Care to share what's going on between you and my ex-husband?"

My heart pounds in my chest. The last thing I need is to deal with her. But I'm not about to let her intimidate me.

"I think you have me mistaken for someone who cares about your opinion."

Christy's lips curl into a smirk, her eyes look like a Disney movie witch. "You are so naive. You think you can just walk into the business world with your little degree and a cute figure? You're just a child playing in a world of sharks." She steps closer, her perfume sickeningly sweet. "And let's be honest, you're not really here for the job, are you? You're here for the money, for a sugar daddy, and Hunter happened to be the easiest target."

I freeze.

She continues despite my eyes trying to tell her to get fucking lost. "Hunter may be rich, but he's not an idiot. Sooner or later, he'll see get sick of you. And then what? You'll have to go back to your little garbage life..."

The rage simmers inside me. I feel my attitude coming out full force.

Uh oh.

“I get why you’re upset... You weren’t able to keep a man like Hunter around.”

Christy’s face tightens, her eyes narrowing into slits.

“But I’m not you, Christy.” I look her up and down. “That’s for sure...”

I stand up and turn my back to her, not bothering to look back. I walk out of the restaurant, the door jingling shut behind me. I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“Well, that was a waste of my appetite,” I mutter to myself, rubbing my belly. “Don’t worry, little peanut. Mommy’s not going to let a bitter ex-wife ruin our dinner. Let’s find another place. I’m still starving.”

I continue to walk down the street before I spy a little Mexican joint tucked away between two larger buildings. My stomach rumbles even louder. The place is empty.

Thank God.

I slide into a booth and scan the menu. It doesn’t take long for a friendly server to come by, taking my order for a plate of nachos with extra cheese.

As I wait for my food, I pull out my phone. My fingers hover over Hunter’s name in my contact list, contemplating whether I should tell him about the run-in with his ex-wife.

Christy knows. She knows about the rumors, about the whispers that have been circulating. And it’s only a matter of time before she puts two and two together.

But I decide against it. I’m still pissed at Hunter.

He might be the father of my baby, but right now, he’s just another man who’s let me down.

Let him find out his past is catching up with him on his own.

I slip the phone back into my bag as the server returns with my food. The sight of the nachos, smothered in melted cheese and jalapeños, brings a smile to my face. A splash of hot sauce, a squeeze of fresh lime, and two hands later, I'm munching on the food when memories of Kaitlyn flood my mind. She used to tell me stories about Christy, how she was a loose cannon, unpredictable as fuck. At the time, I shrugged it off, thinking Christy was a classic bitter ex. But damn, Kaitlyn wasn't kidding. Christy is as crazy as they come.

I get sad as I think about Kaitlyn. I miss her laughter, her wild spirit, her support. We used to laugh about the idea of me having a baby, how I'd be the most unconventional mom ever. The thought of telling her about my pregnancy, about the baby growing inside me — it brings a smile to my lips. I wish more than anything that I could share this news with her.

"I miss you, Kait," I whisper to the empty air. "I'm pregnant. I wish you were here with me."

My thoughts then begin to wander to my mom. The look on her face when I tell her about the baby, about Hunter.

I can already see her disappointment, her worry. She's always wanted the best for me: a stable life with a loving partner and a steady career.

My current situation is a far cry from her dreams for me.

You're such a mess, Maya.

I can imagine her questions about Hunter being so much older, about him being my boss, about him being my friend's dad. And then there's my pregnancy. I know she won't like how things have turned out.

I let out a small sigh, pushing my finished plate to the side. I still wish I could tell her. I need her wisdom right now, but the fear of adding to her disappointment in me is un-fucking-bearable.

The empty chair across from me seems to echo my loneliness. I toy with my phone, my fingers hovering over Hunter's number again. A part of me wants to dial his number, to hear his voice, to tell him about the encounter with Christy,

about my fears, about our baby... But how would I even begin?

“Hey, Hunter. Your ex-wife is a nightmare and by the way, we’re expecting.”

Not exactly Hallmark card material. I shake my head, putting my phone away.

I don’t need to tell him, I don’t need his understanding, his sympathy, or his drama. I don’t need him. I’m not alone, I’ve got my little peanut to think about. I’ve always been independent, always faced my problems head-on.

As I get up from the table, I put a hand on my belly, smiling. “We don’t need anyone.”

The words leave my lips, and a wave of sadness crashes into me. I’m not used to feeling this vulnerable.

HUNTER

I sit alone in my office, staring out at the city through my floor-to-ceiling windows. The room feels eerily quiet and a half-drunk whiskey sits by my side, fueling my intense thoughts.

I think back to the heated words I threw at Maya today.

I regret it. I let my frustrations get the better of me like a fucking child. The way she walked out, the door slamming behind her, without a word... It keeps replaying in my mind. I'm usually more composed, more calculating with my words, but Maya, she has a way of getting under my skin. She gets to me.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my temples. The loneliness that wraps around me is familiar.

"Damn it, Maya," I mutter to the empty room. "I need you to talk to me. Just tell me what's going on. Because I'm at my wit's end here."

My gaze falls on the photo of Kaitlyn sitting on my desk. My guilt leaks into my veins. She's been avoiding me too. And her absence is a void that can't be filled.

I finish the whiskey in one gulp, the liquid burning a path down my throat.

I can't help but think that I'm losing Maya too. And the thought scares me more than I'm willing to admit. This isn't just about our professional relationship. It's true that I can't afford to lose her in this position.

But it's more personal than that.

I glance at my reflection in the glass. The billionaire businessman who always gets what he wants, replaced with a confused, worried man.

Who the fuck are you?

I rub my face roughly, the prickling stubble reminding me of how long I've been holed up in my office.

Suddenly, the office door bursts open, and in storms Christy, her blonde hair bouncing with each step. She slams a newspaper on my desk and points a well-manicured finger at the front page. A paparazzi shot of Maya, her hand protectively on her belly.

“What the hell is this, Hunter? Are you trying to humiliate me? And our entire family?”

I stare at the newspaper.

Pregnant?

My mind reels, trying to process the rapidly changing situation.

“Explain yourself!” Christy demands.

An explanation?

For what?

I don't even know what's going on.

I push back my chair, standing up. “Get out,” I tell Christy, my voice eerily calm amidst the chaos she brought in. “Now.”

Her mouth drops open at my response, but my eyes must have told her I meant business. She turns to leave but as she does, Kaitlyn walks in.

She freezes in the doorway, as she looks back and forth between me and her mother. I can feel the tension in the room. Without a word, Christy turns around to stake her claim with Kaitlyn.

Kaitlyn continues inside and catches sight of the newspaper on my desk. She walks over, picking it up. The

picture and headline hit her like a gut punch. A picture of Maya, her hand resting on her belly, and the headline screaming **‘Billionaire’s Assistant Expecting?’** She looks up at me, her confusion turning into shock.

“Dad, Is Maya pregnant?”

I look at her. Shit. I can’t lie to her. And something in me can’t say ‘no’.

“I don’t know.”

She glances back down at the newspaper.

“You have been fucking her, haven’t you?”

I don’t say anything, but my silence is all the confirmation she needs.

“How could you?” she whispers. Her voice is low and my heart shatters.

She drops the newspaper on the desk with a shaky hand and turns to leave, tears pricking at her eyes.

“Kaitlyn, wait.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she says without turning around. Then, she walks out, leaving me alone again with her mother.

Fuck.

“You’re quite the piece of work, aren’t you, Hunter?” she sneers, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’m not in the mood for this, Christy.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re not. But you sure seem to be in the mood to sleep with your daughter’s best friend!”

“Christy, it’s none of your business.”

“She’s my daughter, Hunter! How can you say it’s not my business?”

“That’s between me and Kaitlyn. Not you,” I fire back, standing my ground.

“You’ve caused enough damage, Hunter. Don’t you dare drag our daughter into this mess,” she warns, pointing a finger at me.

“Kaitlyn is an adult. And unlike you, she has enough sense to hear all sides of a story before jumping to conclusions,” I snap back, my patience finally wearing thin. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a lot of things to sort out.”

With a final glare, Christy storms out, leaving me alone once again in my office. The weight of the day’s revelations sinking me further into my chair.

Silence descends on the room once more and I’m left to deal with the mess of emotions raging inside me.

I’ve always been so sure of myself, so confident in my decisions.

But now?

Now I feel like I don’t know anything anymore. My thoughts drift back to Maya.

I reach for my phone. I dial Maya’s number, her contact photo – an image from a charity event we’d attended together – pops up on the screen.

The phone rings...and rings... and rings.

No answer.

I dial again.

Straight to voicemail.

I hang up.

After a moment of hesitation, I start to type a message, my fingers shaking.

Maya, are you pregnant?

I need to know.

I hit send.

There’s silence from the other end.

There’s no way she’s going to respond.

I put my phone back down.

And then I pick it back up.

Nothing.

I put it down again and slam my fist on my desk.

“Fuck!”

I’m losing control, my grip on reality slipping away.

And then the phone buzzes in my hand.

A message from Maya.

My heart starts pounding as I open it.

Yes.

Yes... Yes? Yes? That’s it?

One word, but it carries the weight of a thousand.

I stare at the text.

This changes everything.

MAYA

I t's Hunter. Again.

Sitting in my small apartment, I try to drown out the sound of my phone buzzing relentlessly on the coffee table. I can't face him, not now. My heart pounds in my chest with each vibration.

Just pick it up.

My thoughts yell at me.

I know I should pick it up, but I can't.

Finally, the buzzing stops and the room falls silent. All I can hear is the damn clock ticking on the wall. I breathe a sigh of relief. But then, the silence breaks.

A new notification. This time it's a voicemail.

My heart sinks. I pick up the phone, hesitating for a moment before I hit play.

"Maya..." His voice floods the room, rougher than I've ever heard. There is a pause then a shaky breath. "Maya, why the hell didn't you tell me?" His voice cracks, anger and desperation seeping into each word. "I had to find out from a fucking tabloid? Is that it? Is that what I am to you now? Just some... some guy you can't be bothered to be honest with about something this big?"

There is another pause, thick and heavy. "You and I... We need to talk, Maya. You can't just... you can't just throw this

kind of news at me and then disappear. It's not fair. It's not fair to me, and it's not fair to... to our baby."

The message ends there.

His words hit me in the gut.

Our baby.

I hug my arms around my waist, feeling very small and very alone.

I can't keep ignoring him.

But I can't seem to face him either.

I'm not ready.



OVER THE NEXT couple of days, I put up walls around myself, creating a fortress to shield me from the world – especially Hunter.

I pick up my phone and dial.

"Human Resources, this is Sarah speaking, how can I assist you?"

"Hey, Sarah, It's me." I try to sound as miserable as possible. "Got hit by the flu. It's like a tiny, sadistic army is launching an all-out war inside my body. I think it's best if I work from home for the next few days, you know, to avoid turning the office into a mini pandemic ground zero."

"Oh, that sounds awful. I hope you feel better soon. I'll let Hunter know."

"Thanks, Sarah." I hang up the phone, feeling a bit of guilt for the pathetic white lie. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

I am avoiding Hunter like the plague, using email and texts to communicate about work and nothing else.

From: Hunter Holmes

To: Maya Jensen

Subject: Project Update and...

Maya,

I hope this email finds you feeling better. Trust me, we're doing fine at the office avoiding the microscopic war you've hinted at. The Anderson project is progressing as planned. I've noticed a couple of issues that need your magic touch. See attached file.

Also, I can't help but notice that my text messages are living in some sort of limbo. Could you answer them, perhaps after work hours? There's some non-project-related stuff I'd really like to discuss with you.

Best,

Hunter

From: Maya Jensen

To: Hunter Holmes

Subject: Re: Project Update and...

Hunter,

Thank you for the update. I'll delve into the Anderson project later today and see what can be done.

Stay healthy,

Maya

Every time my phone buzzes with a text, I feel a knot in my stomach, but I am determined not to let him in.

Maya.

Please. Will you talk to me?

I understand if you need space, but I think we need to talk about this.

Please, let's have a conversation.

I hope you're feeling better.

I'm worried about you.

Okay, I get it. I'll leave you alone.

When you're ready to talk, I'll be here.

My heart lurches at his last message.

He'll leave me alone?

Is that what I want?

How did things end up like this?

The phone buzzes with another message, but it's not from Hunter. It's a generic health check from the network provider. I feel a rush of disappointment.

What is wrong with me?

I close my eyes, trying to silence the whirlwind of thoughts. The truth is, I'm afraid. Afraid to admit my feelings, even to myself, let alone to him. Afraid to shatter the comfortable world we've built around us. Afraid of the consequences.

So, I do what I've been doing all week. I ignore his messages. I bury myself in work. I maintain my fortress of solitude. But each notification, each unread message, is a brick that adds to the weight of my guilt.

I know I can't keep evading him, can't keep running from my feelings. But right now, fear has the upper hand. And I... I just don't know how to fight it.

Punching the metaphorical clock, I shut down my home office for the day. I get up from the chair, my eyes aching in protest from long hours of being glued to the computer screen. I grab my coat, a pair of sunglasses, and step outside. The bracing cool air hits me like a bucket of ice-cold water. It feels good.

I make my way to the nearest food truck and I order my favorite — a loaded burrito, comfort food at its finest — then I

find an empty bench and sit, letting the city noise wash over me.

A familiar face appears from around the corner; it's Stacey from accounting, with her clingy sidekick, Gina. They wander past, deep in hushed conversation, casting gossipy glances my way. I lower my sunglasses, hoping to hide behind them, but I can still hear them.

"I heard she's been fucking the boss and he threw her to the curb," Stacey says with a laugh that boils my blood. Gina giggles in agreement, their laughter taunting me.

The burrito in my hand feels more like a lead weight than a source of comfort now. I'm tempted to throw it at them, but instead, I take a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm.

Maybe it would be easier to start fresh, to go somewhere where no one knows me, where I could escape the drama of my current life. A new city, a new job, a new identity.

I gaze at my reflection in the window of a nearby building. Staring back at me is a woman I hardly recognize.

Where did the confident, sassy Maya go?

The one who wouldn't think twice about snipping Stacey's comments down to size? The one who wouldn't let a man, let alone her boss push her into hiding?

The woman in the glass is a shadow of that girl. She barely resembles the Maya that I know. Or rather, used to know.

I toss the rest of my burrito into a trash can, my appetite gone.

The thought of quitting my job and disappearing into a new life hangs around my mind like an unwelcomed guest.

As the sun begins to set and the city sky shifts into blues and purples, I find my way back home. Back to the fortress I've created, away from the world.

I kick off my shoes, shrug off my coat. Heading back to my desk, I switch on my laptop, open up a new document and start typing.

Hunter,

I am writing to formally announce my resignation from my position as Project Manager & Assistant with immediate effect. My last working day will be two weeks from today.

I have enjoyed my time here and learned a lot from working with you and the team. However, I have decided to pursue other opportunities.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely, Maya Jensen

As I read over the words, they seem so cold, so clinical, so... final. But I know in my heart that it's the right thing to do.

For me. For him.

Then he can get back to his normal life, the life before me – a life of power lunches, board meetings, and billionaire bachelorhood. Back to normal.

I can't help but wish we could turn back time to a few months ago. Back when we were on his yacht, sailing into the sunset. The wind in my hair, the taste of salt on my lips, the feel of his arms around me.

It was perfect.

We were perfect.

We were us.

Uncomplicated.

Wild and free.

But that was then and this is now.

With a deep breath, my finger hovers over the 'send' button, lingering in the moment of decision. I can feel the resistance in my bones. My mind starts listing all the reasons why I shouldn't be doing this, all the reasons why I should just delete the email and face my problems head on. But the rational part of me interrupts, insisting this is the right move.

The drama, the gossip, the constant anxiety. Is that really what you want?

This is for the best.

In a moment of shaky resolve, I push the button, sending the email. The digital copy of my resignation flies through the virtual space, irreversible.

“This is for the best. I’ve made the right choice,” I tell myself over and over, trying to drown out the rising tide of regret. But despite my best efforts, a single, heartbreaking thought manages to break through the noise: *I don’t want to stop working for him.* But, it’s too late now. The decision is made, the email is sent, and all I can do is hope that time will heal the wound that has just been inflicted.

Before I can even entertain the thought of sleep, my phone begins to ring, displaying a call from Steve – the director of the local youth club. I haven’t been there in a while with all the drama going on.

Something in me tells me to pick it up, even though I’ve been avoiding every single other person in my life.

“Hey, Steve. What’s up?” I ask, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Maya, are you okay? You haven’t been here in weeks now,” he states.

“I’m fine,” I lie, hoping he’ll buy it. “Anyway, I have a question for you. Do you have any job openings at the youth club? Something paid?”

There’s a pause on the other line before he finally responds. “Actually, yes. We just had a position open up for a program coordinator. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

“I’ll stop in tomorrow. Can we talk more about it then?”

“Sure thing, Maya. We’d love to have you on board. You always have a way with the kids,” he says before we hang up.

This could be my ticket to a brand-new start.

HUNTER

I walk into my penthouse after another long day of Maya avoiding my every move and head straight for the bar. Pouring myself a glass of Scotch, I take a sip and let the burn of the alcohol soothe the raw edges of my thoughts.

Having another child at this stage of my life?

With Maya? My daughter's best friend... goddamn

How could I have allowed things to spiral this far out of control?

The guilt kills me, knowing that this could tear apart their friendship. The memory of my daughter's face contorting with confusion, anger, and hurt in my office is a punch to the gut.

My actions had not only changed the course of my life but those I cared about the most.

Moving to the couch, I sink into the plush leather with a sigh, glass in hand, and flick on the flat screen before me. The screen becomes nothing more than a blur of colors and lights.

The penthouse feels empty.

I take another sip of Scotch, feeling the sharp sting of loss. For a moment, I imagine Maya walking through the front door, her smile and her eyes breathing life into the room. I shake off the thought.

She's gone, idiot.

Reality hits me.

Sinking further into the couch, I let the glass rest in my hand. Alone in my home, the weight of the world weighs on my shoulders.

Regret, guilt, and apprehension consume me. I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the roots in frustration.

Suddenly, a memory floods into me, taking me back to life with Christy. I remember it like it was yesterday. Christy and I were in the living room of our old apartment. She was pacing up and down, her blue eyes full of anger and desperation.

“Is it too much to ask for, Hunter?” Her voice loud and shrill. “All I want is some quality time with you. Is your job more important than your own goddamn wife?”

“You know it’s not like that, Christy.” I was attempting to keep my own anger under control. “I work so that we can have a comfortable life. So that you can have everything you want!”

She spun around to face me, her face an open book of hurt and frustration. “Yes, a comfortable life! The kind where I barely see my husband and when I do, you’re too tired to even have a real fucking conversation with me!”

The argument escalated, her demands growing more incessant. She wanted more money for her shopping sprees, her pricey spa treatments, and her girls’ nights out. The more she asked, the more I felt used. Nothing was ever enough.

“At what cost, Christy? At what cost will it ever be enough for you?”

Her silence was the only response I got.

She was a mirror, reflecting my own shortcomings - my inability to connect, to really be there for her. Maybe I was the toxic one. The guilt of it all still haunts me.

I was so wrapped up in my work, in the business I was building from the ground up. I didn’t make time for her or for Kaitlyn.

How the fuck would I be a better father now?

I don’t even know how.

For the first time in my life, I don't have a clear answer. All I have is the fear of repeating the same mistakes.

I mindlessly grab my phone and start scrolling through emails.

My eyes fall on an unread email in my inbox; the sender - Maya. My heart thuds as I open it, her words, her resignation, stabbing me like a knife. She was leaving. My eyes read and re-read the message, my mind unable to comprehend.

How could she just abandon everything? How could she abandon *me*?

I push off the couch and drag myself into my office. I boot up my computer, my rage blazing, the loss and betrayal pushing me into action. With a few swift clicks, I'm on the company's internal job board, typing up a new job ad. My anger fuels my words, bitterness lacing every sentence.

"Seeking an Executive Assistant. Must be punctual, responsible, and able to handle intense work pressure. Must not be flighty or prone to making irrational decisions." The words flow, each one a jab aimed at Maya. Once satisfied, I hit 'Post', and the new job ad appears on the board instantly.

But as the initial rush of anger starts to fade, replaced by the same emptiness, I can't deny the bitter fucking truth. As much as I'd like to replace Maya, it's not just her job that's now vacant. It's her place in my heart.

The words on the screen blur as I think about a future without Maya by my side. I can hardly believe I'm about to let her go.

I start remembering the countless times Maya proved herself invaluable at work. Her ability to anticipate my needs, the way she managed any crisis that arose. How she would diffuse tension with her quick wit.

The thought of losing her professionally feels like a punch to the gut. Where would I find someone who could fill her shoes?

I press my fingers to my temples, trying to fight off the headache that's forming.

With a sigh, I pick up my pen, eyeing a blank check before me. I consider the possibility of paying her off, to keep her silent.

I could pay Maya off. I could set her up somewhere safe, somewhere private. A place where she could raise our child without the prying eyes of the world. Without the harsh judgment and the whispers.

Why does this feel so disgusting?

I'd never wanted it to come down to this. It's not the way I want things to end between us. But the more I think about it, the more sense it makes. If the paparazzi finds out that Maya is carrying my child, they'll be on her like hounds. That sort of attention, I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, let alone Maya.

It would be a living nightmare for her. Maybe paying her to keep quiet would save her from that. At least then, she could have some semblance of a normal life. I set the pen down, rubbing a hand over my face. The weight of the decision sits heavily with me.

Is this really the only solution?

Pay her off and wish her away?

I cringe at the thought. It sounds horrendous, even to me.

Yet the alternative is to risk exposing our secret to the world. The paparazzi, always on the hunt for scandalous stories, would be fucking ecstatic to spin a narrative of the billionaire boss and his young employee. It would be a gold mine for them, and a nightmare for us.

Suddenly, my office seems suffocating. I lean back in my chair and try to breathe. My reputation, my business, and my relationship with Maya... everything is hanging by a thread.

What do I value most?

My reputation or my relationships? I take a deep breath.

I think I'm in love with Maya.

Fuck. I think I'm in love with her.

A sigh escapes my lips. For the first time in my life, I find myself wishing I was just an ordinary man.

But this is my reality.

I close my laptop, cutting off the harsh glow of the screen. The room is dark now and I make my way to bed, hoping tomorrow will come with better answers.



THE SUN IS COMING up as I step out of my penthouse, buttoning my suit jacket. The morning chill hits my face like a slap. It feels refreshing.

I walk the few blocks to a local café, appreciating the quiet of the city — the regular hustle and bustle hasn't started up yet.

As I step into the café, the smell of fresh brewed coffee hits me, and I head to the counter.

“The usual, Hunter?”

I nod and hand the barista my credit card.

While waiting for my order, I spot a familiar face from the corner of my eye. Seated at a corner table, with her head buried in a book, is Kaitlyn. She's so into her book that she hasn't noticed me.

I grab my coffee and walk towards her. I haven't seen her since she stormed out of my office with her mother. I stand in front of her, my shadow falling onto the pages of her book. She looks up, her face breaking into a surprised grin when she sees me.

“Dad... What are you doing here?”

“Getting coffee,” I respond, gesturing with my cup. “May I?” I look at the chair across from her.

She nods hesitantly and I sit down. I sip my coffee in silence for a few minutes, not sure where to start. I'm afraid to say the wrong thing in case she'll bolt out of my sight again.

“Kaitlyn.” I take a deep breath. “I’ve missed you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you everything.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her face hardening. “How could you do this, Dad? How could you go behind my back like this?”

“I... I was trying to let loose, have a good time.”

She leans back in her chair, studying me with those piercing eyes that are too much like her mother’s. “You know, I remember telling you to do something fun, Dad,” she says in a pointed tone. “I was thinking more along the lines of skydiving, or maybe buying a stupidly expensive sports car. I did not—*not*—mean for you to do something quite as... fun as my best friend.” She emphasizes the last two words, raising her eyebrows playfully. Despite her banter, I see the hurt still lingering in her eyes.

“Maybe I got a bit carried away,” I admit, my fingers tightening around my cup.

She raises an eyebrow, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Carried away... with Maya,” she says and the name hangs heavily between us.

“Yes,” I say, looking her in the eyes.

“Well... do you like her?”

“I really like Maya.”

She looks down at her book and then back up at me. “What are your intentions with her, Dad?” she asks, her voice steady. “If you’re going to be with her, it needs to be because you really want to be with her, not just some... mid-life crisis fling.”

I nod, understanding her concern. “I want to be with her, Kaitlyn. Really.” I hope she can see the sincerity in my eyes. “But there’s a little problem... Maya isn’t talking to me. She’s cut off all communication.”

“What do you mean she’s not talking to you?” Kaitlyn’s frown deepens.

“I mean she’s blocked my number, won’t answer my emails, and she quit her job.” The reality of the situation hits me harder when I say it out loud.

“Fuck, Dad. You need to figure this out. You know Maya, she’s stubborn. She’s also my best friend, and I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“I know, Kaitlyn.” I lean forward. “And I don’t want to hurt her either. I just... didn’t handle things well.”

“Then make it right, Dad. Do whatever it takes to fix this.”

Kaitlyn’s words hang in the air between us. “Otherwise...” she hesitates, her gaze hardening. “Otherwise, I think it’d be best if we don’t see each other.” Her words are like a punch to the gut.

I have tried to reach Maya — so many calls and texts, all unanswered. I run my fingers through my hair, desperation creeping in.

I need to make this right.

MAYA

I 'm standing in my apartment when my phone buzzes. I look down and my eyes widen

Kaitlyn?

It's *Kaitlyn*.

I haven't heard from her in so long.

I open the message.

Maya, we need to talk. I know everything.

My heart slams against my chest. The words hang in the digital space — she knows. My fingers tremble as I type out a response.

Can we meet?

A long silence follows before three dots appear on the screen.

Yes.

A simple reply but relief floods through me.

Pete's? In 30?

A few moments later.

Okay.

I run a brush through my hair as I glance at my reflection in the mirror. I look a little pale, but there's no time for makeup. I grab my purse and keys before heading out.

The guilt is like a slow, rolling wave as I walk and think about my situation. I betrayed my best friend, and now it's time to face the music.

I walk, losing my breath a little as the nerves kick in. My hands are sweaty.

What if she tells me she doesn't want to be friends anymore?

I wouldn't blame her.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I slept with her dad.

Who does that?

As I walk into Pete's, my eyes immediately dart to the corner where Kaitlyn is seated. Her face is stoic, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. I swallow hard.

"Kaitlyn." I sit down across from her. She doesn't respond, just continues to stare at me. I let out a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen like this."

"But it did happen like this." Her voice is cold. "You slept with my dad, Maya. You went behind my back and slept with my dad after I got you a job with him. I was trying to help you out."

"I know, Kaitlyn, and I'm sorry." I can feel the tears in the back of my eyes, but I refuse to let them out. "I never meant to hurt you."

"But you did." She looks me in the eyes. "You betrayed me, Maya. After everything we've been through together."

"I know. You're right... And I would do anything to take it back."

"But you can't." Kaitlyn's voice breaks a little, and she looks away, her eyes glassy with tears. "You can't take it back. And I don't know if I can forgive you." She looks back at me, her gaze piercing. "I just don't know."

I swallow hard, my throat feeling like it's closing up.

I really fucked up.

And I'm not sure if I can fix it.

Kaitlyn takes a deep breath. "I need some time, Maya." I feel her pain, and confusion. "This... This is a lot. I need to figure out how I feel about all of this."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I understand..."

She takes another long sip of her coffee, placing it down on the table before locking eyes with me again. "You know, Maya... for the sake of the baby, I hope you and my dad can work things out."

I blink, my mind going blank.

I forgot about the baby.

The world around me starts to spin. She knows about the baby too.

"Wait, you know about..." I gulp, unable to finish the sentence. But I don't need to. Kaitlyn gives me a sad nod, confirming my fears.

"So, how are you feeling?"

"Pregnant," I joke, trying to lighten the moment.

"I mean, how are you really feeling, Maya?" she insists, leaning back in her chair. "About all this."

"I'm... scared," I admit. "And I'm sorry, Kaitlyn. For everything."

There's a long pause. She wants to say more but she holds back.

"I care about you, Maya. I want to know everything, but I need some space right now," she says, her voice steady. "I need to process all this."

I sound like a broken record. "I understand."

Kaitlyn gives me a small nod, then gets up and walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The guilt. The fear. The uncertainty. It all hits me at once and I'm left wondering if things will ever be the same again.

Left alone in the coffee shop, the noise of the espresso machines, and the soft chatter of other customers distract my solitary thoughts.

I look around the room, taking in the worn-in charm of the place: the mismatched furniture, the artwork on the exposed brick walls, the pendant lights overhead.

I pull out my phone, my fingers automatically unlocking it and opening the internet browser.

As I scroll aimlessly, a picture catches my eye.

What the fuck?

That's me.

It's a picture of me, leaving the office, tears streaming down my face. The headline blares: 'Hot Shot CEO's Assistant Exits in Distress.'

My heart thuds in my chest as I click on the article.

"Rumors abound as Maya, personal assistant to billionaire Hunter Holmes, was seen leaving the office in an apparent emotional state. Speculation of a possible pregnancy has further incited the rumors, placing the reputation of the notoriously private CEO in jeopardy."

The article gets worse. There are quotes from unnamed sources at the office who claim Hunter fired me out of the blue.

"Maya was an indispensable part of the team," an anonymous insider is quoted, "so it was a shock when the news broke. It's unlike Mr. Holmes to make such hasty decisions."

Insinuation continues to fly. "Was there drama behind closed doors? Is it related to the alleged pregnancy?"

The paparazzi seem to be having a field day with my life.

My head spins.

As if the universe has a twisted sense of humor, my phone buzzes again, interrupting my train wreck of thoughts.

My mother's name flashes on the screen.

Nope. Not now. Not yet.

I press the side button to silence the call.

She's supposed to fly in soon for a visit, and I've been dreading having to break the news to her.

The baby, Hunter, everything.

I can already hear her voice, the shocked gasps, the disapproval, and the endless questions.

What if she already knows?

Kaitlyn figured it out on her own.

And my mom is as nosey as they get.

I stare blankly at the now cold mug of coffee in front of me.

One disaster at a time, Maya.

For now, I just need to survive this media storm.

I shut off my phone, the screen's glow dying away. I sit there in the dim light of the coffee shop, the weight of everything crashing down on me: the reality of the situation of the scandal brewing, of Kaitlyn's disappointment, of my unexpected pregnancy.

I rest my forehead in my hands, my thoughts a whirlwind. The truth was out there for everyone to judge. My relationship with Hunter was under a fucking magnifying glass. My entire life was too.

HUNTER

Work has been a goddamn battlefield. Projects piling up and deadlines missed, my days have become a blur of meetings, paperwork, and endless cups of coffee.

As I sift through a pile of proposals on my desk, my fingers brush against something cold – a picture frame. It’s a candid shot of Maya and me from the company’s charity event. She is beaming, her eyes gleaming with joy, and I have a genuine smile on my face.

That night we danced together until we both couldn’t stop laughing. I remember the softness of her hand in mine, her hair against my cheek, the warmth of her body close to mine.

The memory hits me like a punch to the gut.

I miss her – her wit, her laughter.

I miss us. I place the picture back down.

“Good morning, Hunter,” Sarah says as she enters my office.

“Morning, Sarah.” I brace myself for whatever she’s about to throw my way.

“I’m sure you’re aware that the new employee onboarding protocol needs your approval.” She places a thick file on my already cluttered desk. “It was due a week ago.”

“I’ve been meaning to get to it.” My eyes fling back to the photograph of Maya and me.

“Meaning to? Hunter, you are the CEO. These things need your attention. We have a new batch of employees starting next week. If we don’t get this sorted, it’s going to be a disaster.”

“I know.” I try to keep my voice steady. “Things have just been... complicated.”

Sarah gives me a long, hard look. “Hunter. I know you have a lot going on... but we need the CEO, not the man who’s pining over his lost love.”

Her words sting, but they also ring true. I can’t let my personal life affect the company.

Sarah leans on the desk, her eyes softening. “You cared for her. I get that. More than anyone else in this building, I get that. But Hunter, you have a company to run.”

“I know, Sarah” I reply, rubbing the back of my neck. “It’s just, every time I look up, I expect her to walk through that door.”

Sarah sighs, her eyes welling up with sympathy. “And maybe she will. But right now, this company needs you. The employees need you. You need to get it together.”

I need to get it together. But God, it’s hard.

“I’ll get it taken care of today.”

“Thank you.”

She turns to leave, but I interrupt her. “Sarah, has anyone applied for the assistant position yet? Nothing has come through my email. Did I miss something?”

She shakes her head. “No applications yet.”

“Okay. Keep me updated.”

Sarah pauses with her hand on the doorknob. I notice her hesitation before she finally says, “Hunter...”

“What is it?”

She turns around, her face looking pale. “There are... online threads,” she starts. “About you. About how...”

challenging it is to work for you.”

“What?”

“Yes.” She nods. “They’re discussing past employees’ experiences, saying you’re difficult to work for. It might be part of the reason why we don’t have any applications yet...”

“That can’t be the reason...”

My mind doesn’t want to admit that it’s true.

I am usually a monster to work with.

The only employee I ever enjoyed was Maya.

Sarah continues, “It’s not good. They’re saying you’re terrible to work with... that you push your employees too hard.” Her gaze doesn’t waver from mine, her eyes full of concern and the hint of a challenge.

I run my hand through my hair, my mind spinning.

“Damn.” It’s the only thing I can come up with. After a moment of silence, I add, “I’ll look into it, Sarah. Thank you.”

She nods, leaving me alone with my thoughts, the rumors, and the damn photograph. I reach for my laptop, typing in a few keywords into the search bar: ‘Working for Hunter Holmes.’ The results flood in, tons of online threads discussing the alleged horrors of being in my employment.

The cursor hovers over the first link, and I click.

“Hunter Holmes is a tyrant,” one former employee states. “He demands perfection, working us to the bone while he sits in his ivory tower. No regard for personal lives or the fact that we are human, not machines.”

Another chimes in, “I worked for Holmes Corp for two months. Worst two months of my life. Was it worth it for the paycheck? Absolutely not. No amount of money is worth your sanity.”

A third post says, “Stay away from Hunter Holmes if you value your peace of mind. The man is an absolute nightmare.”

I scroll down, my eyes skimming over more and more comments, each one echoing the same sentiment. I'm a monster, a slave driver, a heartless boss.

The reality check is bitter and stinging. I've always prided myself on my leadership, my ambition, my drive.

Maybe they are all just fucking babies.

Nobody likes to work these days.

Nobody knows what hard work is, like I do.

I'm lost in my angry thoughts when it hits me that maybe I am too harsh.

Nobody gets me.

Nobody understands... the pressure, the things I've had to go through to get here.

The only person who ever seemed to humanize me was Maya and now she's gone.

Closing the laptop, I lean back in my chair, staring blankly at the ceiling.

My eyes wander back to the photograph on the desk, to the image of Maya, her smile wide.

Reality sinks in deep, feeling like a physical blow to my face. I pushed her away.

I replay the voicemail I left for her in my head, the harsh words, the anger I let loose on her. It was an act of self-preservation, a defense mechanism built over years of protecting my heart.

The regret settles in, clawing at my conscience.

I posted her job, hoping to replace her, to fill the void she left. I realize now how futile it was. Maya wasn't just an employee. She was a part of my life, my world. She was everything.

I start to feel desperate. I pull out my phone, my fingers trace over the screen. It's a shot in the dark, but I text Kaitlyn.

Kaitlyn. Come over for dinner?

I hit send. Seconds turn into minutes. Minutes turn into what seems like an eternity, but there's no response.

I try again.

Kaitlyn, please. It's important.

I wait, staring at the screen and hoping for a reply. It remains stubbornly silent.

The cold, hard truth begins to settle in. Even Kaitlyn won't respond to my messages either.

The desperation grows.

I swipe through my contacts, finding Maya's name. I haven't contacted her since... well, you know. Taking a deep breath, I type a message.

Maya. I need to talk to you. Immediately.

My thumb hovers over the 'send' button. I swallow then I press send before I can chicken out.

I'm not doing this anymore.

I add it as an afterthought, hitting send again. My chest feels tight. This is completely out of character for me, practically begging, but I need her. I need to fix this.

I wait. And wait. And wait.

No response.

My self-loathing reaches a boiling point.

My fists clench, the paperweight on the table suddenly becoming the object of my frustration.

"Fuck!" With a growl, I throw it across the room. It slams against the wall, shattering into a thousand pieces.

I pick up my phone and dial out to my receptionist. "Cancel all my meetings for tomorrow!" I yell, with no chance for her to respond. "And go home for the day." It's a command.

The office, once a place of order and discipline, now mirrors the chaos inside of me.

I sweep my arm across the desk, my anger unleashing on the innocent stationary items, flinging pens, notepads, and files onto the floor.

Without another word, I storm out of the office, the door slamming shut behind me. I've hit my breaking point and there's no turning back.

MAYA

Well done, Maya, you've officially shattered the Richter scale of the mother freak-out meter.

I walk down the busy city streets toward the youth club as I prepare myself for my mom's reaction when I finally tell her that I am pregnant with my boss's baby.

She gets into town later today and I'm dreading the moment I have to face her. I'll need a defibrillator to get through that conversation.

And the cherry on top of this complicated sundae?

I haven't even talked to Hunter yet. Not really, at least.

Every time his name lights up my screen, I have an automatic reaction to silence it.

I'm not ready.

You'll never be.

"Shut up." I assault my thoughts.

I round the corner and push open the door of the youth club, the sound of laughter and the smell of fresh paint hits me.

"Maya!"

I look over and see Steve walking toward me. I can't help but smile.

"Hey, Steve!"

His presence has always been comforting to me. I've been volunteering here for years now and he has become more than a supervisor to me. He's a friend.

"How's it going, kid?"

"Well, you know, I'm... coping," I answer, shying away from looking him in the eyes.

There's understanding in his expression. "What's going on?" He pulls up a chair and motions for me to sit with him. I take a deep breath, pulling together my thoughts.

"I... I quit my job, Steve.... Hunter... We... we got involved. More than we should have. And now, everything's messed up."

He stays silent for a long moment, taking in my confession. "Oh, Maya." He sighs, rubbing his temples. My heart squeezes at the concern in his voice. He knows this is messy.

"Yeah, it's complicated." I manage a weak smile, my fingers twisting the hem of my shirt. "I need a change, Steve. A new scenery, a fresh start." I glance up at him.

He nods. "You've always been strong, Maya." He gives me a half-smile, squeezing my hand. "You're going to get through this. And you know, we are always here to help."

"I know. Thanks, Steve." I try to keep my voice steady. "That means a lot to me. That's why I thought this job position here might be the perfect fit for me. I need something new, you know? A fresh start..."

"Yes! It's a full-time role, managing programs for the teens. It would be a step up from what you've been doing volunteering here. It's a lot of responsibility, but I can't think of anyone better suited for it."

His words sink in, and a wave of relief washes over me. A fresh start, a new beginning. This could be exactly what I need at this point. I look at Steve, a soft smile playing on my lips.

"I... I don't know what to say," I stammer. "Thank you. This is exactly what I think I need especially because I'm..." I

stop myself.

Don't tell him you're pregnant yet, idiot.

Who is going to want a pregnant employee?

I try to switch gears, but he's already onto me.

He squints at me, concern drawing tight lines around his eyes. "Maya, I've known you for a long time. I know when something's eating at you. Is there more going on that you're not telling me?"

I swallow hard. I never thought it would be this tough. But it's Steve, he's always been there when things got tough.

"I... I'm pregnant, Steve."

His eyes widen at my confession, and for a moment, he's speechless. Then, he lets out a deep breath, running his hand over his face.

"Wow... Maya, that's... that's a lot. Is it... Hunter's?"

I nod, unable to hold his gaze. He's quiet for a moment. I can feel his gaze on me, searching for more information.

"You're in a tough spot, kid. But remember, it's your life... and you have the right to make decisions for yourself. You've got to think about what's best for you and your baby now."

I look up at him, my eyes welling up. "I... I don't know what to do, Steve. I am not even talking to Hunter right now."

Steve sighs. "Maya, I think you need to talk to Hunter. Carrying all this by yourself is going to eat you up. It might not solve everything, but it will help to clear the air. And it's not just about you anymore." He pauses, looking at me as he continues, "And what about your mom? Have you told her?"

I shake my head, the fear evident in my eyes. "No, not yet. I just... I don't know how to."

Steve leans back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Maya, you need to tell her. You can't keep something like this a secret. It's going to be hard, I won't lie to you, but she needs to know. Don't underestimate her. She might surprise you with how she handles it."

Steve's eyes soften as I keep listening, letting his words sink in. "Maya, you need to surround yourself with support. You can't - and shouldn't - go through this alone." He pauses. "And if you decide to take this job, I want to make it clear that we'll do everything to support you too. That includes healthcare benefits and we've even got a built-in daycare here at the club." He gives me little laugh.

It's true. There are kids always around here. It would be easy to bring my baby along.

"Thanks, Steve. I appreciate it." I exhale, feeling the tension in my shoulders loosen. "You know, Maya, I have a daughter of my own. I've seen and learned quite a bit about pregnancies, although from a father's perspective." He chuckles, "So, I have a few tips for you. First, you gotta take care of yourself. Eat healthily, stay active, and make sure you get rest. It's not just about you anymore; you're building a life here." He points at my abdomen with a knowing smile.

"Pregnancy is a roller coaster ride. There'll be good days and tough ones. It's okay to feel overwhelmed, scared, excited, and a million other things at once. And remember that it's okay to ask for help. You're not expected to know everything. Use your support system, whether it's your mom, your friends, or even me. We're here for you, okay, kid?"

I look at him and smile. "Got it."

"And one more thing, Maya," he adds, "you're going to be an amazing mom. I've seen you with the kids here. Don't doubt yourself. You've got this."

I feel the sincerity of his words and the tears start to well up in my eyes. It's been weeks of sleepless nights, holding the weight of the world, keeping this secret. I've felt so alone, so unsupported. And here I feel cared for. It's overwhelming.

The tears escape, rolling down my cheeks, and I let them. "Thank you, Steve," I manage to get the words out despite the lump in my throat. "I'll... I'll let you know about the job. I really appreciate it, I just... I need to process everything."

"Take your time, Maya."

I stand, wiping the tears from my cheeks, “I gotta get going, my mom’s in town for the weekend. I haven’t seen her yet and I’m going to tell her.”

“You’ll do great, kid.”

I nod, giving him one last smile before turning and walking out of the club.

I can do this.

I can do this.

As soon as I walk into my apartment, the scent of my mom’s floral perfume fills the air. She’s sitting at the kitchen counter with a glass of wine she helped herself to.

“Mom, you’re early! How was your flight?”

“Hi, dear. It was all right. The man next to me snored the entire way, though.” She rolls her eyes playfully. “You look tired, dear. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“Sleep? What’s that?” I laugh, trying to keep the atmosphere light.

She laughs, but her eyes are serious. “You should take better care of yourself, Maya. Health is wealth, you know.”

I start warming some water for tea as silence falls between us. It’s not uncomfortable, but the air is thick with words left unsaid.

I finish boiling the water and pour it over my peppermint tea bag nestled at the bottom of my mug. My mom raises an eyebrow at me. “Would you rather have a glass of wine, sweetheart?” She gestures towards the wine bottle on the counter.

“No, thanks, Mom. I prefer tea.” I cradle the warm mug in my hands and we make our way to the living room, sitting down on the couch.

The silence wraps around us again, but this time it feels different, charged with the decision I’m about to make.

“Mom, there’s something I need to tell you.” My heart is racing, but I can’t delay any longer. This secret is going to be

the death of me if I try.

“What is it, dear?”

“I’m... I’m pregnant, Mom.” I keep my eyes lowered. I can’t look at her.

The room goes silent, the only sound is the obnoxious tick-tock of the clock on the wall. It feels like an eternity before she finally responds.

“I know, Maya.”

I snap my head up. “What? You know too?”

“I read the tabloids, darling. And I had a motherly hunch. You were always terrible at keeping things from me.” There’s an awkward pause. “So, Hunter Holmes, your boss, and your best friend’s dad? Really, Maya?”

I wince at the words. It’s true but for some reason, it sounds worse coming out of her mouth.

“I know, Mom, it sounds bad when you put it like that. But it’s not like we planned for this to happen. We just... We couldn’t fight the attraction we had for each other.”

Her eyebrows squeeze together. “Does he know about the baby? Are you two planning to be together?”

“Well... We’re kinda... not talking at the moment.”

My mother sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Maya, darling, you need to get your act together. This isn’t a high school drama, it’s real life, and real life has consequences.” She takes a sip of her wine. “You’re carrying a baby, his baby, and you should talk to him about the future. He’s a responsible man, he’ll step up.” She glances at me with a hint of disappointment in her eyes. “At least he’s not some broke loser. He can take care of you and the baby.”

“I don’t need anyone taking care of me, Mom. I can handle my own stuff.” My voice comes out more defensive than I intend. I’ve always been independent, and the thought of relying on someone else feels like a blow to my confidence.

“Maya, you’re so stubborn.” She shakes her head at me. “Independence is good, but sometimes we all need a little help.”

“But Mom, he...” I start, but she raises a hand to stop me.

“I understand, Maya. He’s your boss, he’s older, he’s Kaitlyn’s father. It’s complicated, I get it. But he’s also the father of your child. And accepting help doesn’t make you weak. It only shows that you’re wise enough to realize that you can’t always do everything alone.”

I open my mouth to argue, but I find myself lost for words.

Fuck. She’s got a point.

But I won’t admit it.

After a long silence, I murmur, “I’ll think about it, Mom.”

Ding.

My phone interrupts our conversation. I glance at the screen and my heart drops.

Seriously?

It’s Hunter.

What kind of weird timing does this guy have?

My mother, catches a glimpse of my phone’s display and raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Hunter Holmes?”

Caught off guard, I fumble with my words. “Yeah, he texted me.”

“Maya, answer it.”

I hesitate. The blue bubble of Hunter’s message taunts me.

Is it that easy?

Can I just dive into the conversation and confront the tornado of complications that are waiting to pull me in?

“Maya. Sometimes, reaching out doesn’t make you weak. It’s a sign of strength. Now, answer the text.” She winks at me and I roll my eyes as I start typing to him.

Before I can change my mind, I hit send.

Hey.

HUNTER

The next day, I find myself at the youth club. I donate there every quarter. I usually send a check in the mail, but I'm using any excuse I can find to run into Kaitlyn these days. She spends a lot of her free time there and I miss her. She still hasn't spoken to me. I'm trying to give her space, but it's killing me.

"Hey, Hunter! Good to see you. The kids have missed their favorite benefactor," Steve says.

I throw an arm around his shoulder. "Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint."

We talk for a while, Steve filling me in on the club's latest programs and the projects he's been working on. Then the conversation takes a turn. He's perceptive. He's seen enough kids with troubles to know when someone's got something on their mind.

"You seem a bit distracted, Hunter. Something on your mind?"

I hesitate, but Steve's a good guy.

I trust him.

"Yeah, Steve," I run a hand through my hair, looking out to where the kids are playing. "It's Maya. You know she works for me... but it got complicated. We have a personal relationship. A complicated relationship."

Steve raises an eyebrow but waits as I take a deep breath. I know I'm not making any sense.

“Maya quit. She’s pregnant and I’m the father.”

Well. That came out way more direct than I was aiming for.

I continue awkwardly. “She’s Kaitlyn’s best friend, Steve. You know that...”

Steve is remarkably calm. “I know, Hunter.”

“You know?”

“Yes... Maya stopped in. She told me. And she asked if I had any job openings for her... I offered her a paid position here to help her out if she needed it.”

A myriad of emotions flood me. Relief that she’s found a place where she’ll be taken care of, sadness that she’s chosen to ignore me, and a bit of jealousy that Steve knows more about Maya’s plans than I do.

“I’m glad she’s got a backup plan,” I force a smile, “Steve, I care about her and I want her to be taken care of. It’s good to know she’s got options. But...” I trail off, my gaze wandering out to where the kids are merrily playing. The sadness I’ve been holding back starts to creep up on me. The reality of the situation sinking in. “But it’s not easy, you know? The silence, the distance... I don’t.. I don’t know what the fuck to do.”

“Well, that’s... quite the situation you’ve got yourself into, Hunter.”

“You’re telling me.” I grimace. “I told Kaitlyn. She won’t talk to me... And my ex-wife, she’s another story.”

“Hunter, life has a funny way of knocking us off the course we set for ourselves. But it’s how you respond to those unexpected turns that defines you as a man. You’ve gotten yourself into quite the situation, but it’s not the end of the world, you know.”

I run a hand over my face as I consider his words. He’s right. But it’s hard to admit it right now. My ego is hurting.

“Maya is carrying your child, Hunter.” He continues. “And whether or not you’re ready for that, it’s happening. You have a responsibility to her and to that child. But more than that, you owe it to yourself to step up and face all.”

“And Kaitlyn?” I ask, my voice above a whisper. “How do I fix things with her?”

Steve shakes his head, a rueful smile on his face. “That, my friend, is a different kind of challenge altogether. But she’s your daughter, Hunter, and she’ll come around. But you’ve got to make the effort right now, and you’ve got to be sincere about it.”

“God, this is a mess.”

Steve hits me on the shoulder. “And only you can clean it up.”

We get up from our chairs and walk around the youth club. The sound of the kids laughing feels like a weird contrast to the heavy conversation we’re having.

My thoughts float back to the text I got from Maya yesterday. “She texted me back, finally,” I confess, “but now, I don’t even know what to do next.”

“Well, Hunter, in my experience, text messages can only do so much. You’re dealing with real-life issues here, not small talk. You need to see her. In person.”

“I’ve been trying. She’s been ignoring me.”

“Do you blame her?”

“No,” I admit. “I get it, but what do I even say to her?” I go off on a sarcastic tangent.

“Hey there, I just thought you should know that I’m not just your boss, I’m also doubling up as a midlife crisis poster child who happens to have impregnated you. No biggie, right? And then I could follow it up with an ‘Oh, and did I mention that I’m old enough to be your father?’”

I finish with a self-deprecating chuckle, acknowledging the absurdity of the situation.

“That’s the thing, Hunter. You can’t script life. You need to listen to her, understand her fears and concerns, and reassure her that you’re in this together. It’s not just about you or her anymore. There’s a child involved.”

I shake my head, running a hand through my hair in frustration. “I just... I need to make this right. For Maya, for the baby... and for Kaitlyn.”

Steve claps me on the back, a proud smile on his face. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Steve...” I change the topic of conversation. “Tell me about that new project you’re working on. The one for the inner-city kids?”

Steve’s face lights up. That’s the thing about him, he’s passionate about the work he does. That’s half of the reason I donate so much to his club.

“Well, it’s an initiative we’re starting to provide educational resources and opportunities for kids who need the help. We want to help expose them to different career opportunities, workshops, and mentoring programs. We’re building a network of volunteers who can help with academia, but we also want to give them life skills. Things like conflict resolution, financial planning — stuff they don’t teach you in school.”

I nod, impressed. “Sounds like a great program, Steve.”

I take out my wallet and start writing the check. I double the amount I usually donate and hand it to him.

“Take this and do great things, buddy,” I tell him.

He smiles wide and his soft eyes squint together. “You know I will, Hunter. You always come through for us.”

I say goodbye and he walks to the back office to get paperwork done. As I watch him go, my thoughts return once again to Maya and Kaitlyn.

I leave the youth club and Steve’s words echo in my head, ‘It’s your mess, Hunter. And only you can clean it up.’ Nodding to myself, I pull out my phone and scroll down to Maya’s contact. I pause for a second before hitting the call button.

It rings and rings, but she doesn’t pick up. I try once more.

Damn it.

I thought she said she was ready to talk.

Women are so confusing.

I try one last time.

Nothing.

I hang up and start writing a text instead.

Maya. I really want to talk to you. Are you home?

I hit send and wait, hoping for another response. The minutes tick by, but my phone remains silent. I put the phone back into my pocket, a pit in my stomach.

I need to try harder...

Maybe she's at home.

I start walking and I see a flower shop. A small bell rings as I push open the door, stepping in. I pause, looking at the variety of flowers around me.

This is what women like, right?

Fuck if I know...

I pick out a bouquet of white lilies — simple, elegant, and pure.

Just like Maya.

The flowers feel like a peace offering, an olive branch for the mess I've made.

I keep walking with the flowers as I approach the familiar front door, my heart pounds in my chest.

Taking a deep breath, I ring the doorbell.

The door opens.

“Hunter.”

I stand there in shock.

It's Maya's mom, her face a picture of surprise and suspicion. “What are you doing here? Maya's not...” She stops mid-sentence. I'm afraid she's going to go off on me, but she surprises me by stepping aside and opening the door wider.

“Come in.”

I step inside, feeling like I’m walking into the lion’s den.

“Well, this is quite the surprise....” The disappointment in her voice is as clear as the rings of Saturn in a clear night sky.

“Which part?” I laugh.

She gives me a half grin. She’s not amused.

“I’m not here to make excuses. I want to... I need to make things right with Maya.”

“Is that so?” Her mom’s voice is laced with skepticism. “And what exactly does that mean, Hunter? What are your intentions?” The protective mother. She scans me, studying the sincerity in my eyes.

“I love your daughter if that’s what you’re wondering.” I find myself confessing.

“She’s young, Hunter. And you...you’re not. She works for you. And what about Kaitlyn? This is complicated.”

“I know,” I agree, “and I’m sorry. I never wanted to put her in this situation. But now that we are here, I want to be there for her. For the baby.” I meet her eyes. “I don’t expect you to believe me, not right away. But I am asking for a chance to prove myself.”

She studies me for a long while, her expression unreadable. Then she sighs and nods. “Well, it seems we have no choice but to let you try. But, Hunter, remember this: if you hurt my daughter, in any way...”

I interrupt her. I need her to know that I’m serious. “I won’t. I love Maya and I will make this work.”

Accepting my words, Maya’s mom gives a nod then disappears into the kitchen. She returns a minute later with a glass of ice water with lemon for me.

“Here.” She hands it to me, grabbing my hand as a peace offering.

“Thank you.” I take a sip and let the cold water slide down my throat when I hear the sound of the front door squeaking

open and closing with a quiet thud.

Maya walks in, her gaze glued to her phone, not realizing I'm in the room. When she finally looks up and sees me, she freezes, her eyes widen and then cloud over with anger.

“Hunter! What... What are you doing here?” she stutters. “How did you get in here?”

She looks at her mom, confused. “Mom, did you let him in?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“Hunter has something for you, sweetheart. Just give him a chance.”

“Maya, I...” I start, but she interrupts me, her voice rising in frustration.

“You shouldn't be here. You need to leave.”

“Honey, don't be so rude...”

“Mom. Stay out of this.” Maya's eyes don't leave mine. She's serious, but I can see the hurt in her eyes.

I realize the depth of the pain she's in and there's no talking her down right now.

I look at Maya's mom. “It's okay. It's best if I leave.”

I pick up my coat, leaving the bouquet on the coffee table, and without saying another word, I walk out of the door.

MAYA

“Go talk to him, Maya,” my mom insists.

“No, Mom. You don’t understand. I can’t just push my feelings aside and pretend everything is okay! He hurt me!”

“Sweetheart, I understand that you’re upset. But you need to hear him out. He seems sincere and he’s trying to make things better.” She puts her hand on my shoulder.

I know she’s right, but I can’t bear to admit it.

“He thinks he can come into my life, disrupt everything, and then what? What happens when he gets bored of me? What happens when he realizes that I’m not the one he wants to be with? No. I can’t do this.” I start shaking my head and tearing up.

“But what if he doesn’t get bored? What if he loves you?”

I look at her and cock my head.

“Loves me?”

That thought never crossed my mind.

How could he love me?

I’m twenty years younger than him. There’s no way he loves me.

“You’ll never know unless you give him a chance, sweetheart.”

I want to believe her, I really do. But I can't shake off the pain. And right now, that's all I can feel.

I glance at the bouquet lying on the table. The white lilies contrast against the dark mahogany. They're beautiful.

He did pick a good bouquet, Maya, you have to give him that.

And damn if he didn't look like a Greek god walking out that door...

No, stop it!

Just because he's got a jawline for days and abs that could double as a washing board, does not mean I should just fall back into his arms.

But then again, maybe my mom is right. Maybe he does love me?

No way. He couldn't possibly...

But he did come find me and he seems to have won over my mom...

Few men get her stamp of approval.

Ugh, why is this so hard?

Maybe I should give him a chance to explain.

"Do you think he's still out there?"

I hate that I'm asking that. I feel so vulnerable.

"There's only one way to find out." She looks over at the door, summoning me out.

Taking a deep breath, I nod. "Okay, okay, I'll go."

As I reach for the door handle, my heart pounds in my chest. Stepping outside into the cool city air, I look around.

No Hunter.

Anywhere.

My heart sinks. Maybe he left already. Maybe he doesn't really care. My eyes dart around the busy streets. I squint, searching for him everywhere. The uncertainty gnaws at me

and I feel a shiver run down my spine. I take a few steps forward, debating whether to keep looking or retreat back to the safety of my home.

I'm about to turn back and something catches my eye. His silhouette leaning against a car parked a few houses down the street.

I hesitantly take a step towards him when a swarm of paparazzi emerge from nowhere. My heart races as they surround me, their cameras flashing in my face.

“Maya, is it true you're pregnant?” one of them yells out.

“And were you fired from your job?” another one adds.

I look around and find myself encircled, the paparazzi closing in on me like a pack of hungry wolves. Their camera flashes are bright and disorienting. Rapid-fire questions, each more intrusive than the last, bombard me from all directions.

“Is Hunter Holmes the father of your child?”

“What's your relationship with him? Are you two having sex?” another reporter follows up.

Then a particularly stinging question cuts through the noise.

“Were you having an affair while you were his employee? Is that why you got fired?” They twist the knife deeper into my personal life.

Tears well up in my eyes. I feel like a hunted animal. The world around me spins and my vision blurs. I blink, trying to keep the tears away, but it doesn't work.

The anxiety is too much, the fear too overwhelming. I cover my face with my hands, hoping to shield myself from their prying eyes and the harsh reality of the situation.

Suddenly, a man breaks through the crowd and lunges towards me. He's a head taller than the others, his camera dangling around his neck. His eyes look dark.

Great, he looks like a real asshole.

Normally I'd walk circles around an idiot guy like this, but I'm so weak right now and I hate it.

"Maya, tell us. Tell us the truth. Are you having sex with Hunter Holmes?" he presses, shoving his microphone in my face. His voice is loud and grating.

Before I can respond, he bumps into me. I lose my balance, my feet slipping out from under me. I fall back, landing hard on my butt.

A gasp ripples through the crowd. I am stunned. I look up at the paparazzi, their faces a blur of surprise and more interrogation. They want their content, that's all.

A tall, broad figure pushes through the crowd.

It's Hunter.

His face is full of rage as he charges at the man who knocked me down. Without a second thought, he lands a punch square on the man's face. The man falls back, clutching his nose. Blood trickles down his hand.

The crowd explodes. Cameras flash, capturing every moment of the chaos. Shouts and gasps fill the air as they snap photos of Hunter, his hand still balled into a fist, his face seething with anger. The crowd's attention shifts from me to the unfolding drama.

Hunter's hand is smeared with blood. His knuckles are bruised and swollen already. He locks eyes with me as he rushes towards me.

"Maya, are you okay?" He extends his hand, helping me to my unsteady feet while the other hand shields me from the camera lenses.

Somehow, his glare keeps the paparazzi away as he helps me walk toward my apartment door.

We walk inside and the door closes behind us. Hunter's protective arms wrap around me. When she notices us, my mom gasps, catching sight of the blood on Hunter's hand.

"Get an ice pack, please," Hunter instructs her. His tone is assertive and firm. He leads me towards the couch, helping me

sit down. I can feel a panic attack coming on. My breathing accelerates, my chest tightens, and my vision gets hazy.

Hunter takes a seat beside me, his hand on my knee.

“It’s okay, Maya. Just breathe.” He leans in to kiss my forehead.

His lips are warm.

I missed them.

My mom comes in and puts an ice pack into Hunter’s hand. He presses the pack gently against my ankle, the cold sensation helps ground me and my breathing slows.

“I’ve got you.”

He strokes the hair away from my eyes.

“Just relax, baby. I’ve got you.”

I see my mom watching from a distance. Her eyes melt as she watches Hunter’s care for me. I keep breathing, slow and steady.

Finally, I come back to life and am able to formulate words that make some sense.

“What happened out there? I think I blacked out.”

Hunter goes to the sink to wash the blood off of his hands as my mom hands him a washcloth to help.

“That asshole bumped into you trying to pry information out of you and you fell...” He wipes his hands carefully. “I’ve never been so fucking mad in my life. I... I saw red. I had to protect you and our... our baby.”

My mom, who had been observing from a distance, finally speaks up. “This can’t happen again, Hunter. She’s already vulnerable and this is too much for her.”

“I know.” Hunter nods. “And I promise you, it won’t.”

He reaches out for my hand. “I’m going to hire some personal security to keep an eye on her when I’m not around. No one will ever touch her like that again.”

His words are firm, his eyes determined. He's making a promise not just to me but to my mom as well. And he means it.

"You guys... I am fine. I can handle it... I don't need security." I look at Hunter, trying to find my confidence again, but it's not fooling him.

"Maya. Now is not the time to be 'Miss Independent'."

I look at my mom knowing what she's about to say.

"See, honey... It's okay to ask for help, remember?"

Ugh. All this weak and vulnerable shit is getting old. I might need help, but I'm not going to give up my independence yet.

"Fine." I give in. "But just so you know, I'm still capable of taking care of myself."

"We know that. Trust me. We know that." My mom playfully rolls her eyes at me before interjecting again.

"Well, I think I'm going to go get some fresh air." She starts putting her shoes on and grabbing for her coat. "I'm going to run to the store to grab us some food for dinner."

She looks at me hesitantly, as if I won't like what she's about to say.

"Hunter, will you be staying for dinner?"

Hunter looks at me before looking back at my mom. "I'd love to."

I roll my eyes.

"Well then. It's settled. I'll get the food and leave you two here."

I sense that she's setting this whole thing up so that Hunter and I finally have no choice other than to talk about what's going on.

She gives a satisfied nod and leaves the apartment, leaving us alone. The energy feels a little awkward now that she's gone.

I feel my stubbornness rearing its ugly head. Part of me doesn't want to have this talk, but then again, a part of me has been dying for this moment to come.

Finally. A chance to talk to Hunter.

Alone.

HUNTER

We sit in silence for an awkward moment. Neither of us knows where to start.

“Listen, Maya, I... I’m sorry,” I start, stumbling over my words. “I’m sorry that I left you to deal with all this alone. I was wrong. I was scared... terrified, actually. But that’s no excuse.”

Maya takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry too... for pushing you away, Hunter... I was scared too, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I thought that if I could just... handle it on my own, then maybe it wouldn’t be so real.”

“I know... I felt the same way.” I reach out and take her hand in mine. “But we can’t do this alone, Maya. We need each other.”

“I need you.” She looks at me with vulnerability in her eyes. I know this is harder for her than it is for me. She’s Miss Independent and here she is admitting that she needs me.

I won’t lie.

Something about her words turns me on.

But the truth is that I need her too.

“I need you too, Maya.” The words escape from my lips. It’s the raw truth.

“I need your courage, your spirit. You’re a whirlwind of sass and determination. You challenge me, you drive me to be better, and you bring light into my life in a way that no one

else ever has. You make me feel alive, Maya, where I've spent so long just... existing."

There's so much I want to tell her. I'm trying to get it out without sounding like an emotional mess.

"I... I've always wanted a family, Maya. One that stuck together. I feel like I fucked up so bad with my first one. I've always told myself that if I have another child, it's going to be different. I want to give my child a home filled with love, where they always feel safe, where they always feel cherished."

I've never spoken about this to anyone. It's a part of me that I've kept locked away, hidden.

"When I found out about the baby, it scared me. I didn't know if I was ready to take it all on. But when I saw you earlier today when that man knocked you down... I knew in that moment that I want this family. And I want it with you. I want the chance to love and raise a child with you, Maya. Because if there's anyone in the world who can teach me how to be a great dad, it's you."

I wait for her response. It seems like she's taking forever to say something back.

Give her a minute to take it all in, man. She's overwhelmed.

Her mouth starts to open and I exhale.

"Hunter... I... I had no idea you felt this way. Your words... They mean more to me than you can imagine." I watch her breath deepen. "I'm scared too, scared of facing this alone, scared of how much emotion I feel for you. It's been terrifying and exhilarating all at once."

I grab her hand and start rubbing her thumb with mine.

"Seeing this side of you... it makes me realize that I don't want to do this alone." She pauses and looks down. "I can't do this alone."

"You won't," I reassure her.

“Hunter, I’ve always wanted to be a mom. But I never imagined it would be like this... I’ve been beating myself up about it. Wondering if I’m ready, wondering if I’m good enough. I mean, how am I supposed to raise a child when I still feel like a child myself sometimes?”

I can feel her emotions beginning to bubble over, the tears welling up in her eyes.

“But when I think about it, when I really let myself imagine being a mom... it’s you I see by my side. It’s your hand I’m holding in the delivery room, it’s your laughter filling our home, it’s you I’m sharing all those little firsts with. And that thought... it’s the only thing that makes all this scary stuff feel less... scary.”

I take a deep breath, feeling a sense of relief after she finally is sharing herself with me like this.

“Maya, I want that too. All of it. The laughter, the firsts, the delivery room... everything. I want it all with you.”

She lets out a small sigh, a smile playing on her lips. But then a look of worry creeps into her eyes. “What about my job? Can I have it back? I like working... and I like working with you.”

“Well... I would never be able to find someone that does as good of a job as you. Trust me, I tried already.”

Her eyes widen in playful disbelief. “You did what?! You tried to replace me?”

“I did. I put up a job listing, but nobody applied.” I throw her a mocking grin. “Apparently, there were too many complaints about the boss being impossible to work with.”

She shakes her head. “And here I was, thinking I was the only one who had to put up with you.”

“Seems like nobody else can handle me.”

“They don’t have my tolerance for pain.”

She is so sassy.

It’s turning me on...

This is why I love her.

“I love you.”

She looks at me with wide eyes.

Oh, shit.

It slipped from my mouth. It’s the first time I’ve said those words to her face.

“You what?”

I lean in closer, looking into her eyes, the playful banter fading away. “I love you, Maya.” There it is again, the real, raw truth.

The look in her eyes changes. “Hunter,” she whispers, her voice shaky, but her eyes are steady on mine. “I love you too.”

I pull her into my arms, holding her against me. “You have no idea how much you mean to me, Maya.”

I run one hand down the side of her face, my thumb brushing her cheek. Our eyes are locked in an intense gaze. “I need you.”

Her eyes reflect the fire burning between us. “I need you. Right now.”

She breathes, her fingers tracing the outline of my jaw. “Then take me.”

I pull her closer, my hands exploring the curves of her body. Our lips meet in a heated kiss.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt her lips. I missed them.

“I missed you.”

Our kiss deepens, our desire for each other growing. She moans into my kiss, letting me know that she missed me too.

My hands reach down to find the bottom of her shirt as we keep our lips locked onto each other. As I lift the fabric, she raises her arms to help me. I pull away from our kiss only long enough to pull the shirt over her head before my lips find hers again.

We stumble towards her bedroom, her fingers tugging at the buttons of my shirt. As we reach the edge of the bed, I guide her down, her body falling onto the plush comforter. I stand above her for a moment, taking in the sight of her. She's fucking gorgeous, her chest rising and falling with every breath, her eyes glazed with lust and anticipation.

I lean in and find her pouty lips once again; my hands move to unhook her bra. I can feel her heart pounding beneath my touch. As the clasp releases, she lets out a soft gasp, a shiver running through her body. There she is. I stare at her breasts for a moment. They are so perfectly shaped and I immediately lower my lips to her neck, planting soft kisses and trailing down until I find one nipple. Maya moans in pleasure as I take one of them into my mouth. My tongue swirls around it, exploring, biting, twisting. She gasps at every touch. I move to the other breast, lapping up its sweet nectar before continuing.

I move down her body, my lips and tongue exploring every inch of her as I go. Her hands thread through my hair, pulling me closer to her. I lay a kiss on her inner thigh before making my way back up to meet her eyes. Our eyes lock onto each other for a moment. It's as if we both are saying 'I love you'.

I make my way down to her inner thigh again, planting soft kisses along the way. I can feel her body trembling under my touch.

"Hunter. I missed you so much."

I look up to see her eyes filled with desire. My fingers trace the outline of her panties before pulling them aside, revealing her most intimate area to me. I lower myself to her now exposed clit, giving it a soft lick. She gasps, her hands reaching down to tangle in my hair. I continue, using my tongue to explore her, every lick, every touch making her squirm beneath me. The sounds she makes, the way her body reacts. It's making my cock swell up even more than it already is.

I spread her legs further apart so I can see her wet center. My fingers trace around her pretty walls, teasing her entrance

before I push one finger inside her.

“Mm. You’re so wet, baby.”

Her inner walls grip my finger and she lets out a moan, her body arching into my touch. I add another finger, thrusting them in and out of her, building up a rhythm with my licking. The combination of my fingers and tongue pleases her. Her hands grip my hair tighter as her body begins to shake. I can feel her walls tighten around my fingers.

She’s getting close.

I quicken my pace, alternating between licking and sucking her clit, while my fingers continue to thrust in and out of her. Her moans get louder, her body tensing as she reaches her climax.

“Oh! Hunter!” she screams, her body shaking as the waves of her orgasm wash over her as I hold her closer to me.

She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. “I need you inside me.”

I bring my lips to hers in a passionate kiss, my hands clasping hers and pinning them above her head. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she breathes heavily. “Please.”

I reach down, positioning myself at her entrance. I feel her wetness, her body ready for me. I lock eyes with her as I push into her slowly, feeling her body adjust to my size.

“Oh fuck,” she moans, her nails digging into my back. I hold her tight, pulling her closer as I start moving inside her.

Our bodies move in sync with each other. Her hips meet mine with every thrust, our breaths mixing in the heated air.

Her moans become louder. And I start to move faster, deeper. Our bodies collide with each other in an intoxicating mix of lust and love. I kiss her, tasting her, feeling her, losing myself in her.

The pleasure is overwhelming. We move together, the sensation building up until it becomes too much.

“I’m going to cum baby.” She says to me.

“Cum.”

As I say it, she lets herself go and so do I.

“Mm,” she moans deeply.

We eventually slow our breath and I lay down next to her in her bed.

“I love you.” I press my forehead against hers.

“I love you too, Hunter.”

Those words will never get old.

MAYA

“Hunter, this closet is bigger than my whole apartment.”

“You think so? I was worried it might be a bit small.”

I roll my eyes at him.

Hunter asked me to move in with him a week ago. We were cuddled up on his couch, watching reruns on Netflix, when out of the blue he threw this at me.

“Maya.” He turned to me with a serious face. “I want you to move in with me.”

I was completely thrown off. I mean, I love him, but moving in together is a big step, especially when ‘together’ means living in a penthouse that’s more luxurious than any place I’ve ever set foot in.

The thought of adjusting to his high-flying, billionaire lifestyle was a little intimidating. I’ve always been an ordinary girl with an ordinary life. This was new territory for me.

But as usual, I can’t resist this man. I said yes. Yes to living with him, yes to the penthouse, and yes to a lifestyle I had no idea how to prepare for.

“Welcome home, baby.” He puts a moving box down into the closet for me. “Make yourself at home. Everything that’s mine is yours.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that, especially when it comes to your clothes. I bet your cashmere sweaters are super cozy.”

“You’re welcome to steal my sweaters, babe. I’m more worried about you stealing all the cookies.”

“You wouldn’t dare keep cookies away from a pregnant woman.” I widen my eyes at him playfully.

He smiles and pulls me close, his hand traveling to my still-flat stomach. He leans in to kiss my forehead. “You know I’d never do that.”

He takes my hand leading me out of the closet. He stops for a second and kisses me again. This time, it’s a slow and passionate kiss. He pushes me away and looks into my eyes. “Time for dinner.” He pulls back, taking one of my hands in his. “I know you’ve gotta be hungry by now.”

“Yes, please feed this preggo woman. Before I start to get hangry.” I laugh and follow him to the dining room. When we walk in, I’m caught off guard.

“Hunter, what’s all of this for?”

The room is lit with candles, and a table set for two with elegant silverware and crystal glasses. “You went all out, didn’t you?”

“I may have mentioned it was a special occasion.” He gives me a sly grin and pulls out the chair for me.

“Special occasion?” I question.

“Your first night in your new home...”

Our personal chef, Charles, enters carrying a silver tray. He places it on the table, lifting the cover to reveal a plate of seared salmon on a bed of pureed cauliflower.

“Bon appétit.” He gives us a nod before exiting the room.

There are two wine glasses, already poured sitting in front of us.

I push mine back.

“Don’t worry. It’s sparkling grape juice for you.”

I laugh as I pull the glass back. “Well, in that case, let’s toast.”

“To us,” he proposes.

“To us,” I repeat, our glasses clinking.

Throughout dinner, Hunter seems nervous, his fingers tapping anxiously on the table. He’s been fidgety all evening and I can’t help but wonder what’s up.

I raise an eyebrow at him. “You’re more jittery than a cat in a room full of mice, Hunter. What’s up?” I ask, placing my hand over his, the constant tapping ceasing beneath my touch.

“Is something bothering you?”

“Just some work stress. It’s nothing, really,” he dismisses my inquiry.

I am not convinced, but I let it go. After all, he has a billion-dollar empire to run. That’s stressful enough.

As we finish our meal, Hunter stands and walks over to the vintage record player in the corner of the room. He places a vinyl on the turntable and the soft strains of Etta James’ ‘At Last’ fill the room. He extends his hand to me.

“May I have this dance?”

He pulls me to my feet and leads me into a slow dance, his hands around my waist, my head resting on his chest. The scent of his cologne still makes me melt into him. I can’t help it.

He takes a deep breath, as if to gather his courage, then drops to one knee.

Holy shit.

He’s going to propose.

“Maya...”

It’s happening. He’s proposing.

“From the moment I met you, my world changed. You’ve shown me a love I didn’t believe existed, and you’ve made me a better man. You’re not just my lover, you’re my best friend, my confidante, my everything. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Oh my God. Oh my God.

From his pocket, he pulls out a small velvet box and opens it. A breathtaking diamond ring is staring back at me.

“Maya, will you marry me?”

Of fucking course, I will!

I throw my arms around him, whispering a breathless, “Yes, yes, yes! YES. YES!”

He pulls me into him, letting out a huge breath of air. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say yes.”

I pull back to look at him. “Hunter, I love you.”

He pulls me in for another long passionate kiss. As we pull away, he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his thumb brushing against my cheek.

“I love you too... wifey.”

I laugh and swat his arm. “Don’t you get ahead of yourself, Mr. Holmes. Are you sure you can handle all this?” I gesture to myself.

“Well, let’s see. Can I handle late-night ice cream cravings, hormonal mood swings, and having absolutely no say in interior décor? I’m still debating.”

“Well, Mr. Holmes, in that case, I’m sure I can find a line of suitors ready to take your place.” I try to keep a straight face.

“Ah, sweetheart, but they won’t have my charm... or my credit card.” He winks at me as he laughs.

“Good point. You’re definitely going to need both to get through this pregnancy with me.” I poke him in the chest.

He changes the subject. “I was thinking, Maya... I’d like to throw an engagement party. I want to celebrate with our closest friends and family. What do you think?”

I give him a surprised look. “A party? Really?”

“It’s not every day a man gets engaged to the love of his life, you know.”

“You really want to, Hunter? I know you hate the limelight... and after everything that’s happened?”

It seems like drawing more attention to us would be the last thing he’d want to do so I’m a little shocked by his idea.

“Hunny, you don’t need to worry about any of that,” he reassures me. “Those rumors...they’re history now thanks to Bennett. All that matters is us. Our love, our happiness, and this life we’re building together.”

Bennett, the mastermind behind the scenes, somehow managed to eliminate every trace of the rumors and fabricated stories that were making their rounds in the tabloids. He knew exactly how to manipulate the media. He started by planting stories that contradicted the rumors, creating doubt in the minds of the public, and somehow managed to spin even it all into something positive. The rumors lost their credibility, and the paparazzi lost interest.

He pulls me close, wrapping his arms around me. “I want to celebrate you. And us.”

“Well, when you put it that way... let’s throw a party!”



IT’S the night of the party. And I have to admit that part of me is a little nervous. I haven’t seen Kaitlyn in a while now and I’m not even sure if she’s going to come.

“Did you hear from Kait, yet?”

“No,” Hunter’s voice is low. “Not yet. But I have a feeling she’ll show.”

“Oh, you do, do you?”

Hunter laughs at my sarcasm. “You’re underestimating Kait, she’s not one to hold grudges, especially not against you.”

“A billionaire psychic. Now, there’s a niche market.”

Just as I'm about to hit him with my next sarcastic jab, the door swings open, and in walk my parents. It's the first time Hunter is meeting my dad.

Dad had been on the sidelines for a while, his battle with the big 'C'. Chemotherapy is a rollercoaster that no one wants to ride. But my dad is stubborn. My mom says it's where I get my stubbornness from.

She's not wrong.

He pushed through every nauseating wave, every energy-draining session. And finally, we got the news we'd all been hoping for. "Your Dad's in remission."

"Hunter... I'd like you to meet my dad."

Hunter extends his hand. "It's great to finally meet you, sir."

Dad looks at Hunter, a quick up-down scan. Then, to my surprise, he clasps Hunter's hand firmly in his. "Hunter. I've heard a lot about you."

"All good things, I hope."

This is Hunter in his element, confident and charming.

"You've been taking good care of my little girl here, I've been told."

"Well, she makes it easy."

The two men continue to banter, swapping stories as if they've known each other for years.

I excuse myself from the conversation and head toward the buffet table when I hear a familiar laugh. Turning around, I find myself face-to-face with Kaitlyn.

"Kait!" I practically yell. I wrap her in a tight hug. "You came!"

"Well, I couldn't let my best friend down, could I?" Kaitlyn breaks the hug and gives me a teasing grin. "I've got to admit... I never thought I'd see the day when you'd score yourself a sugar daddy. And not just any, but my very own father. You always were an overachiever."

I roll my eyes at her, trying to suppress a grin. “Oh my God, Kait! Don’t start with me.”

“What? I can’t help myself.” She laughs. “But don’t think for a second that this means I’m calling you ‘stepmom.’ I’ve always wanted a sister, though.”

I swat her on the arm, unable to hide my laughter. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“But you love me anyway.”

“Unfortunately.” I sigh dramatically. But in truth, I love this girl so much she doesn’t even know.

“I’ll catch you later, Maya. I’m going to go say hi to my dad.” Kaitlyn winks at me before heading toward Hunter.

I watch as she embraces him and they share a genuine father-daughter moment. The sight of them hugging, their faces lit up with smiles, eases the tension in my heart.

I turn my head and spot Steve at the entrance and wave him over.

“Maya, it’s so good to see you!”

“And you, Steve! Thanks so much for coming out to celebrate with us. It means a lot.” I give him a hug.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“So, how’s the new hire doing? The one that Hunter referred for the job position?”

Hunter’s eyes flicker over at us as he makes his way to join the conversation.

“Ah, you mean Charlotte? She’s doing well. She’s got a knack for the job.”

“Did I hear you mention Charlotte, how is she doing?” Hunter chimes in.

“Yes, Charlotte. She’s been doing great work. You certainly have a knack for recognizing talent. She’s no Maya, but she’s been a good asset to our team,” Steve responds, a note of appreciation in his voice.

“That’s good to hear,” Hunter smiles, clapping Steve on the shoulder. “I’m glad she’s living up to expectations.”

“Well, congrats again to you two love birds. You two make quite the pair. I’ve never seen Hunter so smitten before, and Maya, well, you’ve always been a force to be reckoned with.”

Just as he finishes his sentence, Kaitlyn’s voice cuts through the crowd. “Dad! Steve! Come here!” She’s waving them over, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

They both give me a nod before heading over to where Kaitlyn is standing. I watch as they disappear into the crowd, laughter echoing through the room.

A moment of silence falls over me, a bubble of quiet in the midst of the party’s bustle. I take a deep breath, letting the reality of the situation sink in. I’m in love with my best friend’s father, my boss, and as strange as it is, it feels right.

I feel a gentle touch on my shoulder and turn around to find my mom standing behind me, a proud smile on her lips. “Look at you, handling all this with such grace and maturity.”

“Oh, Mom... Stop it.”

“No, I mean it,” she insists. “You’ve come a long way, sweetheart. You’ve taken on responsibilities that most women your age couldn’t, and you’ve done it with such strength and resilience. Your father and I, we’re so proud of you.”

Fuck. She knows how to get me.

Even though my parents have always been so damn annoying about what they want for me and my life, I know it’s always been because they love me and they want the best for me.

My eyes well up.

“And this new life you’re about to start... It’s uncharted territory and a little scary. But that man...” She looks toward Hunter. “That man loves you. I see it in his eyes.”

I swallow hard, pushing back the tears. “Thanks, Mom. That means a lot.”

She wraps her arms around me in a warm, comforting hug. “You’re a real woman, my dear. And I couldn’t be more proud.”

As the last of the guests trickle out, the noise of the party fades, and the house settles into a comfortable silence. It’s just Hunter and me, alone in this mansion that’s now ‘home’.

“Hunter.” I turn to him and he looks back at me, his eyes reflecting the glow of the chandelier above. “The night was perfect.” I step close to him as his arms wrap around my waist, pulling me into his chest. He smells divine, a heady mix of musk and sandalwood.

His lips find mine as his hands glide up my back, pulling me tighter against him. I lose myself in him, in this moment of complete surrender to each other.

Hunter studies me, his gaze heavy with desire. “Well, it’s not over yet.” He smiles, a slow, sexy smirk that sends a shiver down my spine. His hands travel down to my hips, his fingers slipping beneath the hem of my dress, sending a wave of anticipation crashing through me.

He lifts me up and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me through our home to the master suite. He sets me on my feet and starts walking me backward, his hot eyes never leaving mine. His hands find the zipper of my dress, trailing it downwards, allowing the fabric to pool at my feet. His eyes roll over my body, taking in the sight of me in the dimly lit room.

I’m breathless as he takes me in like a work of art. I watch him as he removes his own clothes, my breath hitching as his muscular arms pop out of his button-down shirt. His hands return to me, exploring my skin.

He bends to capture my lips in another heated kiss, his hands taking firm hold of my hips as he lifts and carries me to the bed. Laying me down, he hovers over me and his eyes meet mine.

“I love you,” he whispers before his lips claim mine.

HUNTER

I start to explore her body with my eyes. She's my dream girl and I can't keep my hands off of her.

"Hmm..." I take my fingers down her body, tracing her insane curves. "I've always been quite fond of this little freckle." I touch a small spot on her shoulder. Her skin is warm and soft as satin.

"Really?" she squeals.

"Yes." My lips follow the path my fingers just traced, pressing a soft kiss onto the freckle. "It's like a secret map to buried treasure."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed." My fingers keep tracing down to rest on her waist. "And then there's this waist of yours... perfect for my hands to hold and lead in a dance."

She giggles, swatting me away playfully. "You're ridiculous, Hunter."

"But you love it." I tease her, my fingers resuming their journey, tracing light circles on her stomach. "And your laugh... It's the sexiest sound."

She laughs harder. "Stop it, you."

I tease her with another kiss. "Never." My hands keep instigating. "I could go on all night."

My lips move lower, nuzzling against the smooth skin of her inner thighs. I press kisses along the sensitive area, each

one pulling a soft gasp from her, her fingers clutching at the sheets. Dipping lower, I start to explore her with my tongue, finally making it to her wet entrance. I take her clit into my mouth and suck it, tasting her sweetness, worshipping her like the precious gem she is. Her hips jerk upward, a moan escaping her lips.

My hands hold her steady as I continue licking her pussy. My fingers glide over her wetness before I finally penetrate deep inside her. Her body arches in response.

“Mm, Hunter...” A gasp leaves her lips.

I start thrusting with my fingers, exploring her, each movement intensifying the pleasure coursing through her as my tongue flicks over her clit.

Her fingers thread through my hair, tugging me closer to her center. I moan against her; the vibrations send a whimper from her as she buries my face even deeper between her thighs. The taste of her arousal fills my mouth. I can't get enough of her.

“You taste so good.”

“Fuck, Hunter,” she breathes out, her voice shaky. “You're driving me crazy.”

“I want you to lose yourself, sweetheart. Just for me.”

My words seem to tip her over the edge, and her hips buck against my face, her body trembling with the force of her orgasm. I keep lapping at her sweetness, riding her through the waves of pleasure until she falls limp on the bed, panting.

“Fuck, Hunter,” she breathes out, a satisfied grin spreading across her beautiful face.

I move up her body, my hard length pressing against her thigh. She wraps her legs around me, pulling me closer. Her hands run down my back, her nails drawing lazy patterns on my skin. She looks up at me.

“Your turn.”

Maya's fingers wrap around my length. I groan, my hips instinctively rolling into her touch.

She peels herself from the bed seductively. In a swift, fluid movement, she is on her knees before me. She looks up at me through her lashes. With a coy smile, she leans in, her soft lips brushing against my cock. As she takes me into her mouth, I let out a low growl, my fingers tangling in her hair.

“Mm, baby. It feels so good.”

She explores me, her lips and tongue working my hard cock. She takes her time; her movements deliberate as she savors the moment. I watch her, turned on by the sight of her on her knees, worshipping my cock.

“Mm. That’s a good girl.”

She likes those words. I can tell by the way she keeps licking and sucking like she can’t get enough.

She gazes up at me, those big eyes of her. It sends a jolt of power through me. There’s a certain kind of intoxicating control in having someone look at you like that. I gently tug her by the arm, pulling her up from the floor.

“Lay down,” I command her. I watch as she complies without hesitation, her trust in me makes me even more turned on. Her body stretched out on the bed is so fucking hot. Every curve begging for my touch, her eyes locked onto mine.

I place myself between her thighs, the head of my cock teasing her entrance. My length is throbbing. I need to feel her.

Maya gasps as I push into her, filling her completely. The sense of power returns, amplified by the sight of her beneath me, her body responding to mine, welcoming every inch of me within her.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” I gasp out, my eyes closing at the pleasure coursing through me. “You’re so tight,” I groan, pulling out and pushing back in, setting a slow, steady rhythm.

She whimpers, her nails digging into my back. “Harder,” she breathes out. “I need you, Hunter.”

Her words get me, and I pick up my pace, thrusting into her with all I have. Her body meets mine with every stroke, her hips rolling in sync with mine. The room fills with the

sounds of our pleasure, the scent of our arousal intoxicating me.

“I love you,” I gasp out, my body tensing as I feel my climax approaching.

“I love you too, Hunter,” she whispers, her body tightening around me as she comes undone beneath me. Her words and her climax push me over the edge, and I spill inside her, our bodies trembling together as we ride out our orgasms.

As the waves of pleasure subside, I collapse beside her, pulling her into my arms. She nuzzles into my chest, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on my skin.

“That was so fucking good.”

I laugh and kiss the top of her head. “Yes, it was, sweetheart.”

As I pull her closer, my fingers trace the curve of her spine. “You know...” I pause. “I’ve been thinking about the future.”

She raises her eyebrows at me as her fingers play with the hair at the nape of my neck. “Oh? And what does Mr. Billionaire Workaholic see in his future?”

“Less of the billionaire workaholic, actually,” I admit. “I’ve been thinking... I want more of... this.” I gesture to her and the bed. “And less of spreadsheets and board meetings.”

What the fuck did I just say?

I can’t even believe the words coming out of my mouth. The idea of trading suits and ties for cozy nights in and family time is amusing me.

“You? Wanting to step away from your empire? Who are you and what have you done with Hunter?”

“I know it’s shocking, right?” I laugh. “To be honest, I’ve been scared of the idea, but with you, it feels right. I want to be more family-oriented, enjoy the important things in life.”

She smiles up at me. “You’ll be a great dad, Hunter. And don’t worry, we’ll keep your spreadsheets in the basement, just

in case you miss them too much.”

“You’re ridiculous with that attitude of yours...But that’s why I love you.”

“Likewise, Mr. Billionaire-turned-family-man.”

We lay there in comfortable silence.

“So, what do you think our baby will be like?” Maya’s fingers trace lazy patterns on my chest.

I laugh. “Hopefully not like me. I wouldn’t wish my stubbornness on anyone.”

“Or your workaholic tendencies. We don’t need a baby CEO.” She giggles, poking my side.

“Fair, but we could do without your feistiness too.”

“Oh, so now you have a problem with my feistiness?”

I laugh at her. “I wonder if our kid will inherit your sass.”

“Let’s hope so. The world needs more sassy people.” She pauses, her lips curving into a thoughtful smile. “They’ll be perfect, won’t they? No matter who they take after.”

“Absolutely. Even if they inherit your terrible taste in music.”

She gasps, slapping my chest. “Hey! My music taste is impeccable. You’re the one with the questionable playlists.”

We laugh together.

“I can’t wait to meet our little troublemaker,” I whisper, planting a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Me too.” She snuggles deeper into my chest. “I can’t wait to see you as a dad.”

“And I can’t wait to see you as a mom.”

In this moment, everything feels perfect.

EPILOGUE

MAYA

O NE YEAR LATER....

THE BELL RINGS and I pull the door open.

“Mom, you’re early! We weren’t expecting you till the evening.” I pull her into a hug, then step aside to let her in.

“I’ll take as much time with that little cutie as I can get.” She sets her suitcase down and looks around. “Where is she?”

“She’s with Kaitlyn right now.” I lead the way to the nursery.

As we enter, Kaitlyn looks up from where she’s playing with Madeline on the floor and grins. “Well, look who it is. The OG babysitter.”

My mom laughs. “Nobody can out-babysit me, honey,” she teases, moving to take Madeline in her arms. “I’ve been doing this since before you were born.”

Kaitlyn smirks, crossing her arms. “Oh, it’s on.”

Hunter walks in, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Ladies, ladies, there’s no need for a babysitting duel. There’s enough Madeline to go around.”

Mom laughs, bouncing Madeline in her arms. “Well, as long as I get to spend time with my granddaughter.”

“And as long as we get to go on our vacation,” I add, grinning up at Hunter.

“Our first vacation as just the two of us since this little one arrived.”

I watch as Kaitlyn and my mom coo over Madeline. That little girl is so loved.

Life has been a whirlwind since Madeline was born — a beautiful, chaotic, love-filled whirlwind. Becoming parents has been the most rewarding, exhausting, and amazing experience of my life. It’s been so fulfilling, hearing her babbling evolve into words. Her favorite seems to be ‘dada’ — to Hunter’s delight and my jealousy.

Madeline is our world. Her energy is so sweet and her joy, contagious. She’s got her father’s eyes — mischievous and sparkling — and my fiery spirit, already evident in her pursuit of everything she sets her mind on.

But it’s not just our lives Madeline has transformed. She’s brought our families closer, turning gatherings into cherished times of bonding and creating memories.

Even Christy, Hunter’s ex-wife, has settled down. She’s with a new boyfriend, a really nice man, Marc. She finally found love again with him and he brought her the peace and stability she needed. She started joining in on family gatherings. And during one of them, Christy extended an olive branch to me. She took me aside, away from the noise and laughter, and apologized for her past actions. “I was bitter and angry,” she said, her eyes reflecting sincerity. It was a turning point for all of us.

It’s been especially good for Kaitlyn. Having her parents on good terms has brought a lightness to her. Her relationship with both her mom and dad is stronger than ever. It’s as if she’s finally allowed herself to relax, knowing that she doesn’t have to choose sides or navigate tricky emotional waters.

Hunter has made the decision to cut down on his work. He hired a few new positions to help with what he was managing and he’s just overall, relaxed a lot more.

Even with Madeline, I have insisted on staying involved with the company. Yes, I'm a mother now but I was a businesswoman first, and always will be at heart. I can juggle a baby, a business, endless spreadsheets, and still find time to enjoy my triple-shot espresso.

I love my family, but I also love the thrill of the boardroom. After all, I am Miss Independent.

Sure, there have been sleepless nights, endless diaper changes, and the occasional tantrum (from both Madeline and me). But it's all been so fucking worth it.

We may be exhausted, but we are so, so happy.



“HUNTER, LOOK!” I point out into the deep blue ocean.
“Dolphins!”

Hunter squints as he looks out at the tropical sun. “You have the eyes of an eagle.”

“Or maybe you need glasses, old man.”

“Old man? I'll have you know, Miss Sassy, I'm in my prime.”

“Well, your prime better get with the times. You've still got a dolphin show to catch.”

We watch the dolphins leap out of the water and twirl around outside on our balcony overlooking the ocean. Our laughter fades away, replaced by the rhythmic lapping of the ocean waves.

“I love you,” Hunter says, his eyes never leaving the horizon.

“I love you too,” I reply, turning to look at him. His gaze shifts to meet mine and there's something soft and tender in his eyes.

“You know... I think I already miss Madeline.”

“Well, don’t worry,” I joke, nudging him with my elbow. “I’m sure she’s having a blast without us. Her parties are probably wilder when we’re not around to supervise.”

“You’re probably right. Our sweet, innocent Maddie, throwing ragers in our absence.”

“I miss her too. It’s funny, but I have a weird feeling... like I can’t wait to get home. Like our family is not complete without her.”

Hunter smiles and pulls me close. “That’s it, isn’t it? We’re a family.” He kisses my forehead. We watch the sun dip below the horizon together, the colors of twilight painting the sky.

“Well for now,” Hunter says, his grip tightening around mine as he turns back to the ocean. “Let’s just enjoy this beauty, this peace.

He looks into my eyes and into my soul. “My home is wherever you are.”

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DESCRIPTION

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Chapter One

Oh my God. How is he so freakin' hot?

My heartbeat pounds in my ears and my fingers start to break into a balmy sweat. I grab my red cup filled with

whatever cheap beer they have in that keg. A wave of heat rushes through my body.

“Is it hot in here?” I turn to my best friend, Maddy, while airing out my armpits.

“Not really... I’m fine,” she replies, adjusting the thin straps of her black silk cami.

Get your shit together, Olivia.

I take a sip of beer and hold it in my mouth before I force myself to swallow it.

Why do people drink this stuff? It tastes like shit.

Maddy eyes me up and down. “What’s going on with you? You’re acting weird.”

Sometimes, I hate how much she knows me. I can’t hide anything from her.

“It’s Nathan. He just walked in.” I breathe heavily and look at her.

“Oh, I see him.” She smirks and then laughs as she looks at me from the corner of her eye. It’s the kind of laugh that screams, ‘this is going to be interesting’.

“What?” I snap back, embarrassed by my eager excitement.

“Nothing.” She grins and takes a sip of her beer. “Go over and say ‘hi’ to him. I’ll be here if you need backup.”

I take another sip of my beer and set it down on the chipped wooden end table next to me. I stand up and start tugging at my pink blouse and straighten out my skin-tight floral skirt.

“Do I look okay?”

Maddy looks up at me and smiles. “You look hot as fuck,” she says and then slaps my ass. “Now, go. I want to hear all about it later.”

I let out a nervous sigh and I look over at Nathan, who is standing across the room talking to one of his friends. He

looks so cool and collected — there's not even a bead of sweat on his forehead. His dark hair sweeps into his gorgeous blue eyes and he's wearing a white V-neck tee that shows off his toned arms. I watch him as he starts laughing. The softness of his eyes contrast against the sharp edges of his chiseled jaw. My heart races faster and faster as I watch him.

The next thing I know, he looks over at me and our eyes meet. He holds my gaze and I immediately feel my face flush. He nods his head at me to come his way.

You're fine, Olivia. Just play it cool.

I take a deep breath and start to make my way through the crowded basement toward Nathan. I can feel his eyes heavy on me as I get closer, and my heart is beating so loud that I'm convinced that he can hear it. I try to regain my composure before I finally reach him.

"Hey, Nathan."

He looks at me with an unreadable expression. "Hey, Olivia. What's up?"

My heart drops a little as his cool demeanor washes over me. I try to play it off. "I haven't seen you at the house in a while." I look down at my shoes. "What have you been up to?"

He smiles a little and takes a sip of his beer, "Oh you know. Busy hanging out with friends and football."

I can feel myself start to relax a little as he talks. I look back up at him. "That's cool. You starting this season?"

He nods and laughs as if it was a given. "Yeah. First string, like usual. It's going to be a good season."

I smile and start to feel more confident.

Compliment him.

"That's great. I'm sure you'll do amazing, as always."

Nathan takes another sip of his beer and sets it down on the table. His dark blue eyes lock with mine for a few seconds before he speaks again. "Thanks."

My stomach flips with butterflies as I look into his eyes.

I think he liked that.

He starts leaning toward me and I start to lean more into him, wanting to get closer. I can smell his cologne and it's intoxicating. I'd rather drink that than this nasty beer. I close my eyes for a second, breathing in his scent as it fills my lungs. I can feel the butterflies inside me start to flutter. I start reaching my face toward his, almost so close that our lips are touching, before I am pulled out of my starry-eyed illusion.

"Whoa, Olivia. What are you doing? You look like you're trying to kiss me."

My eyes fly open and I step back so fast that I almost trip over a chair. Nathan catches me by the arm and steadies me.

"I... uh..." I stammer, embarrassed by my forwardness.

Nathan looks at me with an aloof smirk. "Olivia, you're Jake's little sis." He lets out a laugh.

This isn't going well.

I try to laugh it off and act cool. "Haha, I was just kidding." I avert my eyes away from his face.

Nathan takes a sip of his beer. "Sure, you were," he teases with a wink.

I blush a deep red and try to find the words to explain myself, but none come out. I just stand there frozen like the cement pillar next to me in this dingy basement.

"Yo, Nathan!"

Nathan turns his head away from me. "What's up, bro?! How's it going?"

I look over to see a group of Nathan's football buddies coming down the stairs. He turns his body away from me next and puts his attention on them as they walk toward him.

I take that as my chance to flee this shit show and slip out of his sight. As I slink back toward Maddy, I guess my embarrassment is palpable judging by her face.

“What happened?” she asks with a raised brow.

I huff and flop down into the chair next to her. “Nothing... I fucking blew it.” I throw my hands across my chest. “I thought he was leaning in to kiss me and then I made a move and he totally rejected me, saying that I’m ‘Jake’s little sis’.”

Maddy shakes her head and rolls her eyes back. “So what? What’s the problem with having a crush on your brother’s best friend?”

I’ve had a crush on him for so long. He’s been my brother Jake’s best friend since middle school. He is always over at our house. And whenever he is over, I find myself making whatever excuse I can to go into Jake’s room to be closer to Nathan.

“The problem is that he doesn’t have a crush on me, Mad. That’s the problem. He thinks I’m just some dumb little girl, not worth his attention.”

“Don’t worry, girl. There are plenty of fish in the sea,” Maddy says as she opens her hand, gesturing to all the other guys at the party. “Nathan’s a jerk anyways.”

I smile sadly. I can’t help but still feel the sting of rejection. Maddy is right. Nathan can be a real jerk, but I know he has a soft side too. I’ve seen it. And he’s the only guy that I want.

I look across the room at Nathan, who is now surrounded by other girls that are all fawning over him. I see him put his arm around Stacey Mastin, the lead varsity cheerleader, and my heart breaks.

He pulls her onto his lap and starts making out with her.

I take a deep breath, willing my eyes to look away and stop torturing myself.

It’s time to move on.

** * **

6 years later

“Want a glass?” I start to pour red wine before Maddy even has time to answer. I know she does.

“You know I do, boo,” she replies, reading my mind as she plops herself down on the white sectional in my living room. “Ahhhhhhhhh... it’s been too long since we had quality girl time.”

“I know! Life is so busy now that we are grown-ass adults!” I hand her the glass of wine. We both laugh and raise our glasses in a toast.

“To too many years of being friends.” Maddy winks at me.

“To too many years of being friends,” I echo and tip my chin up high.

We both take a sip and sit in comfortable silence for a few moments, savoring the taste of the wine. It feels so good to be with her again.

Maddy is my rock. She gets me and she always has.

“So, what’s going on? Are you back on dating apps now that you are single?” Maddy twirls the wine around in her glass. “I know things with Brad took a toll on you.”

She’s not wrong about that.

My relationship with Brad started to get pretty toxic, pretty quick. At first, things seemed fine. We fell in love, hard and fast. He flew me all over the country, wining and dining me. He said all the right things and made me feel like a princess.

“Let me buy you a ring.”

“I’ll take you all over the world, baby. Let’s go to Paris next week.”

It all comes flooding back into my memory. All the empty promises and grand gestures that sucked me into his vortex. I couldn’t help myself with him. I felt drawn like a moth to a flame. And right into flames, we went.

The longer we were together, the more he started to try to control me. It’s like he wanted to keep me in a cage for his entertainment only. I started to catch on when he started to make mean comments whenever I was spending time with my friends or even my family. I couldn’t understand why it would

be an issue. My therapist says it was a way for him to try to isolate me.

Who knows.

But then the degrading remarks started to come in too. It was like he flipped a switch and if I wanted peace in the relationship, I had to do what he wanted me to do. If I started to get too independent, he was sure to take me down a notch.

“You’d be prettier if you shut your mouth from time to time.”

His words echo in my head.

“I don’t know why it’s so hard for you to listen to me. I know what’s best for you.”

I shiver thinking about it.

It wasn’t healthy and I needed to get out of it. So, I broke up with him a little over a month ago now. It’s been hard. I really thought he was the one when I first met him. I felt deceived by him. Tricked or something. It’s hard to think about trying to trust a man again.

It feels like all I’ve done is be hurt by them.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m done with all the dating bull shit. I’m just going to focus on my career for a little bit. My career can’t fuck me over as hard as the men in my life have.”

Maddy laughs and nods in agreement. “I hear that, sister. But hey, at least you got to experience it, right? You know what they say: no pain, no gain.”

I offer her a high five which she happily accepts. “Yeah, I fucking guess... At least I made it out alive.” We laugh and clink our glasses again before taking another sip.

“What about you? How are things going with Kevin? Anything new?”

Maddy rolls her eyes and sighs. “Oh, you know...same shit, different day. We get along great most of the time, but

there is definitely something missing between us. I am bored out of my mind."

I reach out and squeeze her hand before taking another sip of my wine. "You need someone who can keep up with you, Mads. You'll figure it out. Who knows? Your hot, daring prince charming could be right around the corner."

Maddy smiles and looks out of the window as if she can already see him.

"I applied for a few different nursing positions this week. I'm hoping something comes through soon. I need a new job ASAP. I'm dying of boredom at the firm." I change the subject. I don't want to talk about men anymore. It's a downer.

"Keep me updated when you hear back. I'm sure you'll hear something soon." She grabs her cell phone and starts scrolling through Instagram as she continues. "I wish you would come work at St. Francis with me, though." She stops on a picture of her and her co-workers and shows it to me. "Imagine being able to work with your bestie." She taunts the photo in front of my face.

"I'm sure it would be a blast. But we wouldn't get any work done working together," I laugh, taking one last sip of my wine before standing up. "I really want to get the position at Lutheran Memorial." Lutheran is one of the biggest hospitals in the area and they have a lot of opportunities for growth there. It would be good for my resume. "Plus, I think it would be a good challenge for me. I need something stimulating."

Maddy smiles and nods in agreement. "I totally understand. All I'm saying is that if you decide to stay local instead... you know where to find me!"

We both giggle as I put my wine glass in the dishwasher and clean up a bit in the kitchen.

Maddy breaks my concentration. "So, what's Jake been up to these days? I haven't seen him or heard about him in a while," she asks, referring to my brother.

“He’s soooo busy! He’s been traveling a lot for work so I haven’t seen him much either.” I wipe down the counters with a damp washrag. “He seems to be doing well though. He loves his job.” I pause, thinking about him. “It’s like... all he does.”

I miss my brother. We were close growing up and we had overlapping friend groups. Since we’ve gotten older though, we both have our own lives and see each other less. It makes me sad sometimes, but I’m happy that he’s doing so well in his career. He seems happy, so I shouldn’t be so selfish.

I pick my head up. “Actually, he’s home for a few weeks. What are you doing tomorrow? He invited me to come out for dinner and drinks. Wanna come? We can all catch up!”

Maddy smiles and her face lights up. “Umm, yes! You know I don’t turn down a good time.”

“Perfect. Meet me here tomorrow at 6 P.M.?”

“It’s a date,” she says, winking at me.

I smile at her, thinking about how we both need to let loose a little. It will be good for us.

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Sending lots of love and sexy vibes,

xx Lacey Nash