

Secret

DESIRE

JESSIE JOCELYNE

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Epilogue

Preview of Secret Obsession

PROLOGUE



Laura

My boss took a step closer to me. His powerful frame was an electrifying presence at my back. We were in the middle of the busy cafeteria, but the excitement thrumming through my body was so distracting I couldn't focus on my surroundings. He stood closer than any boss should, and I hoped no one was watching. A scandal would be disastrous.

His intoxicating masculine scent flooded my senses, and I clenched my thighs in response. I yearned to have him closer, needing to touch him somehow. The music and chatter surrounding me faded away to nothingness, and everyone in the room became a distant afterthought. I found myself rocking until my back grazed his chest. It was the barest of contact between our bodies, but pleasure tingled my entire being.

It was addictive. I wanted more. If I pushed myself more into him, would he wrap his arms around me?

I shook the thought from my mind. It was so wrong to flirt with my boss. The risk too great. I should walk away.

But before I could, he brought his head close, his breath teasing my ears. "Meet me in my office, Laura," Steven said in a voice oozing with sex appeal.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Was he asking what I thought he was asking?

His hand caressed my ass.

I gasped and my feet were rooted to the floor. My body wanted the closeness more than my brain wanted to flee.

“I want you, Laura,” he whispered. “I can’t hold myself back anymore. And I won’t.”

The sound of my heart pounding drowned out my thoughts, but luckily, I grasped the last shred of logic in my conscious mind. “But...we’re at work.” My voice sounded far away as if I wasn’t the one speaking.

I wanted to say yes. But we couldn’t do this. Shouldn’t. What if we got caught? An intern and her boss. It would ruin our careers.

Was he even worth the risk?

ONE



Laura

6 weeks before.

I pranced into Wealth Asset Group’s Manhattan high-rise, my enthusiasm bursting from me with every step. Sunshine flooded the massive lobby of one of the most successful investment companies in the US, illuminating the marble floor and creating a sparkle as bright as my mood. Today must be a lucky day. The sun never shone this bright in November in New York City.

Employees bustled toward the elevators—brown, blue, and gray business suits whizzed past me. At least a dozen monitors lined the expansive walls, each one displaying real-time market data for hundreds of stocks.

I reached the reception desk, my head whirling left and right, wanting to see everything at once and not believing I was now a part of it. This was the first day of my new life. New city. New job. New everything. Year one of my ten-year plan to success and riches.

Goal: To become the female version of the investment genius Warren Buffett, except with better hair and bigger boobs.

Strategy: Immerse myself in my career, work harder than everyone else, and climb the corporate ladder. Fast! And most importantly, not let anything or anyone distract me from my goal.

“May I help you, Miss?”

The voice broke through my thoughts, and I swung my focus to the elderly guard behind the counter. His blue security uniform hung loosely on his frail frame.

“Oh, hi,” I glanced at his name tag, “Jim. I’m Laura Bloom, and today is my first day.”

His knobby fingers scanned the paper on his desk. “Ah, ’ere it is. Oh, you’re Mr. Cox’s new intern.” He smiled apologetically.

That was weird. Was he feeling sorry for me? Couldn’t be. I was the luckiest graduate of all the Ivy League schools in the country. This was the most sought-after internship on Wall Street, and I was the one who earned it.

“Sign ’ere and go straight up to the top floor. That’s the executive floor. Then turn left to the CFO’s office.”

As I signed in, whispers broke out around me, some of them loud enough for me to hear.

“Poor girl.”

“Hope this one lasts more than a month.”

“Better her than me.”

What was going on? This didn’t make any sense. My enthusiasm sank a notch until Jim handed me my employee card. I reached out with both hands and closed my fingers around it as if he was bestowing me with a sacred scroll. This was what I had worked so hard for over the last eight years. I bit back a squeal of delight as I clutched my reward for never giving up.

“Scan your card at the gate o’er there to get to the elevators,” he said with another apologetic smile. “And good luck to ya, miss.”

I ignored the look of pity on his face. “Thanks, Jim.” I waved animatedly and followed the other suits across the lobby.

A very pregnant woman in a power suit stretched to the max across her bulging bump waddled through the lobby. A jerk, who was texting while walking, bumping into people, and not once looking up, was barreling right toward her. I scooted between them in time to block him, bracing myself as he knocked into me instead of her. The impact was so hard that pain shot through my arm, and I stumbled sideways, almost bumping into preppers. My new employee pass shot out of my hand and slammed to the floor with a clap.

“Watch it!” The jerk had the nerve to say as he stomped away without so much as a glance to see if I was ok.

As for Mrs. My-blazer-button-is-about-to-pop-along-with-my-water, well, if she did notice I saved her from a collision, she didn’t seem to care

because she waddled away toward the Starbucks at the far end of the lobby. It didn't matter as long as she wasn't hurt. I thanked myself for potentially saving her from a fall since no one else had bothered.

I hadn't expected to find the friendliest co-workers in the financial district, and after five minutes, my predictions were confirmed. But I didn't mind. Making friends wasn't high on my priorities list.

I picked up my pass, running my thumb over the smooth plastic, a smile on my face. My name was printed in big, bold letters next to the exquisite, foiled lettering of the company logo.

Clutching it to my chest, I looked skyward and whispered, "I made it, Mom." She would have been so proud.

At the access gate, I scanned my pass, and the clear sliding doors slid open with a welcoming whoosh. Following the other suits, I squeezed my big butt into the crowded elevator. "Top floor, please."

A gorgeous blonde with long Amazonian legs standing by the panel rolled her eyes and pushed the button while muttering something under her breath ending with *show off!*

What was her problem? Only one way to deal with a hater.

"What was that?" I asked, raising my voice like a kid who didn't know the meaning of inside voice. "Clothes off? You want someone to take your clothes off?"

Her head whirled around, her horror-stricken face turning the exact color of her rouge lipstick. I heard snickers from the people behind me.

"What? No! That's not what I said." Her desperate eyes darted to each person, begging them not to believe my words. "That's not what I said," she pleaded to the crowded elevator as she pressed her blazer to her chest.

The elevator dinged as the doors opened, and she scurried off.

The snickers erupted into roaring laughter. "Good one. Sheila totally deserved that," said one guy.

"Yeah, I think you might actually stand a chance in this place," said the woman next to me.

"Errr...thanks?"

The elevator stopped nine more times, and employees shuffled off at their respective floors. Left alone to continue to the top floor, I burst into a happy dance. I couldn't believe my luck in landing this prestigious internship.

No. Not luck.

Blood, sweat, tears, permanent dark circles under my eyes, and drool

stains on my shirts from falling asleep between classes and work shifts. It had taken me more than double the years normally required to finish my university degree because of all the part-time jobs I'd had to take on to support myself and pay off Mom's medical bills. I finally graduated with a Finance degree and applied for the internship days before my twenty-eighth birthday. The hard work had paid off.

Finally.

I felt like all the pain of the last few years was behind me. I could start afresh. A new beginning.

I sashayed my hips, snapped my head from side to side, and whipped my hair back and forth. I even tried to twerk.

Total fail.

I probably looked like Elaine from Seinfeld, but I didn't care. I was grooving to my own beat of "I Love My New Life."

Sheer elation spread through my body and erupted in one loud "Ha!" I arched my back, threw my head up, and froze on the spot in a contortionist's pose.

Oh shit!

I was staring straight into the surveillance camera. Way to make a fool of yourself on your first day, Laura. I quickly straightened into a stance befitting a serious businesswoman while my brain scrambled to figure out who could have been watching me.

I convinced myself that if anyone saw my groove-a-thon, it would have been one lone guard in the control room. But they must have dozens of cameras to watch, so there was no guarantee that they'd even seen me.

Pleased with my line of reasoning, my confidence returned along with my first-day-on-the-job buzz.

I also took comfort in the thought that none of my direct co-workers would have seen that clumsy display.

TWO



Steven

“Are you *grinning*?” My best friend asked me from across my desk, sporting a grin of his own.

Was I? “Don’t be absurd, John,” I said, the hint of amusement in my voice betraying me.

What was happening to me? I didn’t get amused. And why were my eyes still locked on the third computer screen to the left?

“You totally are. I can’t believe it. I haven’t seen you smile like this in decades. Not since that frat party when the chunky cheerleader gave you a lap dance.”

I scowled at him. “She wasn’t chunky.”

John ignored the warning in my scowl, as he always did. “Oh, yes she was, she was f—”

“Don’t you dare! She was curvy and beautiful, you judgmental prick.” My voice now back to my normal grouchy tone. “Get back to work.”

“Ahhh, there he is. Now I recognize you.” John leaned back in his seat with a satisfied look on his face. “Don’t order me around, you moron. You keep forgetting I’m your boss.”

Maybe because he’d been my best friend for longer than he’d been my boss. Or maybe because... “I answer to no one.”

John pointed to my monitor. “What were you looking at?”

More importantly, *why* was I looking at it? And why couldn't I stop? "Nothing. Get out."

"Nope." He leaned forward, grabbed the screen, and turned it.

But before he could see what had me so enthralled, I tapped a button on my keyboard, and the full-screen view of elevator A6—showing a beautiful young woman shaking her bountiful booty—disappeared and was replaced by a gallery view from fifty other cameras.

John's eyes narrowed. "Jackass."

He stood up and walked over to the mirror. Smiling at his own reflection, he adjusted the jacket of his pin-striped suit and meticulously fixed a lock of his ginger hair.

"Quit preening like a peacock. We're at work, not on a catwalk."

Still admiring his reflection, he said, "You're just jealous that I'm better looking."

Never. Jealous, he had better people skills, maybe. But I'd never let him know it. "I'm bigger and stronger."

"You're bigger than everyone, you oaf. Bigger is not better. I'd rather be devilishly handsome. Besides, I still have the same sexy bod I had back in college when I competed on the swim team." He flopped into the chair and hooked an ankle over a knee. "You should come to the club with me tonight, Stevieboy. I'll get a couple of chicks to fawn over your big muscles."

I didn't need his help to pick up chicks. If it wasn't my muscles they wanted, it was my cash...at least until they got to know me. There was a reason I didn't date anymore. "Not my thing."

He sighed, his disappointment hanging in the air between us. "Give it a try, buddy. Look at me. I go to the club at least twice a week and take a different woman home each time. And most of those times, it's a supermodel. I'm so gorgeous, they can't keep their hands off me. But all you do is work and work out. It's not a life, Steven. You need to have some fun."

Fun doesn't last. At least not the kind he's talking about. "Making money is fun. Beating people in the MMA cage at Titan's Club is fun. If I have any more fun, I'll turn into a clown."

He rolled his eyes as he stood. "Whatever. Don't forget the meeting in an hour. And try to be nice this time."

Why did he always say that? You'd think he'd give up by now. "There's no place for niceties in business. Especially not in our industry. Numbers. That's the only language I talk."

“I don’t want to pull rank on you, buddy, but please be polite.” He leaned on my desk, looking down at me. “We need the board of directors to approve this merger.”

I flung a thick report across the desk that landed between his hands. “I make them a shit-load of money. They’ll approve it because the numbers speak for themselves. I don’t need to win them over with my charm.”

“Charm?” John’s howls filled the room as he bent over with laughter. “You?”

He didn’t have to rub it in. “Get out.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” He clutched his side, his laughter grating on my nerves. “You haven’t had any charm in over twenty years. Not since Barb dumped—”

I shot out of my chair and pointed at the door. “GET OUT!” I didn’t want to hear her name ever again.

He stumbled out into the hallway, his guffaws echoing through the corridors until he reached his office.

I settled back into my seat, and moments later, the elevator dinged. My anger melted away, and that damn grin found its way back on my face. What the hell was wrong with me? My brain answered by filling my mind with a replay of my intern dancing.

God! The way she had swayed those hips. And that plump bootie bobbing around. Annd now I was hard. For fuck’s sake. Get a grip, man. So inappropriate. This couldn’t be happening. She would be in my office in a second. Stop it, Steven, think of baseball or broccoli or hyenas...anything.

Instead, my brain bombarded me with questions. What color were her eyes? How full were her lips? Why was I asking these questions about my new intern?

I slapped my face. Hard. Snap out of it, you fool.

I didn’t fantasize about women at work. Never. Strictly forbidden. Not because of company rules, but *my* rules. Although, I was pretty sure there was a strict non-fraternizing policy when it came to an executive and his intern.

This company was my life. It was all I needed. Nothing and no one could distract me from my job. My career.

And no one ever would.

She marched into my office, then passing the sofas and round table, she stopped midway, a few feet from my desk. Her chin-length onyx locks

bounced like joyous springs around her pale, round face with every determined step. She was shorter than I had guessed. At least a foot shorter than my 6-foot-2 frame. Abundant luscious curves in all the right places, her petite body stood proud, her head held high as if she already owned the place.

Christ, that confidence was sexy. And those curves, begging me to explore them...

“Good day, Mr. Cox. I’m Laura Bloom, your new intern.” Her voice, full of captivating confidence, didn’t help to bring me back to reality.

“Good morning, Ms. Bloom,” I said as my gaze lingered on her beautiful features. She had an adorable button nose. And those eyes—warm deep brown, like hot chocolate. Delicious.

I snapped my head down, unable to look at her without my body reacting like a horny teenager. I eyed my drink suspiciously. Had my assistant spiked it with an aphrodisiac? Grabbing my cup, I brought it to my nose and sniffed.

The hot chocolate smelled divine, the mini marshmallows floating merrily. It was my usual. Not a drink that portrays power and intellect, but no one knew about it except my assistant, and she was sworn to secrecy. I had an image to preserve. Couldn’t let the sharks in our industry find any weaknesses to exploit, or in this case, habits to ridicule. I didn’t become a titan on Wall Street by showing weakness or being nice. I never asked, I demanded. I never said please, I barked orders. And I always stayed disciplined and in control. Except...

I shifted in my chair. My wood was still a fucking problem, so I couldn’t get up to shake her hand as I normally would. Instead, I pointed to the door on the left. “Set yourself up in the office over there through the adjoining door.”

I chanced a glance to see her reaction. Her eyebrows scrunched up in an adorable way for a moment as her eyes followed my finger until they landed on the door. Then her gaze shone with excitement, so full of innocence. You didn’t see that often in this industry, and I suddenly felt as if I needed to protect that innocence.

I swiveled toward my keyboard. My brain still in some sort of malfunctioning mode, I typed gibberish, pretending to be fully engrossed in my work, waiting for her to disappear from my office...and my thoughts.

THREE



Laura

Mr. Cox's piercing jade-green eyes had greeted me as I walked into his huge office. Intense eyes, full of hunger. I expected nothing less from a man in a position of high power. To stay the best, you had to keep that constant hunger for success.

It took all my self-control to act professional and not fangirl over him. It was so surreal. I was standing in front of my idol. One of the titans of Wall Street. My grin must have been stretching from ear to ear like a complete weirdo.

Don't be weird, Laura. At least not on your first day.

As I waited for him to tell me where to go, I gave my new boss the once-over. He had short, neatly styled hair in an Ivy League cut, giving him a classic debonair vibe that perfectly matched his three-piece suit. No doubt some super expensive made-to-measure designer brand, judging by the way his vest hugged his body like a lover.

The man sitting before me looked to be in his mid-thirties, except for the silver strands peppering his dark hair. But I knew he was about fifty. I knew everything about him. Well, everything that was public knowledge from the multitude of articles I had collected about him.

Now that I saw him in real life, I could confirm that the pictures never did him justice. Maybe it was because he never smiled in them. But he was

smiling now, which surprised me. It was the complete opposite of his demeanor during my Zoom interview two months ago with him and the CEO, where Mr. Cox had scowled the entire time and never once looked at the webcam or the screen. Did he even recognize me?

Today, with his features softened by his smile, I saw a handsome olive-toned face with a powerful jaw. Everything about his appearance seemed to be at odds with itself. Massive, broad, boulder shoulders filled the fine stitching of his suit. His thick wrist, marred by a wide, raw scar, was adorned with an expensive-looking gold watch. Elegance versus ruggedness. If it wasn't for his crooked nose, he'd be perfect on the cover of GQ magazine.

He must be living such a glamorous life. My mind filled with visions of him spending his evenings sipping champagne and eating caviar with gorgeous supermodels at fancy nightclubs, where the entry fee was the cost of a small car.

My eyes did a quick, discreet scan of his humongous corner office. Everything in here had opposites too, but they weren't at odds. There were the oversized, studded armchairs in plush jade-green velvet that matched his eyes and the massive mahogany desk as big as a bed etched with delicate carvings. Sturdy, yet delicate. Rough, yet refined. There was a synergy there, and it worked.

He pointed to my office and told me to set up.

My very own office. On the executive floor of a high-rise in the heart of New York City's financial district. I had to lock my knees to stop myself from bouncing. I had made it. Almost. A paid internship was a step away from a permanent position. From my dream.

I waited for him to get up to greet me with a handshake or offer a few words of welcome, but he stayed put in his burgundy leather chair and said nothing else.

Kind of rude, but that wasn't enough to bring me down from my high. "Thank you, Mr. Cox."

He swiveled in his chair, and his fingers began typing away at his keyboard before I could say anything else, giving me a view of his impressive wide back.

I loved his work ethic. No time wasted on useless, polite chit-chat. Work was my priority, too. I rushed to my new office, confident I would get along wonderfully with my new boss.

FOUR



Steven

I gave her half an hour to settle in. But if I was being completely honest, I needed the time more than she did to regain control of my body. Once I had mastered my urges, I called her back into my office.

She sat eagerly across from my desk with a pen and notebook, and I busied my mind with random calculations to keep it from focusing on her voluptuous body.

“Ms. Bloom, for today, please familiarize yourself with the employee manual.” One thousand three hundred thirty-five times five hundred forty-six is...carry the three, then add the four...

“I’ve already finished reading it.”

Not possible. Dammit, I lost count. “It’s only been half an hour.”

“I read it over the weekend when HR emailed it to me. What else should I do?” She asked with an eager expression on her face.

I had a pile of books I usually bombarded new interns with, a test to weed out those who were not cut out for the workload. Most failed. I couldn’t bring myself to give them to her. I was too curious about this woman to get rid of her so soon.

And it wasn’t lust affecting my judgment. I had chosen her before laying my eyes on her. Before even knowing her gender. I never looked at the names on the applications. I had picked her out of hundreds of the most

brilliant minds coming out of the Ivy League business programs.

There was something about her application that had stood out from all the others. She had had much more to offer than just top grades. All those jobs she had held while staying at the top of her class proved to me she would work harder than the other applicants. I saw a bit of myself in her when I was her age and recognized that potential for greatness.

“Please review them again. You will be working closely with me, and I need you to know these rules inside and out. We manage and invest billions of dollars here at Wealth Asset Group, and we have the strictest rules in our industry to protect our clients’ assets.”

“I assure you, I’ve not only memorized them, but I’ve analyzed how to apply them while trading and investing our clientele’s portfolio, and I’ve studied how to integrate them with the Securities and Exchange Commission’s regulations. I knew security would be severe here when I went through all those security checks in the hiring process. The investigators even interviewed my neighbor and their dog Fluffy’s veterinarian.”

The beauty in front of me snorted as she laughed at her own words. And the snort did nothing to diminish my desire for her. It showed how confident she was as if she didn’t care what she sounded like to anyone. Snorts and all.

The corners of my lips twitched as I watched her. How was she so comfortable around me? Even if she didn’t know my reputation, most people were nervous in my presence. I always assumed it was because they had a healthy dose of respect for someone high up on the corporate ladder, my intellect, power, and status making people nervous around me. But John said it was the grinch vibe I gave off along with my perm-a-scowl.

“Do you have any other work for me?” she asked.

I put a book on the desk, watching her reaction carefully. “You can read this.”

She tilted her head. “Ah. Yes.” A look of adoration crossed her features. “This is my favorite book. I can read it again, but I know it pretty well. ‘Calling someone who trades actively in the market an investor is like calling someone who repeatedly engages in one-night stands a romantic.’”

It was my favorite too. “No one has ever quoted from *The Essays of Warren Buffett* to me before. Impressive, Ms. Bloom.” I handed her another book, the anticipation of her reaction building inside me.

She looked at the book cover and grinned. “I’ve read this book three times already. In the words of the Father of Value Investing, ‘The intelligent

investor is a realist who sells to optimists...’”

“‘And buys from pessimists’,” we said together.

Impressive was an understatement. This woman was fucking amazing. Out of my pile of ten books, there was only one she hadn’t read. I instructed her to spend the day studying the book on advanced derivatives.

Most interns had grumbled, viewing the task as beneath them as if it was homework they thought they would never have to do again now that they’d graduated. None of them understood that there was always something new to learn when it came to stock options and swaps. Arrogant newbies always thought they could waltz in here and start managing a multimillion-dollar portfolio from day one. But this intern...

She grabbed the book, hugged it like it was a cherished present, and dashed into her office.

I silently congratulated myself for finding the brightest woman in the country. As an intern. Just an intern. Nothing else, Steven.

Remember your rule.

FIVE



Steven

My assistant ambled into my office, her pace slower than usual. Had I been working her too hard? There was a time when she used to sprint back and forth between our offices, but now... “When was your last vacation, Mrs. Barnes?”

She tsked as she reached my desk. “At the same time as yours.”

When was that? Two years ago? No, more like three. I should have forced her to take her vacation days.

She waggled a finger at me. “Don’t look at me like that, I’m fin—”

Suddenly, her knees buckled, and she grabbed the edge of the desk, slumping over.

I jumped to my feet, dashed around my desk, and reached her before she fell. I steadied her with my arm around her waist, feeling far too many ribs. When had she lost so much weight? “Mrs. Barnes! What’s wrong?” My voice rose an octave with worry as I helped her to the chair.

Sweat beaded the brow beneath her gray hair. Her face was blanched out, her natural olive-toned glow faded. “I’m alright. Just age catching up with me, I guess.”

I kept forgetting how old she was. Apart from the graying hair, she still looked radiant for a woman in her mid-seventies. She didn’t look a day over 59.

I hovered near her, unsure how to help her. “Go home. Take the day off.”

“There’s too much to do. I have to set things up for the new intern. I haven’t greeted her yet or given her a tour.”

“That can wait. I’ll handle it.”

“You?” she asked with a shaky laugh, so unlike her regular boisterous cackles, sending another wave of worry through me. I had never seen her like this before. This wasn’t good.

I rubbed my wrist, my thumb sliding under my watch and digging into the ridges of my scar. “I’ll have Andrew take care of it. Go home...no, on second thought, go see Dr. Lewis at the private clinic.”

“I don’t need a doctor. I’ll go home and rest for a couple of hours and come back after lunch.”

I bit back a roar of frustration. “Stop this nonsense, Aunt Mable.” I stared into her green eyes, pleading. They were almost identical to Mom’s.

Mom and Aunt Mable had looked so much alike that people mistook them for twins. I wondered if Mom would have aged as gracefully as Aunt Mable had. Would she have looked this way today, had she still been alive?

I couldn’t lose the only family I had left. “It’s an order, Aunt Mable. I’ll get you a cab.”

“Don’t call me that at work, silly boy. No one knows we’re related. Can’t have people thinking I got this job out of nepotism.”

“I don’t care what people think. You’ve been my assistant for twenty years. You’re the only one I trust with my secrets. What’s the extension for the security desk?”

“You still don’t know after all this time?” She sighed, her body slumping with exhaustion. “5555.”

I called security and had them order a cab. “Come, Aunt Mable. I’ll help you downstairs.”

“Don’t treat me like an invalid. Besides, you can’t keep the chair waiting. I’ll manage.”

“Screw the meeting. You’re more important.”

“Stop fretting.” She patted my hand, her warm touch on my skin soothing my nerves. “I’ll be fine.”

I called security again and had them send a guard to help her to the entrance.

“Hurry, Steven. You’re late already.”

I texted my doctor, then put my hand on her shoulder. “Go straight to the

clinic. If you don't, then I'll come to your house and drag you there myself."
She waved me away. "Fine. Fine."



John tapped my foot twice under the conference table at the board meeting. Two taps. The code to shut up. So I wrapped up my presentation with an impressive financial projection that was sure to convince everyone this deal would be lucrative. "Bottom line is that this merger will increase our profits by 35% while increasing investor returns by 67% over the next three years."

Some of the board members nodded, seeming impressed. I nodded back. And I ignored those who had doubt plastered all over their faces, when what I really wanted to do was tell them how stupid they were. They obviously kept forgetting I was never wrong. Idiots.

John took over and turned on his charisma to the max, schmoozing the old farts around the table by babbling about corporate image and brand awareness. I don't know why he bothered. Wasn't he listening when I spoke about profits? How was the discussion still going on when I had clearly given conclusive evidence that there was only one possible decision?

I drowned out the useless conversations around the table relating to subjects that had nothing to do with the bottom line.

John kicked me once under the table. My turn again, but I knew John wanted me to suck up. He should have known better. "You'd be an idiot to pass up on a merger like this," I said to the chair.

"What did you call me?" He slammed his fist into the table, his walrus mustache bristling, his beady eyes narrowing at me. "I've had enough of your behavior." The chair's voice sounded like grunts and bellows. "You're easily replaceable."

Replaceable, my ass. I was the best in the business on this side of the ocean. If he fired me, he'd be in big shit. He couldn't risk losing me to the competition. "You think—"

"Mr. Wallis," John cut me off, his fingers digging into my arm. "What Steven was trying to say was that not only do the numbers show the potential for exponential growth, but if we pass up on this merger, our competitors will step in. If they join forces, they'll beat us in the market. On top of that..."

John droned on, using his diplomatic tone to lull the chair, but I couldn't

concentrate on the meeting.

I yanked my arm away and checked my phone again. A text from Dr. Lewis finally appeared. He surmised it was probably fatigue, but he would keep Aunt Mable in for the day and run a series of tests to rule out everything else. She was in excellent hands. He was the best in Manhattan. I only ever chose the best.

Some of the tension I hadn't realized I'd been holding in my shoulders eased as I reread his text three times. Aunt Mable would be fine. I'd make sure of it. I couldn't lose her too.



John followed me into my office and slammed the door. “Why, Steven? Why? You couldn't keep the insults to yourself for one hour? Just one fucking hour. He already tried to get you voted out last year. He wants you gone. Do you have to keep pushing his buttons?”

I sank into my favorite lounge chair, my thumb running over the cool studs as my fingers caressed the plush leather. Something about the contrast always helped me relax. “The board will never get rid of me. I make them too much money.”

John paced behind me. “Fuck, Steven. That won't save you. I heard the chair is already looking for your replacement.”

I glanced at the adjoining door, the one to the intern's office. Was Laura there?

Laura? I shouldn't be calling her by her first name. Keep it professional, Steven.

The door was closed, but it wasn't soundproof. “Keep your voice down, John. And for fuck's sake, don't pace behind me like that.”

John sat on the edge of the chair facing me and looked over at the door. “Since when do you care if your intern hears us arguing?”

I didn't. Usually. But I didn't want to frighten this one away. Finally, an intern worthy of my mentorship. I'd rather be talking with her right now. “I have work to do. Get out.”

John sighed, his anger melting away. “Fine. But I saved the day again. You're welcome, by the way.” He stood up and put on a show of bowing as if he were receiving a standing ovation for saving the deal. “Now we can get

started on the merger.”

SIX



Steven

My hand hovered over the brass doorknob of our adjoining door. For the first time in my career as a CFO, I wondered if I should knock before entering. I had often stormed in, trying to catch the previous interns goofing off on the job.

But, judging by her impressive bio, I had a feeling this intern would never do that. John had been hesitant to choose her because it had taken her eight years to finish her degree, but John had ignored the rest of her resume.

I had dug deeper. I always did. This job was too important, so I had hired the best detective in the state to find out everything about the candidate before deciding to hire her.

All those jobs. That's what I had found impressive. Few people were capable of getting honors and top grades while holding down three jobs.

Being raised by a single parent too ill to work, Ms. Bloom had worked harder than most people could ever imagine. She had taken care of her sick mother until she passed away when Ms. Bloom was only 16. Forced to become an adult at such a young age and fend for herself, she had worked her way through college and succeeded.

She knew the value of honest hard work, and I was sure she had the discipline to handle this job. Not like those other honors kids with rich dads paying for their every need and maids making them snacks so they could

study through the night.

I had a feeling she would keep impressing me with her brilliant mind and strong work ethic. And I was looking forward to it.

I rapped my knuckles on the polished wood door, then entered the tiny, windowless office. Two short steps and I was at her desk, only inches away from her.

She sat in her chair, reading the book, her lush curls hanging loosely over her face. I wondered how soft they were. My hand stretched as I imagined running my fingers through those curls.

I cleared my throat to announce my presence.

She was still reading. Had she not heard me? “Ms. Bloom.”

“Gaahhh!” Her head snapped up, and she dropped the book.

I resisted a smile. I’d never met anyone so engrossed in a book on derivatives to the point of blocking out all outside noises. It was refreshing. And adorable.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Cox.” She grabbed her pen and notebook and looked up at me expectantly with her beautiful brown eyes.

I cleared my throat, but this time to shake away the image of her eyes looking up at me while she did something else to me. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Me? Oh, yes. Thank you, except...” She pointed at the two computer monitors on her desk. “I usually prefer to work with three monitors.”

“I’ll get you one.” I would? Where had that come from? I never did menial tasks myself. I delegated. Gave orders. My time was too valuable for mundane stuff like this. But for some reason, this seemed important to me.

I wasn’t going to waste my time analyzing why. I would ignore it. Simple as that. This feeling would fade. Hopefully soon.

She waved her hands. “Someone in your position shouldn’t have to do that. I simply need the number for IT. Or maybe your assistant...?”

“She isn’t here today.” I turned on my heel before I offered to do something else completely out of character, and in two strides, I was in my office. “I’ll handle it,” I said as I closed the door.

How would I handle it without Aunt Mable? Once I was at my desk, I picked up the phone and paused. What was the number for IT?

Shit.

Aunt Mable always handled these things. I simply had to bark out my orders, and the next thing I knew, everything I needed appeared on my desk

within an hour.

Should I call her?

No. I didn't want to give her a reason to leave the clinic before Dr. Lewis had done all the tests.

I really hoped her results would come back fine. At her age, she should think about retiring, but I didn't want another assistant. On the other hand, I didn't want her getting sick because of the job. Because of me.

I dialed one of the few extensions I knew. John answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

"What's the extension for IT?"

"Ha! Mr. Hotshot thinks he's all that, but you're hopeless without Mable."

"Just give me the fucking number."

"What do you need? I'll have my assistant contact them."

I should take him up on his offer. It would be so much simpler. "I want to do it myself."

Silence. Had he hung up on me? "John?"

"Ok, hang on. I had to clean my ears because...whaaat?"

This was a bad idea. Ms. Bloom could have waited until tomorrow for the extra screen. Aunt Mable would have gotten her whatever she needed. "Give me the damn extension. Oh. Wait. Maybe you don't know it either, Mr. CEO."

"4357. If you can't remember that, you spell out HELP on the dial-pad."

Ah shit, he did know it. I grunted my thanks and quickly hung up. Then I dialed 4357.

"IT," a bored nasal voice answered.

I would need to have a talk with the Director of IT. If employees had time to be bored, then there was something very wrong in the department. "Get me a computer screen. Now. Top floor."

"We need a manager's approval. Fill out form 34B and send it—"

I stared at the receiver in disbelief. "Do you know who I am, kid?"

"The rules apply to all employees."

"I'm the CFO, you little...Get me a screen. Now."

I slammed the phone down, then picked it up right away and called the Director of IT. There was no answer, so after the beep, I let out my frustration. "What the hell, George! What kind of incompetent shit is this? You don't take calls from the CFO? Your employee on the so-called HELP

line sounds like he just woke up from a pot-induced coma. Whip your department into shape. Oh, and get me a damn computer screen.”

Why was such a simple task so complicated? I slammed the handset onto the base, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly.

What else would Aunt Mable have done for the new intern on her first day? Didn't she say something about giving her a tour before I shipped her off to the doctor? I couldn't do it myself and take up my valuable time to act as a tour guide to a lowly intern, shepherding her around from department to department for thousands of employees to see. I'd lose credibility.

I picked up the phone to make one more call.

SEVEN



Laura

I bounced in my chair, desperate for a bathroom break, but I had trouble tearing myself away from this read. Using a pen as a placeholder, I finally closed the book and ran my fingers over the smooth hardcover. How had I not read this one yet? It was so fascinating. Derivatives were better than chocolate.

Walking out of my office to explore the halls on the top floor, I went in search of a bathroom. No one had given me a tour yet, but maybe his assistant would when she got back. I was really looking forward to discovering the rest of the building.

When I got back, Mr. Cox was standing in my office with a monitor in his arms. For a fraction of a second, I thought I saw panic in his eyes, like a lost puppy dog. But the look was gone so fast I figured I was probably wrong.

Confidence dominated his expression and posture. He towered over my 5-foot-2 frame by at least a whole foot. He oozed confidence that was barely contained by my tiny office, as if a space this small was beneath his authority. I had never met a man with such a commanding presence. My heart skipped a beat.

“Ms. Bloom. I thought you had left.”

Left? What kind of employee would leave the office at 10 a.m.? On her first day? Without telling her boss? “Sorry, had to go to the ladies’ room. Is

that for me?” I asked, pointing at the monitor.

He puffed out his chest. “Yes. I called IT.” His voice was full of pride as if he had overcome a monumental challenge.

I wasn’t sure what he was so proud of. Surely it wasn’t because of the monitor. “Thank you so much. I could have called them myself. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He shrugged. “It was nothing. But that department? Nothing but a bunch of incompetent idiots. Why is it so hard to find good workers? It’s like the entire world is one giant incompetent cesspool.”

He placed the monitor on my desk, grabbed the connecting cable, and got down on his knees.

I gasped. “No, Mr. Cox. I can do that myself. Please. Don’t get down on the floor in your expensive suit.”

Without looking up, he said, “It’s only a suit. I have dozens. Besides, my dry cleaner will take care of it. I’ve got the best one in Manhattan. Took me five years to find one up to my standards.”

That wasn’t the response I was expecting. Most rich people I had known treasured their clothes more than other people’s lives. When I was a kid, my dad never even brushed the dirt off my shirt when I fell at the park because he didn’t want to get his clothes dirty.

Why was my boss doing this himself? It was so beneath him. But then again, he was a self-made man. He was different from most rich people. He seemed nothing like those born with silver spoons in their mouths or golden horseshoes up their asses.

Mr. Cox was one of those *nouveau riche* with high standards. He came from nothing and had worked his way up. It wasn’t old money. And it wasn’t luck. He was probably used to having to do everything himself if he wanted it done properly. I respected that.

That was why he had been my role model for the past ten years. I had closely followed his career and never missed any of his published articles.

I still couldn’t believe I was here. With one of the most brilliant minds in the financial world. And there he was under my desk, hooking my screen up to my computer, his impressive ass staring me in the face.

I quickly averted my eyes. I should not be staring at my boss’s ass. No matter how fine it is.

Pushing the computer back into place, Mr. Cox stood up and dusted off his knees.

“Thank you very much,” I said with an appreciative smile.

He put his hand up as if to stop me from saying anything else. “Don’t mention it...ever. To anyone.”

EIGHT



Laura

“Sign your soul away to the devil on the dotted line, Ms. Bloom,” said the HR team leader with a chuckle as he sat across from me in my cramped office.

I didn’t care how tiny my office was. It was mine, and I was on the top floor. Side by side with the big bulls, ready to learn from the titans of Wall Street.

I burst out laughing at his joke and put my twelfth signature on the employment documents.

“Will I burn in hell if I break article 43D of the contract, Mr. Harris?” I asked jokingly.

“Mister does *not* suit me. Call me Andrew.” His playful gray eyes looked at me over the top of his half-rim glasses. “You won’t perish in the bowels of eternal damnation if you chew gum in the halls.”

This guy was fun. Although, I still wasn’t sure why HR came to me when I would have gone down to them. I signed on more dotted lines.

“Now,” he said in a more serious tone, “if you need to change your work schedule, you arrange that with Mr. Cox. You work directly under him, and he’s the only one who can assign projects to you. Don’t let the other employees try to pawn their work off on you.”

He took off his glasses and crossed one superlong, skinny leg over the

other. “It’s a shark-infested ocean over here. You’ll run into a lot of climbers. Some will try to sabotage you. Others will try to make you do their work. They may not know you, but they know you’re smart. The company only hires the most brilliant candidates.”

I expected that. I had been around enough greed in my childhood to know how these people operated. But what I hadn’t expected was a middle-management employee opening up to me like this. I figured everyone would look down on me until I proved myself.

There was something I was dying to ask him, but I didn’t know if I could trust him. His friendly nature might have been a facade. I needed to test the waters first and ask my question indirectly. “My contract is for one year, right?”

He leaned back in his chair and studied me. “Ask what you really want to ask.”

I couldn’t chance it, so instead, I asked, “How long did my predecessors last?”

He continued to study me. “You *are* quick. Did someone say something already?”

I acted casual as if I was talking about the weather. “I may have overheard something in the lobby.”

“Already? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised,” he said as his features softened. “Intern contracts are for one year, just like yours. But most don’t last that long.” He gave me an apologetic smile. “We have a high turnover rate for this particular position.”

The kindness in his eyes convinced me I could probably trust him enough to get the information I wanted. I sat back to mimic his posture and encouraged him to keep talking with a quick wave of my hand.

He grinned at me. “Girl, you’ve got spunk. I really hope you last.” He leaned forward like a teenager about to gossip, even though he looked to be about 60 years old. “Alright, I’ll tell you. You’ve probably already figured it out. Mr. Cox is not the easiest man to work for. He has high expectations and”—Andrew looked up as if he was searching for the right word—“doesn’t have the best disposition.”

“So, you’re saying they quit because the work was too hard? Or because they didn’t get polite conversation from the boss? That makes no sense.” I crossed my arms. “You said the company only hired the best, so they should’ve been able to handle the work. And a few slights from the boss

shouldn't have bothered them."

Andrew scrunched up his face as if he had swallowed vinegar. "Have you spoken to Mr. Cox yet?"

Why did he look so confused? I was the newbie here. I'm the one who should have looked confused. "Of course, as soon as I got here. Yeah, maybe he could have been a bit more polite at first, but he was pleasant and smiled —"

"Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. Did you say *smiled*?" His eyes blinked rapidly.

"Yes. Smiled." What was so shocking about that? Was Andrew joking with me? "He went to IT and got me an extra computer screen and hooked it up for me. Then told me you'd be here at 11."

Andrew's mouth fell open.

Had I said something I shouldn't have? I went over what I said in my head, trying to figure out which part had triggered his catatonic state. Then I remembered Mr. Cox had told me not to mention it to anyone, but I thought he had been joking. Man, I hope I didn't screw up on my first day.

"Um, Andrew?"

Once he finally regained his composure, he stood up. "Right, well, there's a first for everything." He checked his watch. "We'd better get going."

Going? Where? My heart rate hitched up a bit. "What do you mean?"

"I'm taking you on a tour of the building. Special request from the CFO himself," Andrew said with a twinkle in his eye.

Yesss! A tour. This was the best day ever. I jumped to my feet and followed him into the hall, barely able to contain my excitement. I was so grateful for this internship opportunity that I wanted to thank everyone involved in my hiring process.

A simple *thank you* wouldn't be enough. I was bursting with appreciation and wanted to sing their praises from the rooftop.

At that moment, Mr. Cox rounded the corner. Still caught up in a wave of gratitude, I suddenly had the impulse to jump into his arms and hug him. I bounded forward before my brain figured out what was happening.

Mortified, I locked my knees to stop myself from lunging at my boss's chest, which made me pitch forward.

Big, strong hands grabbed me by the shoulders and steadied me before I smacked the floor. I quickly found my footing and backed away, humiliation washing over me.

Mr. Cox cleared his throat. "Ms. Bloom, please watch your step. I

wouldn't want my intern injuring herself and not being able to come to work."

I groaned internally. "Yes, of c-c-course, Mr. Cox."

My boss disappeared into his office while I hurried down the hall, trying to outrun my embarrassment.

Andrew doubled over with laughter. "Way to make an impression on your first day, Laura."



The tour was the perfect remedy to get over my humiliation. It was amazing. I loved every aspect of this company.

The hustle.

The bustle.

On most of the floors, the large open workspaces held a sea of computer screens. Half of them with market data flashing across them. Others displayed articles from Seeking Alpha and many had Excel spreadsheets.

Employees analyzed trends, assessed potential risk, and my personal favorite, performed back-testing. I loved recreating trades using historical data from the past few years to find a pattern for profitable trades.

It was all so thrilling. I couldn't wait to get started with the number crunching. The tour ended in the cafeteria, just in time for lunch. I sat with Andrew and a bunch of other suits whose names I didn't bother remembering. I'd been doing well for the first twenty-five co-workers, but after that, my brain quit memorizing names.

"So, intern, how do you like the big city life?" a guy in a gray suit asked me.

I peeled the saran wrap off my sandwich. "I'm not sure I love it yet, but I'll do anything to follow my dream."

Andrew's phone buzzed. He took the call and walked out of the noisy lunchroom.

"Finally, he's gone," said a man with a goatee. "So, Laura, how did it go with Mr. Cox this morning?"

A redhead leaned in. "Yeah, are you totally traumatized yet?"

"Tell us, we're dying to know," said another lunch companion.

Traumatized? That was an odd way to describe someone's first day. All

eyes were fixed on me, eager for gossip. “You’re joking, right?” I asked.

“Come on, it’s ok. You can tell us,” said the guy in the gray suit. “Did he dump *The Essays of Warren Buffett* on your desk and tell you to memorize it by the end of the day, like he did to Ritchie two years ago? Poor guy didn’t last a month before he had a nervous breakdown. He was muttering equations from *The Intelligent Investor* to himself when the paramedics wheeled him away.”

My smile faded as I searched their faces, each one as serious as a market crash.

“Or did he make you do a system trade back-testing for the last thirty years? Not ten. Not twenty. But thirty freakin’ years.” The redhead threw her arms up in the air in frustration. “Who does that? Those things take forever, but Hellhound expects it done in a day. It’s impossible.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement.

“Oh man, I remember he did that to Amy.” Mr. Goatee said. “She was the intern before you. We had high hopes for her. She lasted three months before she quit. She held the record.”

The guy in the gray suit waved his fork at everyone. “She didn’t quit. She threw one of her computer screens across the room at Mr. Cox, and he fired her.”

“Oh yeah, she went totally bonkers. Rumor has it he managed to dodge the screen seconds before it would have hit him. Then he called her a crazy bitch and told her to—”

“GET OUT!” Everyone at my table shouted at once. Each one mimicking an angry, disgruntled man, presumably my new boss.

“He hasn’t told *you* to get out yet, has he? He’s famous for that,” said the redhead as she looked at me expectantly.

My stomach sank, and I lost my appetite. “Um, no.” This didn’t sound at all like the man I’d met this morning. I tried to ignore their stories and chalked it up to them trying to scare the newbie. Some sort of initiation. “If he’s so terrible, then why are you all still working here?”

My question was met by a chorus of snarky laughs. The guy in the gray suit answered for them all. “Cause most of us don’t have to deal with him. We don’t work directly under him. Only a handful of directors have to report to him and his assistant. And now, you. The work is insanely hard, the hours torturously long, but the pay is amazing. Especially the bonuses. As long as we keep getting results, we don’t even have to see the Hellhound.”

“We’re safe. You’re not,” said the redhead.

Smug faces stared at me.

“You probably thought you hit the jackpot getting this internship, didn’t you?” Mr. Goatee asked, trying to look smug, but he didn’t know he had a grain of rice stuck in his chin hairs. “If I were you, I’d start looking for another job. Your sanity depends on it.”

I bolted out of my chair. “I have to get back to work.”

They had to be lying. Or joking. I hoped. My new job buzz was dying fast. Damn co-workers. I marched out of the cafeteria. No, I wouldn’t let them get to me. I would base my judgment on facts and on my personal interactions with him, not on rumors and other people’s far-fetched history with him.

NINE



Laura

The next day, I arrived early in my beat-up red Miata. Traffic was horrendous, and I sure as hell wasn't used to big city driving. An SUV cut me off, nearly forcing me onto the sidewalk. A cab driver gave me the finger, and I didn't even know why. A cyclist yelled at me, and I yelled back.

But that wasn't enough to break my new-job high.

I sat at my desk and turned on my computer. Within seconds, Mr. Cox knocked on the adjoining door, walked in, and stood before me, with only my small desk between us. He was wearing a vest over a crisp white shirt that barely contained his huge biceps and hugged his muscular body in an even more drool-worthy way than yesterday.

This man was *fiiiine*. It wasn't the power suit that gave him the image of a high-powered executive. It was him, the man filling the suit, who radiated confidence and authority.

Heat flushed over my body, and I had to tear my eyes away.

"Why are you here so early?" he asked.

I resisted the urge to fan myself. "I wanted to beat the traffic."

"You drove? Why don't you take the trains?"

"I'm not used to public transit. I prefer to drive."

I dug into my bag and fished out the book on derivatives he had given me yesterday. "It was a wonderful read." I reached across my small desk to give

it back to him.

His thumb grazed my finger as he took the book from me. My skin tingled at the touch, and the tingling lingered even after he pulled away.

His eyes snapped down to the book as he stroked his thumb on the cover. “Did you finish it already?”

“Yes, it was riveting. I especially loved the part about credit spreads.”

His eyes glinted with a hint of pleasure. “Wow. No one’s ever read it this fast before.”

We spent the next hour having a thrilling conversation about option strategies. I wanted to share some theories I had, but I hesitated. My professors had laughed at me when I had shown them. But I was still convinced my theories had potential.

Mr. Cox was a king in the trading world. I hoped he would see value in my theories. But if he didn’t, then I would know I was truly wasting my time. I trusted his opinion more than anyone else’s.

I wrung my hands. “I’ve been...working on a system-trade analysis in my spare time. It’s not perfect yet...but I think—”

“Show me,” he commanded.

My mouth went dry as memories of my college days came flooding back.

“You’re taking up the seat of a serious student,” my macroeconomics professor had said.

“If you’re going to take forever to finish the program and waste your time on nonsense like this, then bow out so someone worthy can take your spot.” The weight of those words coming out of my favorite finance professor’s mouth momentarily crushed my confidence.

“Must be nice to have so much extra time to work on a side project. It’s easy to get perfect grades when you only take two classes per semester. It’s not fair to the other students,” a TA had said, not caring that I had held down three jobs while studying.

My career counselor had been the harshest. “You’ll never make it to Wall Street.”

No one ever believed I would get here. No one ever believed in me. Except for Mom. But here I was. I had applied to 33 internships. After 32 rejections, I nearly gave up until the acceptance letter for the internship of all internships arrived in my inbox. And the best part? It was my number one choice. I still wanted to pinch myself. I had made it into one of the top three investment firms on the continent.

I took a deep breath and pumped myself full of all the confidence I could muster. I reminded myself that I never backed down just because insecurity crept in. Never. “Well, I’m still tweaking it, and my professors didn’t see any profitable—”

“Fucking academics. What do they know? If they were smart enough to make millions on the market, they wouldn’t be trying to make a living in a classroom discussing theories. You’re in the real world now, and the rules are different.” He settled into the tiny chair, which creaked under his weight.

My nerves melted. I looked him in the eye and shared my hypothesis. And he listened to every word. Not once interrupting me. He nodded a few times, each nod encouraging me to divulge more of my hypotheses.

When I finished, he didn’t say a word, a pensive look on his face.

The silence allowed doubt to creep in. Maybe it really wasn’t any good. “As I said, it still needs work, but—”

“It’s very promising.” A ghost of a smile formed on his lips. “Good work.”

My mouth agape, I quickly covered it with my hand. Did he mean it? Had I heard him properly? “Really?” The word came out muffled in my palm.

“Absolutely. Have you tried adding the delta analysis along with the probability? I think that would optimize your results.”

I had a sudden urge to jump for joy, but I forced myself to be still. “Brilliant. I never thought of that. I can’t wait to try it.”

He stood up, his domineering posture filling the room. “Then don’t.”

My heart sank to the lobby. Please don’t tell me to give up like everyone else has. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t wait. That’s your assignment for this week.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No.”

I wasn’t expecting this. I had hoped for a crumb of validation but never expected him to assign me this project as my job. He was actually going to pay me to test my hypothesis. “But you have hundreds of analysts who have already done this type of work. You must already know the outcome.”

“Actually, no. No one’s ever thought of running the analysis using this specific probability as the benchmark. It’s a fresh way of looking at things.” As he marched back into his office, he said, “You’ll do very well in this industry, Ms. Bloom.”

Was he saying I had come up with a novel way of finding trades? Or was

he humoring me so I wouldn't feel silly?

No. He wouldn't do that. He wasn't the type to joke around about business and money. Besides, I had never found a single article outlining my method. It was different. It needed more analysis and back-testing, but it had potential. I had potential.

And he was the first person to recognize it. A warm fuzzy feeling spread through my body at the thought of someone believing in me.

TEN



Laura

Today was day three at the most awesome job in the world. It was a glorious morning, and my mood was so bright that I imagined the sun's rays shining down on me, even though my office was windowless. As I read through a few Seeking Alpha articles on Methanex stocks from one of my favorite analysts, some guy walked into my office acting like an arrogant prince. He ran a hand through his blond hair and sat on my desk. "Laura, right?"

Despite his arrogance, he was too young to be an executive or even a manager, which meant I didn't have to be on my best behavior. "And you are?"

"I'm Nathan." He eyed me as if he was checking out my body, making my skin crawl.

"Nice to meet you, *beautiful*," he said with a vomit-worthy wink.

Beautiful? This wasn't a pickup bar. And why was his ass on my desk? "Well, Nathan, as you can see, I'm busy." He didn't even deserve that level of politeness.

"We all are, darling. As the intern, it's your job to help our department." He slid a flash drive toward me. "Here, I need the numbers by Friday."

Yeah, right. He was probably some brown-nosing-ladder-climbing-leech too lazy to do the work himself. Even if Andrew hadn't warned me about this sort of stuff, I wouldn't have believed a schmoozer like him. "What is it?"

“It’s not your job to ask questions. Better get the work done before Mr. Cox gets angry. I wouldn’t want you to get into trouble.” He said that last part with what seemed like genuine concern.

I crossed my arms across my chest. “Then why didn’t *he* give me the job?”

“He told me to give it to you. But don’t worry, I’ll help you.” He leaned in and gently placed a hand on my shoulder. “You won’t find a lot of helpful people here, but trust me, I’ve got your back.”

Liar.

This guy was good. I wondered how many interns and new employees he had manipulated in the past. “So, Mr. Cox requested this, did he?” I shook his hand off and took the flash drive. “Well then, once I’m done, I’ll give *him* the report in person.”

His smile twisted into a sneer. “Don’t be a smartass. If you want to survive here, you need allies.”

“Find someone else to be your pawn if you’re too lazy to do your own work.”

He jumped to his feet. “You fat bitch, you—”

Oh, now he’d crossed the line. I’d gladly deal with corporate politics and rivalry, even relish it, but there was no reason to bring personal insults into this.

I bolted out of my chair. “Hey! Don’t you dare speak to me that way. I don’t have to put up with your bullying bullshit.”

He put his hand out. “Give me my drive.”

Looking him in the eye, I gently pulled my blouse away from my chest and dropped it into my bra, where I hoped he wouldn’t have the nerve to dive. “No. Now, leave.”

“Not without my flash drive.” He slunk forward, his face contorting into a threatening glower.

The adjoining door flew open. “What’s going on?” Mr. Cox said as he stormed into my office. With clenched fists, he invaded Nathan’s personal space, towering over the guy.

“N-n-nothing, Mr. Cox.” He had the good sense to shrink back, inching his way toward the door. “Was j-j-just saying *hi* to the new intern.”

“That’s NOT what it looked like.” Mr. Cox pointed at the door. “GET OUT!”

Nathan bolted out the door.

Dark green eyes bore into me. Mr. Cox took a deep breath and relaxed his fists. “What happened?”

“It’s fine. I was handling it.”

“Clearly. But what happened?”

I sighed. “Some employee trying to establish dominance in the hierarchy. Just part of the journey in this industry. I’m sorry for the disturbance.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. Next time, call me immediately.” He turned and started to walk back into his office.

I bristled. I didn’t need a bodyguard. A bodyguard couldn’t protect you 100% of the time, so it was better to deal with things on my own. The only person I could rely on was me. “No,” I said.

He paused mid-stride and turned slowly, a look of disbelief on his face. I guessed he wasn’t used to anyone saying *no* to him. He stalked up to me. His eyes darkened to a deep forest green. “What did you say?” The words sounded more like a warning as if what he really wanted to say was *do not dare disobey me*.

His entire being seemed to radiate powerful dominance, and he loomed over me as if trying to squash me. Was this the man everyone was afraid of? Was he finally showing me that side of him?

It didn’t matter. I never backed down. I would never let anyone dictate who I should be or how I should handle my life. Even though my heart was racing, I lifted my chin and looked him square in the face, my eyes meeting his angry ones.

ELEVEN



Steven

Had I been so nice to her that she thought she could defy me? I reined in my anger, not wanting to scare her away, but showing enough to let her know who was in charge.

Besides, I was offering her my protection. She should be thanking me. And why was it so damn sexy that she was standing up to me?

“With respect, I prefer to deal with things on my own,” she said, a cute defiant look in her eyes, like a kitten challenging a lion. “They’ll never learn to respect me if you step in each time.”

What a stubborn woman! I never imagined someone rejecting my protection. “They *will* respect you because I’ll make them,” I said with an air of finality. I thought about storming out to drive home the point that this was not up for discussion, but I wanted to see if she would keep standing up to me. Or maybe I hoped she would.

Ms. Bloom shook her head, her curls bouncing off her adorable cheeks, making me forget why I was angry in the first place.

“That’s not respect,” she said. “That’s fear. I don’t let people walk all over me.”

This industry was ruthless, but if she didn’t want my protection, then I would make sure she was well equipped to survive. For some bizarre reason I wanted...no, needed to see her succeed. “I don’t think you understand.

You've walked into infested waters. This place has sharks, piranhas, killer whales, all of it. Every kind of scheming mind you can imagine prowling around in a power suit. Devils in disguise, all of them."

"I understand," she said in a softened tone as the warmth in her gaze returned. "I've been around those sorts of people my whole life, and I appreciate your offer to help," she said, placing a hand over her heart, "but this is one matter I'll deal with on my own. Watch and see. They'll learn soon enough that they can't take advantage of me."

I averted my eyes, finding some random object on her desk to focus on before I lost myself in her eyes. There weren't many people in this world I respected, but she was quickly finding her way onto that list. "That's very brave."

"I also plan to make a name for myself in this business by working my ass off."

God, I hoped she didn't lose that big ass of hers. My hands twitched at the thought of grabbing those cheeks. I bet they were more than a handful each. And I had big hands.

She took a step closer to me, dangerously close, our bodies only inches apart. "I plan to thrive under your mentorship and make you proud of me."

My mentorship was not the only thing I wanted her under. My body swayed forward without my permission. God, I wanted her. Her sweet aroma caressed me. She smelled of star anise, and I wondered what she tasted like. My tongue darted out to lick my lips, and my body rocked forward again.

This was wrong. She was talking about her career, and I was fantasizing about her naked body on my desk. I cleared my throat. "I look forward to it, Ms. Bloom." Then I turned on my heel and got the hell out of there.

TWELVE



Laura

The week whizzed by fast. Working diligently on my analysis, I was enjoying myself too much to feel the time pass. Every day I'd have a meeting with Mr. Cox to discuss the results, and we'd brainstorm together to come up with different parameters to test. I had hoped for this, hoped my boss would become my mentor by encouraging my ideas and challenging my theories, but this was beyond any expectation I had ever had. I was so excited to wake up and rush back to work every morning that I could barely sleep at night.

I sat across from my boss in his humongous office while he looked over a report, the anticipation of his feedback bubbling through me. His large hands flipped through the papers, looking over my data.

Today he wore a Rolex with a President bracelet, an ice blue dial, and a diamond-set bezel. From further away, the watch looked deceptively simple yet elegant. Only up close, and if you knew what to look for, could you see that the watch partially hiding his scar was a luxury item. A quick online search told me it was worth at least fifty thousand dollars. That was more than my yearly salary.

One day, I would have an executive office and expensive jewels, although the material side of things wasn't my priority. What I really wanted was to never have to worry about how I was going to pay for my next meal. I wanted the security of knowing I could provide for my needs myself and that no one

could ever take what I had earned away from me.

Mr. Cox rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscular forearms that made butterflies flit about my belly.

Luckily, Mrs. Barnes walked in, breaking me out of my forearm stupor. I cleared my throat and averted my eyes from my boss's body. I had to stop ogling him like he was a sexy-ass, drool-inducing man. I reminded myself that he was my boss.

Mrs. Barnes placed a cup on his desk. "Here's your coffee."

Coffee? Wasn't it hot chocolate? I could smell it from here.

His eyes, creased with worry, scanned his assistant. "Thank you, Mrs. Barnes."

"You're welcome. Did you two hear about the escaped convict on the loose in the city?"

This city was already full of criminals, so what's one more? But it must be really bad if she was mentioning it. "What was he in jail for?"

"Rape! Mr. Cox, what do you think about that?"

He was engrossed in the report and ignored her.

Poor Mrs. Barnes was still standing there waiting for him to reply, so I said, "Well, I hope the cops catch him soon."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," he finally said. "The cops are as incompetent as the rest of the world. The only three competent people in the world are in this office right now."

Mrs. Barnes and I looked at each other. I suppressed a smile at my boss's usual grumbling while she rolled her eyes at him.

Sitting down in the seat next to me, she had an impish grin on her face, the kind kids have when they're about to get into mischief. "Laura, sweetie, aren't you scared?" she said. Don't you have a long walk every night to get to your car?"

"I do. My parking lot is about a mile away." It was the only one in my budget, but I had pepper spray with me at all times. That escaped con wasn't the only danger out there. "But I'm not worried, what are the chances of that one convict crossing my path in a city of millions?"

"Humph. Well, I don't like it. A young woman shouldn't have to walk to her car alone at night."

What was she up to? And why? "Thank you for your concern, but a security guard always escorts me to my car," I said. "It's one of the company's policies if a woman leaves the office alone after dark." So far,

though, I'd never seen anyone leave alone except for me. I should attempt to at least make a couple of friends so I had someone to walk with at night.

"Oh good. I had forgotten about that policy since my husband usually picks me up. Tell me, which guard escorts you?"

"Usually Jim."

"That's not good enough," Mr. Cox said under his breath as he shuffled his papers, a scowl etched on his brow.

Was he talking about the guard or my report? Must be my report. In seconds, I was a ball of nerves as I wondered what he found lacking in my work.

With a satisfied grin on her face, Mrs. Barnes stood. "Well, I'll leave you two to your meeting." She left through the adjoining door on the right.

I wrung my hands. "I can redo the analysis." What if he kills the project completely before I have a chance to prove myself? "Maybe if I change the probability to 35% instead? Or—"

"The work is great. Why would you redo it?" He looked up and gazed into my eyes with a hint of pride.

I sank back into my seat, relief washing over me. I must have misheard him earlier. Unless he was referring to the security team. That might make sense. He seemed to dislike most of the employees in the building.

THIRTEEN



Steven

I walked into Aunt Mable's office, thoughts of that escaped convict uppermost in my mind. "Mrs. Barnes, is your husband picking you up?"

She gave me a warm smile. "Yes, of course, as always."

Good. I didn't want her going out on her own in the city after dark or having to drive herself after her near-fainting episode last week. "You should shorten your hours from now on. Leave the office at 4 instead of 6. And reduce your workweek to 4 days a week."

"I'm fine. A three-day rest was enough for me."

Three days wasn't enough, not at her age. "You have a lot of vacation time saved up, you should—"

"Stop that, Steven," she said with a hint of sternness to her voice I hadn't heard since I was a kid. "I don't need you worrying about me. The doctor said it was simply a case of fatigue."

I sighed heavily. "Exactly. You need more rest. Less work."

"I'll decide that. Not you. And not Harold either, so don't go talking to your uncle about this. I wouldn't be able to stand being at home with him all the time. I love my husband, but he drives me completely bonkers when we spend too much time together." She rose from her chair and patted my shoulder, her tender touch melting some of the knotted tension in my shoulders.

“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s you I worry about.”

“I’m strong, successful, and the smartest person in this city.”

“But how is your heart?”

Oh no. I was about to get *the* speech again. “Perfect health. Just had a physical last month.”

“The new intern is wonderful, isn’t she?”

“She’s brilliant. And hardworking. That’s why I chose her. I wasn’t about to let HR choose another dud for me.”

She frowned and shook her head as if something awful had happened. “I hope she’ll be fine walking all the way to her car.” The same mischievous smile I had seen earlier in my office appeared on her face. “She’s such a pretty young woman, don’t you think?”

What did she expect me to do, wave a magic wand and spirit my intern to her car? Or go out, find and wrestle with the rapist? “That, Mrs. Barnes, is an inappropriate conversation for the office. She’s my intern.”

“Well, then we’ll talk about it at Sunday dinner.”

I ground my teeth and swallowed my retort before I said something I would regret. I knew she was worried about me, but I had to draw the line somewhere. With a level voice, I said, “There is nothing to talk about.”

She chuckled in that slightly condescending way parents did when they teased their children. “I’m making your favorite,” she said with a genuine smile. “Lasagna. Don’t be late.”

I didn’t mind the teasing or her bossiness. I figured it was her way of showing me love. Or was she getting back at me for barking orders at her all day? “Yes, Aunt Mable.”

—les—

I knocked on the other adjoining door and let myself in. “Ms. Bloom, it’s 6 p.m., you can clock out now.” It was already dark out, but it was probably much safer on the streets at this hour rather than later.

Without turning to look at me, her fingers typing away at the keyboard, she said, “I’ll keep working for a couple more hours.”

Words I would normally love to hear from my interns, but for the first time, I felt uneasy. Had the rumors about me reached her yet? Did she believe them? I didn’t want her working herself into a burnout because of me. “You

don't have to do overtime. I'm quite satisfied with your productivity."

The *tap-tap tapping* continued. "Oh, it's not that. Traffic is awful at this hour, and I have nothing else to do."

Why was I standing here like an idiot trying to convince her to leave when she wouldn't even look at me? And why could I not keep my eyes off her?

Pausing, with her fingers hovering over the keyboard, she finally gave me a dazzling smile. "Besides, I only have two years of back-testing left to finish. I've already spotted patterns in the past eighteen, and I won't be able to sleep tonight without knowing if the remaining two have the same results."

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and I found myself with a stupid grin on my face. "I know exactly how you feel." Her work ethic was sexy as hell. Nothing I said would make her stop, I was sure of it. I mentally gave myself a pat on the shoulder for finding an intern with drive, the same kind of drive I had. "Carry on then," I said as I returned to my pile of work.



A couple of hours later, I heard Laura—I mean Ms. Bloom—moving about in her office. Was she getting ready to leave? I looked out the window at the expanse of the busy city below. A one-mile walk to her car. Didn't she know how dangerous it was out there? And which guard was Jim? Better not be the old guy.

I was up and making my way to the hallway before my brain caught up with what I was doing.

What was I doing? She stepped out of her office bundled up in her winter coat, scarf, and hat, her brow furrowing beneath the knitted pink wool as she spotted me standing with my arms crossed. "Oh, Mr. Cox. Are you leaving too?"

"Yes." I should say something else. Elaborate. Explain I was escorting her to her car like an overprotective idiot. Instead, I led the way and hoped she followed.

We rode the elevator down to the lobby in silence, standing side by side but not too close, awkwardly staring straight ahead at the metal doors. Well, at least I felt awkward, not sure how she felt. Was this weird? I usually rode the elevator alone, because no one dared join me. Should I say something?

Make small talk? “Did you see that police helicopter circling our block earlier?”

“Heli...?” She gave me a quizzical look. “No, I don’t have windows in my office.”

Shit, I forgot. “Probably looking for the escaped convict.”

She nodded and fidgeted with her scarf.

What else did people say during small talk? I rubbed the back of my neck. Why was this so awkward? We’d spent hours talking comfortably about finance, economics, and global events, so why was this any different? Maybe I should mention the Fed report I read an hour ago.

I opened my mouth to complain about the monetary policy but snapped it shut before uttering a word. I didn’t want her to think I was only capable of shop talk. So instead, I said, “Weather’s getting colder.”

“It is.”

She turned to look up at me, and I suddenly wanted some hot chocolate.

“I guess you have a parking spot in the building.”

“I do.”

“And you probably have one where you live too.”

“Of course.” Was her small talk as bad as mine?

“That’s why you don’t need a coat when you go out.”

Oops. I hadn’t thought of that. How cold was it outside? A two-mile round-trip walk. I mentally shrugged it off. It didn’t matter. I could handle it. She was worth it.

The elevator stopped on the twenty-eighth floor. To my surprise, three employees shuffled in without looking up. Laura sidled closer to me as the space became cramped. Normally, I wouldn’t move out of the way for anyone, but having her this close to me wasn’t good for a certain part of my anatomy in public. I moved to the side to give her more room.

When the doors slid closed, one of the employees looked up, saw me, and gasped, which alerted the other two, who—eyes widening once they settled on me—scurried to the furthest corner from me and huddled together.

Cowards. I wasn’t that scary. I stared at the door with my hands clasped behind my back, ignoring the employees, but taking a quick glance sideways at my intern. The expression on her face, at least the part visible between the scarf and hat, was a cross between amusement and confusion. Maybe the rumors about me hadn’t reached her yet.

From the reflection on the metal doors, I saw the three employees

watching my intern with their mouths agape. One twitched her head as if she was motioning Ms. Bloom to move away from me and join them in the corner.

She snort-laughed.

I knew that laugh now. I was learning all her laughs and quirks. The giggle was the enthusiasm she couldn't contain. The boisterous laugh was reserved for jokes she found hilarious. And this one, the snort, came out when she was amused by a silly situation or someone's ridiculous behavior.

That meant she thought it was absurd to suggest that she should step away from me like I was some sort of rabid wolf about to pounce on her.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Finally. The lobby.

The three employees scrambled out ahead of us, almost tripping over each other. As I followed Laura out of the elevator, I tensed. I needed to keep a safe distance from her to avoid arousing suspicion.

Laura. I had never thought much of the name before, but now...I thought it was the most beautiful name. Referring to her as Laura in my thoughts was fine. There was nothing wrong with that. As long as I kept things professional when we spoke. Just like with Aunt Mable.

"Aren't you on the wrong floor?" she asked as I walked alongside her.

What a weird question. "No." Had she not caught on yet that I was walking her to her car? I guess I hadn't mentioned it yet.

"But you said your car was in the building's underground parking lot."

Good point. Should I drive her instead? Which was less weird? Which would create fewer rumors? Better to walk her. Walking out of the building at the same time was a coincidence. Her being in my car with me was a scandal.

"I'm in the mood for a walk."

"Without a jacket?"

I shrugged, pretending this was a normal occurrence. "Don't need it. I don't get cold easily."

The old guard, who'd been at the company longer than I had, shuffled around the counter toward us. "Good evenin', miss. Would you be needin' an escort out?"

Laura tucked her scarf into her coat and gave him a big warm smile that would have made me jealous if the guard hadn't been nearly a hundred. "Hi, Jim. Yes, please."

Jim? This was her security escort every night? The guy couldn't even protect himself from a gust of wind. How was he supposed to keep her safe?

“I’ll escort her,” I said, standing my ground, blocking his path to Laura. Jim’s mouth gaped open. “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I will walk Ms. Bloom to her car. You may return to your other duties.” I waved my hand dismissively and continued walking toward the outer doors.

The old man shuffled back to the desk. “Yes, of course, Mr. Cox.”

Laura trotted to catch up to me. “This really isn’t necessary, Mr. Cox. It’s not that late. Besides, your time is too valuable. And you don’t even have a coat.”

“This is not up for debate.” I pushed one of the doors and held it open, gesturing for her to pass in front of me. She scanned the lobby as if looking for someone to help her talk me out of it, but finally she took a step and walked outside.

Surprised that she obeyed me, I had to fight the urge to place my hand on her lower back.

FOURTEEN



Steven

Fuck, it's cold. With my hands shoved into my pant pockets, we walked along the sidewalk. I wanted to inch closer to Laura for her warmth, but I stopped myself. "I'll get you a parking spot in the building."

"You can't."

"I'm the CFO. I can do whatever I want."

Her gloved hand gently touched my arm. "I meant I don't want you to. I can't afford the spot."

Like I would actually charge her. "Call it a perk of the job."

She shook her head, black curls bouncing off her pink cheeks, making my heart rate hitch up a notch and thankfully warming my frozen body.

"No, thank you. I'll take the same benefits as all the other interns. I don't want special treatment just because I'm the CFO's intern."

Stubborn woman. But she had principles. I liked that. I'd better remember to bring a jacket to work from now on.

We continued along the bustling sidewalk as people swarmed around us, many with shopping bags. Half of the stores had Christmas decorations already. Too early for that if you asked me, but at least it provided extra lighting on the streets. Red and green light beams shone on the fronts of the buildings. Giant candy canes nearly ten feet tall bordered the entryways of many of the stores. Miles of wreaths adorned with gold baubles and twinkling

lights decorated the exterior walls. One building had a giant red ribbon tied in a bow, which hung down all of its five floors. And then there were the life-sized Santas and snowmen on practically every street corner.

This was all one giant manipulation. A ploy by corporations to get people to spend more money in the fourth quarter in order to finish the year in the black.

Laura turned her head and looked me over as I shivered. “I’m really ok. You should go back.”

“Nope. I’m fine.” My teeth nearly chattering on the words. Maybe if I looked at her, my body would warm up.

She tightened her scarf around her neck. The fabric was frayed, and it looked ratty. Her coat had seen too many seasons. The color was faded, and a rip was being held together with duct tape.

I remembered those days. Every piece of clothing was a luxury I couldn’t afford to throw out, couldn’t afford to replace. I had perfected the skill of sewing so masterfully it could have been my fallback career.

I guessed she didn’t have time for sewing with all the jobs she had worked before. Should I offer to fix her coat? Or buy her a new one?

I shook my head. What the hell was I thinking? Five days with her and I already wanted to take care of her.

Take care of her?

Where had that come from? I didn’t have space in my life for a relationship. Even if I did, my intern was the last person I should be thinking about. Besides, she would never want me. The only thing women liked about me was the size of my portfolio. It sure as hell wasn’t my cheerful personality.

I had to stop this nonsense. “How much further?”

“A few more blocks,” she said as we turned onto a quiet street.

I stopped short. “Well, I’m sure you’ll be fine from here.”

“Oh.” She stopped and turned to face me. I kept my gaze focused above her head, not wanting to melt into her soft brown eyes.

She pointed down the street. “But we’re closer to my car than the office. Let me give you a ride back to the office.”

My toes felt like ice cubes. My fingers were like popsicles. I wanted the warmth of a car. The warmth of sitting next to her. But what if an employee saw her dropping me off? Saw us together in *her* car. “Have a good night, Ms. Bloom.” I forced myself to walk away, and turning the corner, I rejoined

the holiday shopping crowd.

Half a block later, I froze in my tracks as I realized that the street she had turned on was very dark and quiet, and now she was alone without even an old guard to help her. I sprinted back up the street and peered around the side of the building on the corner. Laura was hurrying along the sidewalk, her head quickly scanning left, then right.

Was she nervous? I was such an asshole. I kept an eye on her from the corner as I vigorously rubbed my hands up and down my arms to warm them up. Come on...get to your car so I can run back to the office. Why did you pick a lot so damn far away?

I scanned the street she was on. No shops. No holiday lights. A bunch of old warehouses that looked mostly empty. No pedestrians either, except for a man in a parka with the hood up, walking in the same direction as her, but across the street. His head turned as if he was watching her.

Laura kept scanning the street, looking left and right again and over each shoulder. She did a double-take when she spotted the man in the parka and quickened her pace. But he quickened his too.

They were the only two people on the street. No reason for him to go faster. He looked around as if checking to see if anyone was nearby, then started to cross the street to Laura's side. I rounded the corner and sprinted toward them, my heart pounding in my chest as adrenaline shot through my body.

Laura looked back over her right shoulder toward the other side of the street, probably to see if the guy was still there. She craned her neck to look directly behind her and nearly stumbled when she saw him and sped up to a jog. So did the asshole.

I barreled up the street, my legs pumping. I was gaining on him. Luckily, parka guy didn't look back. Predators never did.

He took something out of his pocket and started to run toward Laura. She must have heard his steps, because without looking back, she screamed, the sound pushing me to run faster than I ever thought was possible.

Laura sped up too, but then she stumbled.

The asshole was faster than her.

But I was faster than him.

Don't fucking lay a finger on her, you bastard.

Almost close enough. Just a little further. Faster, Steven.

Laura threw her purse on the ground and whipped around, holding a can

in her hand. What the fuck did she think she was doing?
Parka guy was almost on Laura.

FIFTEEN



Steven

I had to act now.

I lunged, tackling him and sending us both crashing onto the cold concrete sidewalk. Whatever he had taken out of his pocket flew out of his hand and landed with a metallic clang at Laura's feet.

He yelled and brought his elbow back to deal me a blow, even as he buckled under me. But before his elbow could connect with my ribs, my MMA training kicked in. I grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back and knelt on his wrist, putting all my weight on it to keep him pinned down. The moves were automatic, as I had been doing them for years, except this time, I used ten times more force.

He screamed in pain. "Get the fuck off me!"

Laura froze on the spot, her eyes wide, her hand still holding up the can as if she was ready to use it.

A few feet away, a steel expandable baton rolled back and forth on the sidewalk. I smacked the guy behind the head with my free hand. "What the fuck were you going to do with that, you piece of shit?"

"Nothing," he whimpered.

Images of what he had planned for Laura with that weapon flooded my mind. I wanted to beat him until he begged for his mommy and then beat him some more.

He struggled and squirmed. “You’re hurting me,” he cried.

Good. “You deserve far worse. Quit whining like a little bitch.”

Laura was still standing on the spot like a statue, staring at the guy on the ground.

Was she in shock? “Ms. Bloom, are you ok?”

Her mouth hung open, but no words came out.

I was torn between keeping this asshole pinned to the ground until the cops showed up to arrest him or letting him go so I could take Laura in my arms and comfort her. “Laura?” I said gently. “Look at me.”

The brain fog seemed to lift a bit as she shifted her gaze to me. “What? Yes. I’m...I’m ok.” Her voice wavered, and even with the bulky winter gear, I could tell she was trembling.

Anger rolled through me. This guy deserved a punishment far worse than whatever the cops would do to him. I wasn’t even sure he would get arrested. He hadn’t actually committed a crime yet, and I didn’t know if batons were considered illegal weapons.

I wanted to kill this bastard for scaring her this badly. Or at least beat the shit out of him. My friend Hawk would help me get him out of here quietly. He had experience with this sort of thing, and he knew how to never get caught. I, on the other hand, had no clue. I had always followed the law to the letter. And the only fighting I ever did was in the cage at Titan’s Club.

Well, tonight I was out of the cage. I unleashed my anger and punched him in the kidney, hoping I put enough force into it to cause the little shit excruciating pain, but also hoping I’d pulled my punch enough to not leave a bruise in case the fucker decided to sue me later. Even if he did, I had my own methods of protecting myself. I wouldn’t need Hawk’s goons for that.

Jerkface’s hollers pierced through the icy darkness in a super-satisfying way that made me want to hit him again, but what if someone was watching from a building. They looked empty, but I couldn’t be sure.

With my free hand, I took out my phone, then hesitated. I really wanted to call Hawk and render my own brand of justice in one of his secret, abandoned warehouses where the law couldn’t touch us. But there was too much of a risk that someone had already seen us.

With a sigh, I called 911.

The jerk under me struggled and yelled “I didn’t do anything. Let me go. Help!” the entire time I was talking to the 911 operator. I should have gagged him.

After that call, I continued to ignore the prick and called one of my lawyers. The best in the city. I needed two things from him.

Laura listened to my conversation with wide eyes as she looked from me to the guy under me.

“Whatever you do, Robert, make sure this guy gets the full punishment. And block any lawsuits he tries to send my way for excessive force. Make them believe I only used the minimum force necessary to stop the attack. Oh, and keep my affiliation to Titan’s Club under wraps. I’ll call you back once I know which precinct the cops are taking him to.”

After the call, Laura took a tentative step forward, wobbling slightly. “How did you...? Where did you come from?”

“That’s not important right now. I think you might be in shock. Sit down.”

She shook her head, and as she did so, the fog finally cleared from her face. She looked at the jerk lying under me and then at the can in her hand. Taking another cautious step forward, she tapped the jerk’s elbow with her boot. “You. Guy on the ground. Why?” She was barely audible, and her voice trembled.

“Lady, help me. Get this guy off me. I didn’t do anything.”

“You were coming after me. Why?” Her voice found its strength again, but I still detected the fear in it. “What were you going to do if you caught me?”

“Nothing, I swear. I was just going for a jog. Help me, please.”

Fucking liar.

Two cop cars arrived. The officers handcuffed the prick and threw him into the back of a cruiser. But I still couldn’t get to Laura. A female officer was taking her statement while three male ones interrogated me nervously. The jerk they arrested kept whining that I had beaten him, and the cops seemed to believe him.

They sized me up and acted as if I was the threat, their hands hovering over their sidearms. If it hadn’t been for my \$6000 designer suit, they would have taken one look at the size of me and probably slapped the cuffs on. Not that I thought they knew the difference between luxury mohair and cheap synthetic crap, but they seemed to at least have enough sense to recognize my clothes came with a big price tag. So, if it wasn’t for the finesse of my wardrobe, they would have probably treated me like a thug. Or maybe it was because I had Jerkface pinned to the ground while he screamed like a girl

when the cops pulled up. Then again, it could have been the scowl on my face that deepened with every second they kept me away from Laura.

I glanced over their heads to see further up the street where my intern stood tall and proud. Her expression, while speaking to the female officer, was solemn yet determined. I couldn't hear exactly what she was saying, but I could tell the words were coming out steadily and without hesitation. To an onlooker, she seemed her usual confident self.

How had she shaken off the shock so quickly? I wondered how many difficult situations she had had to navigate alone after her mother died. I guessed she was used to dealing with all sorts of hardship on her own.

Right now, she appeared completely at ease and back to normal, and for some reason, that made some of the tension in my shoulders melt away.

The shorter of the three cops poked me in the chest. "I'm talking to you, buddy."

I sighed internally. "Yes." Why hadn't they left? They had their criminal.

"So, you admit it?" Shortie said.

I looked down at him and resisted the urge to sneer. "I admit nothing. Don't twist my words. What's the question?"

"So, you weren't listening to us, then?" He threw up his arms in frustration.

"Obviously not." This was the most annoying conversation I'd ever had.

"As I was asking..."

A movement caught my attention, and my eyes homed in on Laura again. She was slowly caressing her arm as if she was comforting herself. The motion itself had been so slight, I barely noticed it.

I handed Shortie my lawyer's business card. "We're done." Not waiting for an answer, I shoved past them, making my way to Laura.

SIXTEEN



Steven

But why was I so desperate to get to Laura? She wasn't in trouble. And she didn't need a shoulder to cry on. Not her style. And even if deep down she wanted to let someone comfort her, consciously, she wouldn't accept it. At least not from her boss. Not from me.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. Not because they were cold, even though they were frozen stubs now, but to stop myself from wrapping my arms around her like a comforting blanket. Instead, I stood as close to her as I could, while maintaining a certain distance. As much as I yearned to be near her, the last thing she probably wanted, after nearly being attacked, was a man invading her space.

"Officer, do you have what you need? It's late, and Ms. Bloom needs to go home and rest."

The cop nodded and put the notebook in her pocket. "Pretty much. We'll contact you if we need anything more. But it should be fine. This guy's been busted for mugging before."

Laura looked around, scanning the sidewalk. "Oh. My purse." She sprinted the few steps to where she had dropped it earlier and picked it up, putting the can in her bag.

"Lucky you were here," the cop said, looking at me. "His victims usually end up with quite a few bruises from that baton he likes to use."

My hands balled into fists inside my pockets. I should have taken the opportunity to throw in a few more punches when I had the chance.

Laura walked over to us, clutching her purse. “So, he wasn’t the escaped convict?”

“The rapist? Nah. They caught him an hour ago. Idiot hid at his grandma’s house, and she ratted him out. Good for her, I say. Wish I had been on that call, though.” The officer shook her head wistfully. “You should check YouTube later. The video of the officers arriving at her house went viral. His grandma was beating him with a broom, and he practically begged to be taken away.”

After the cops left, Laura and I resumed our walk to her parking space. It was awkward. The sidewalk was narrow, and I didn’t know how close to her I should be. Too close and she might be uncomfortable. Too close and I might scoop her up in my arms. To comfort her. And for warmth. Or maybe it was I who needed comforting to quell this annoying rage in my gut. She almost got hurt because I was a dumbfuck who forced her to walk the rest of the way alone.

I moved a bit further from her, my foot nearly sliding off the sidewalk. Any further and I’d be on the street. That would be overkill. If I did that, she’d probably be pissed that I was treating her like she was fragile. I had a feeling Laura never did the whole *victim mentally* thing.

She was a fighter. I could tell by the way she’d handled that prick Nathan at work. And the way she’d refused my help afterward. But I had sensed it even before then when I first saw the ambitious determination in her eyes. She would never let anything or anyone keep her down. Especially not her own fears.

I saw so much of myself in her: her strength, her drive. Except her personality shone like sparkly sunshine, while mine was a black hole surrounded by barbed wire.

Could that be the reason I was acting so out of character? Shit, this was beyond out of character. All week I’d been smiling and grinning. What was next? Laughing? I didn’t even think I remembered how. And what the hell was wrong with my dick? It kept saluting her every time she walked into my office.

My thoughts made me forget why I was keeping my distance, and I soon found myself nearly touching shoulders with her.

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and put her hand on my arm. “Oh my

god, I totally forgot.” Her eyes were full of worry. “Are you hurt?”

I wanted to say, ‘No, of course not,’ but the words wouldn’t come out. The sweet pressure of her gloved hand on my arm was temporarily scrambling my brain. Not to mention the way she was looking at me. No one had ever looked at me like that before. Her eyes held genuine compassion and affection.

I wasn’t delusional enough to read too much into it, to think she felt anything more for me than the polite concern of an intern for her boss. Or the type of concern someone would have for their rescuer.

When people looked at me, their eyes always showed either fear or greed. Not tenderness.

The kindness in Laura’s gaze made me forget where we were and why we were here.

Until I saw her give herself another subtle soothing squeeze.

How was she capable of showing me so much concern when she was still shaken up? “I’m fine,” I said as I motioned for her to keep walking.

She looked down and pointed at the tear in my pants. “But you’re hurt. I’ll take you to the hospital.”

The absurdity of her wanting to take me to the emergency room for a scraped knee was almost laughable. If I ever laughed. “It’s nothing. Let’s get you home.” I held my hand out. “I’ll drive.”

Gripping her purse more tightly under her arm, she marched on. “Nope. I’ll drive you back to the office, then I’ll go home.”

The stubborn woman hadn’t learned yet that no one ever dared disobey me. “Ms. Bloom, this is not up for discussion.”

When we reached her car, I stood at the driver’s door. “If you don’t give me the keys, I will get a cab and follow you to ensure you get home safely.” Did that sound stalker-ish? It probably did, but I didn’t care. I had a responsibility to keep her safe. As her boss, of course.

With a heavy sigh that made her shoulders slump, she said, “Fine. I’m too tired to come up with a counterargument.”

The weariness in her voice almost made me give in. I never gave in. Besides, no way was I letting her go home alone after what had just happened.

As we drove through the traffic, I cranked up the heat, and the feeling in my fingers slowly returned.

She pointed to the right and said with a yawn, “Turn here.”

“Put the address in my phone’s GPS, then you can close your eyes and get some rest.”

“No need. At the next light, turn left.”

I clenched my jaw at her defiance, followed her directions, and muttered *stubborn* under my breath.

Her head snapped sideways at that, and I could almost feel her glaring at me. “I appreciate your concern, Mr. Cox, but I don’t need help from anyone.”

I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Don’t need help? That guy would have beaten you if I hadn’t stopped him.” Oh smooth, Steven, remind her of the one thing she’s probably trying to forget. Why was I such an ass?

“No, because I was ready. He wasn’t going to lay a hand on me,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone as she shook her head.

“Ready? With what? A can of hairspray?” Shut up, you idiot. Don’t let your anger control you. She’s not the one you’re mad at. You’re mad at that jerkface and all the other pricks in this town who could hurt her. “What were you going to do, style his hair for him?” Dammit, I wanted to kick myself.

She hugged herself. “It’s not hairspray.”

My gut twisted in a way it hadn’t in years. Was this guilt? For giving her shit when she’d done nothing wrong? As if in answer to my question, the knots in my gut twisted even more. With a deep breath, I pushed all the anger that gave me the Hellhound nickname down into the darkness. With a gentler tone, I said, “Whatever it is, you can’t take down a man twice your size and strength with an aerosol can.”

She raised her chin proudly. “It’s pepper spray.”

Pepper spray? Well, that was useless nine times out of ten. She should have run instead. So many things might have gone wrong. He could have hit her before she had a chance to press the nozzle. And even if she had sprayed him, she could have missed his eyes and he would have been able to...

I gripped the wheel tighter, this time to avoid reaching over to take her hand in mine. “It’s always safer to keep running.”

“Not when the guy is faster than me. He would have jumped me from behind, and my chances of fighting him off would have been worse than facing him head-on.”

That made sense. Was that really what had gone through her mind at that moment? Had she been able to make a rational decision at a time when most people would have panicked? “Pepper spray isn’t the best self-defense weapon. You could have easily sprayed yourself in the confusion of the

fight.”

“It’s the best option for me. You don’t need to worry about me. As I said, I would have been fine. I don’t need anyone fighting my battles for me.”

What the hell was she saying? A fight with an armed mugger wasn’t like a dispute with a co-worker. “I’m getting you a parking spot in the building.”

She sighed heavily. “No, you’re not. We’ve been through this before.”

An hour later, I was in a limo on my way back to the office with what was probably a very confused look on my face. I didn’t know how it had happened, but somehow our long-winded argument about her parking spot had ended with her winning the debate and me conceding. No one ever beat me in negotiations. Since when did I give in? What the fuck was happening to me? I’d better remember to start bringing my jacket to work because there was no way in hell I was putting her safety into that old guard’s hands.

SEVENTEEN



Steven

Hawk's fist came in fast and slammed into my ribs, the blow barely softened by the padding of his gloves. It was the day after, and we were facing off against each other in the cage at Titan's Club. Sharp pain seared into my side, making my lungs seize and distracting me from the incessant loop playing in my mind about Laura and the prick who had attacked her. Almost attacked her. What if I hadn't been there? My tortured thoughts about what might have happened to her hurt more than any punch my opponent threw at me.

I sucked in a big breath. But I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me wince. That was the third jab I hadn't seen coming. Probably because I was too fucking distracted. Was Laura ok? Safe? What if she locked herself in her apartment, too scared to go out again? She could put on a brave face and repeat a million times how she wanted to fight her own battles, but she hadn't fooled me. Deep down, she was shaken, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Hawk let out a quick whistle, tearing me away from my thoughts. I looked at my buddy, if you could call him that.

I didn't have space in my life for friendships outside of the office. With John, it was easy because we worked together. I didn't need to make time for him because his office was down the hall from mine, and he was always barging in, making sure we spent some down time together. Would we still

be friends if we didn't work side by side?

Shit, yeah. I loved the guy, even if I always acted like a crabby prick around him. What about Hawk? Was he a real friend? Did taking your shirt off every weekend, and fighting each other in a cage at a prestigious club reserved for the richest and most powerful men in New York count as friendship?

No, but that wasn't why I considered him a friend. I'd known him as long as I'd known John. During our college years, the three of us partied together, studied together, and fought together. Our competitive drive forced us to push ourselves in our studies, each trying to outrank the other.

After all these years, I trusted him more than anyone, except John. And I knew he would be there for me if I needed help. But I never asked because I didn't like his methods. I always thought him slightly beneath me because of the illegal shit he did, but last night I was willing to stoop to his level. For the first time, I could justify why he did the things he did, because I was ready to do them myself. Maybe I had misjudged him. Maybe he had his reasons.

We circled each other in the cage. His brown hair was slicked back with perspiration. How long had we been at this? I wiped my brow with my wrist and blinked the sweat from my eyes. Sixteen rounds? Or was it eighteen?

I stared into his eyes. We were the same height, and we each had a fighter's body. We were also both heavyweights, but I was bigger, bulkier. Like John always said, I was bigger than everyone.

Hawk's expression was as blank as mine, not giving anything away.

Peering into his hooded gray eyes, I tried to read his tells to anticipate his next move. He shuffled his feet. Two swift moves back. One forward. Again and again. Circling me in the Octogan.

What was he waiting for? I was so fucking distracted that he could have tackled me to the ground ten times over and ended the round with a chokehold.

He gestured with his chin as if asking what was wrong. Hawk was never big with words. Hell, neither was I, except to give orders at work. But he took the strong, silent type to a whole new level.

John paced outside the cage. "Right hook, Steven," he yelled.

I ignored him. Sprinting forward, I aimed for the tattoo on my opponent's chest.

He sidestepped me without bothering to block my punch. Moving too fast to follow, I nicked the edge of his bicep, but most of my fist cut through a

whole lot of air, the momentum lurching me forward. I hit the side of the cage, the steel stinging my skin. I bounced back and regained my footing.

“Good one, Hawk,” John yelled as he whooped.

My opponent circled me like a predator. His feet were so light on the mat as he pivoted and displayed his quick footwork. He was toying with me. Or was the bastard going easy on me, giving me time to recover?

“I don’t fucking need your pity,” I said, lunging toward him. I grabbed him behind the neck and pulled, forcing him to bend at the waist. I brought my knee up, aiming for his chest. He wrapped his hands around my arm and twisted, but he couldn’t get out of my hold. He might be faster than me, but I was stronger. As my knee made contact with his body, I let go of his neck.

The satisfying impact shot a dose of adrenaline through my body, chasing away all thoughts. That was the reason I loved spending my weekends in the cage. It was the only time I could free my mind. It was like a meditation, except one that made you sweat buckets, build muscle mass, and left you covered in bruises.

Hawk lurched backward from the impact, his hands keeping their vice grip on my arm. My knee strike must have winded him, but he didn’t let that stop him. He pivoted and wrapped the crease of my elbow over his shoulder, and slammed his back into my chest.

I knew what would come next. The takedown. He would throw me onto the mat where he had the advantage, his Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu skills far outperforming my Judo skills. I was too bulky to master groundwork. At least against a pro like Hawk.

My size and strength were more suited to a striking fighting style. Muay Thai was my go-to technique. I loved the combination of attack, defense, and counter techniques. The same principles you had to master to be the best in the investment industry. I needed for us to stay on our feet. It was my only chance of beating him, even though he was one hell of a standing fighter too. But I was better. At least, I usually was, when I had a clear head. Not today. My mind was filled with a mix of worry for Laura and delicious thoughts about her body.

With my spare hand, I jabbed at his ribs, knowing full well it was useless. Pain didn’t stop him. It didn’t stop me either. That’s why we were the perfect fighting opponents.

He went into a semi-squat, and at the same time, yanked on my arm, forcing me to bend forward. Then he tucked his hip under me, and suddenly

my ass was flying through the air over his head.

I landed on the mat, the *thwack* echoing throughout the club.

John shook the chain-link fence surrounding the cage. “Steven, get up now! Hawk, pin him down quick!”

Whose fucking side was he on? He could never pick one. Always Mr. Diplomat.

Once I finished a few more rounds with Hawk, then a few with John, my mind was finally free. Completely blank.

After our showers, we relaxed in the infrared sauna, the heat melting away the aches in my muscles. Hawk talked about his hedge fund company, which he started almost twenty years ago, one of the few legit companies he owned. Sometimes I wondered if I had done the right thing climbing the corporate ladder instead of starting my own hedge fund. Hawk was doing as well as John and me, and he didn’t have to answer to anyone, unlike me and that fucking chair. Then John rambled on about the supermodels he’d dated this week. All three of them. Hawk and I rolled our eyes, but that didn’t stop him as he went into way too many details about one of the model’s tight pussy.

I didn’t want to hear it, so I tuned him out until a few minutes later when I heard my name.

“Damn, Steven,” John said. “I haven’t seen you fight that badly since forever.”

He wasn’t close enough for me to hit, and I didn’t have the energy to get up. “Shut up!”

“What the hell is up with you? Could it be a certain intern is distracting you?” John puckered his lips and made kissing noises.

Hawk threw a soaked facecloth at John, and it smacked him in the face. “Can it, Johnny, what are you? Twelve?”

“The fuck? I don’t want your sweat-drenched rag near my mouth.” John chucked the facecloth back at Hawk, who caught it with one quick swoop of his hand. “Eugh, that was disgusting. I think I have Ode-de-Hawk on my lips.”

Hawk leaned back and closed his eyes, smirking. “Serves you right. What kind of man insults a friend’s fighting skills? Did you forget that Steven knocked you on your ass eight times today?”

“Excuse you, bro, who’s the one insulting a friend’s skills now?” John said in a mocking tone. “Besides, Stephen always knocks me on my ass

because he's built like a Mack truck. I, on the other hand," John said as he puffed out his chest, "I'm more streamlined, like an elite athlete, strong and fast. I move with precision and power, but gracefully." John stood and prowled through the sauna, shaking his naked ass to prove his point. "You see, I'm like a panther. But I'm about to melt, guys. I'm hitting the showers again. Meet you losers in the lounge when you're done."

As John opened the door to leave, a rush of cool air flooded the sauna. I breathed in deeply, welcoming the cooler air into my lungs, which gave me a reprieve from the scorching heat.

"I've had enough sauna for today too," Hawk said, getting up and walking to the door. With his back to me and his hand on the handle, he said, "Everything ok with you, man?"

I stared at the back of his head, surprised he would even ask. He was usually as averse to talking about mushy annoying feelings as I was. "I'm fine. I'll be back in my usual prime fighting form by tomorrow."

Hawk nodded and started to open the door, but then stopped and closed it again. He turned to face me. "Look, you know I wasn't asking about your fighting form. And I know you don't want to talk about whatever shit you're going through right now, but just know I got your back, buddy. Anything you need. Anytime."

I averted my eyes. What the fuck was he doing? I wasn't the only one acting strange today. We never did this...this...whatever this was. Opening up? Expressing feelings? "You're weirding me out. What's up with you?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I'm not even sure myself. I met this gorgeous, smart, amazing woman recently, and she's turned my world upside down. And now I'm...feeling...things I've never felt before. It's making me question everything." He raised his hands in frustration. "Oh great, now I'm sounding like one of those emotionally intelligent, weak-ass men that talk about their emotions and consequences 'n shit." He turned and opened the door. "Whatever. Just don't keep everything bottled up. It's not good for you."

He left me alone in the sauna. Luckily my body and mind were still exhausted or else his words would have probably had me overthinking stuff about Laura.

After another shower, the guys and I wolfed down burgers in the club's lounge in silence, except for John's loud moans of delight after each bite.

When I got home, I crashed onto my bed and passed out as soon as I was

horizontal, but the exhaustion didn't keep my curvy intern out of my dreams.

EIGHTEEN



Laura

On weekends, I rarely knew what to do with myself. I wasn't used to having days off. Ever since I was fifteen, I hadn't had time for myself. As soon as I didn't have something to do, that mugger's footsteps chased me in my mind. Whenever I closed my eyes, that creep barreling toward me haunted my thoughts.

I decided free time was overrated. And dangerous. So, the entire weekend, I kept busy. I cleaned my minuscule apartment—that took all of ten minutes. Then I explored Central Park, but it wasn't the same as the forest back home. That was the only thing I missed about my past life. Any scrap of time I had to myself, I had spent out of town exploring the woods. It used to be my haven, and I hoped Central Park would be that for me here, but I didn't feel as safe, even though it was the middle of the day.

I was pissed at the mugger for making me feel this lingering fear, even in broad daylight. But I was more pissed at myself for letting the fear control me.

I would not let it. I would overcome this. So, I forced myself to roam the streets. Yes, I jumped each time someone bumped into me, but I trudged on for hours. I always was the jump-back-on-the-horse type of person. Finally, the fear gave way to nerves, and the nerves eventually melted away. At that point, I was able to enjoy the window displays of the shops I walked past.

Seeing all the holiday displays lifted my spirits, so I stopped at Dollar General for some Christmas knickknacks. How much should I spend? I checked my budget planner app and added \$20 to the miscellaneous column for the month. That would be plenty since I wouldn't bother decorating my place because I barely spent any waking hours there. An hour later, I walked out of the store with two huge bags of decorations, all reserved for my very first office.

Monday morning, I got into work even earlier than usual. Climbing onto my desk with a streamer in one hand and tape in the other, I hummed along to "Santa Baby" which was playing on the speakers in the hall. I rose onto my tiptoes and reached for the corner, wobbled, nearly fell, and let out a loud yelp. But I found my balance and tried again.

Back up onto my toes, I stretched up and reached...

Suddenly, the adjoining door crashed open, and my boss barreled into my office. Stunned by the noise, I lost my balance, dropped everything, and started to fall. "ARGHH!"

I landed in powerful arms, and my scream turned into an oomph. Pressed snugly against his wide chest, my heart went bonkers, and it wasn't because of the adrenaline rush from the fall.

My nose, inches away from his neck, sniffed like a dog homing in on a yummy treat. His woodsy smell was absolutely divine, a combination of rain, fresh air, and wildflowers. I closed my eyes and was transported back to my happy place in the forest back home. My safe place.

"What the hell were you doing?" His holler wrenched me out of my daydream.

My eyes shot open, and I glared at him. "Don't yell at me. I did nothing wrong."

I pushed at his massive chest and wiggled, trying to scramble out of his hold. But his strong arms caged me against him.

He closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. When he spoke again, his tone was softer, gentler. "Are you hurt?"

I matched his tone and tried not to think about the muscular arms encasing my body. "No. Please put me down."

"Oh." He lowered me slowly, with surprising control, given my weight.

Holy shit, that was sexy. He was as strong as the Hulk.

Once on my feet, I rushed behind my desk to put a barrier between us. "I'm sorry if I disturbed your work, Mr. Cox. It won't happen again."

He stared at me with eyes so intense, a deep forest with no end to their depths. “You have nothing to apologize for. I’m the one who should a-a-a... I’m the one who’s s-s-sor...” His jaw clenched, and the words wouldn’t come out.

Were the words so foreign to him? Most people in this industry masterfully spew out any bullshit in order to manipulate you. Fake apologies. Insincere compliments. Anything and everything to get what they wanted.

But not Steven. What you saw was what you got. No lies. No manipulations. No hidden agendas.

It was so refreshing.

“It’s fine.” I avoided eye contact and fidgeted with the streamer on my desk, trying to get my heart rate to slow down and my brain to stop obsessing over those muscular arms.

He retreated to his office but left the door open. I gave up on the decorations for now and started work. I’d continue later when he was away at a meeting or something, so I wouldn’t disturb him.

NINETEEN



Steven

I stewed in my office for an hour. The anger in her eyes when I had yelled at her haunted me. Why was I such a grumpy bastard?

And what the hell did she think she was doing? She could have face-planted on the floor. Broken her nose. Hurt her back. Sprained an ankle. How could she be so careless with her safety? Was she a magnet for danger?

After a few calming breaths, my anger subsided, replaced with the glorious memory of the feel of her body in my arms. I hadn't wanted to let go. Her sweet smell intoxicated me. I couldn't bear the thought of her hurting herself. If she wanted those decorations so badly, I would help her.

I knocked on the open door and stood in the doorway, unsure if she was still upset. She looked at me apprehensively.

"Ms. Bloom, I'll help you with your decorations."

Her eyebrows shot up. "What? No. It's fine. Why would you?"

I straightened my shoulders and strode in. "Because it seems as if you're prone to accidents, and I won't risk my intern injuring herself for the sake of tinsel."

She snorted.

Great. That meant she thought I was being totally ridiculous. It didn't matter. I would make a fool of myself if it meant helping her. Keeping her from injury. And getting a chance to spend more time with her. "I'm

serious.”

“Ok. If you insist. Help me onto my desk.” She held her hand out to me.

“Absolutely not!” I took her hand gently and led her away from the desk. The warmth of her skin caressed mine, and I didn’t want to let go.

But I had to.

“Hand me the streamer,” I said as I jumped up onto her desk. “I’ll tape it to the wall.”

She stared at me with her mouth hanging open. “You leaped onto it like it was merely a step. You didn’t even have to hold onto anything.”

Was I impressing her? I hadn’t meant to. But if I was...I puffed out my chest. “The streamer?”

She gave her head a quick shake. “Right.” She handed me the cheap red and green trimming.

This thing was so gaudy. Where had she gotten this?

“Run it along the wall as close to the ceiling and—no, not that way. I want it to droop down 4 inches in a wavelike pattern.”

I paused. Was she giving me orders? I felt my brow furrow as I looked down at her. I was not used to being on the receiving end of commands.

My ego wanted to resist. Establish my authority over her. But something deep within me suddenly wanted to give in to her wishes. Like a trained monkey, I followed every single one of her instructions until she was satisfied with the streamers.

I jumped off the desk, landing behind her in the small space. My breath hitched at being so close to her.

She didn’t seem to notice, fully engrossed by the streamers on the wall. “Thanks. They look great.”

I stepped back, putting distance between us, while she rummaged in a shopping bag and took out some knickknacks. She held a cheap-ass wreath up against the back wall and marked an X on the wall with a pencil. From her purse, she took out a mini hammer.

“Oh no, you don’t. I don’t want you smashing your finger with that thing.” I grabbed it from her. “Give me a nail.”

She rested her fists on her hips. “I’m perfectly capable of hammering a tiny nail in the wall without losing a finger. I’m not that much of a klutz.”

“In one week, you nearly crashed to the floor. Twice.” Three times, if you counted the time she nearly fell when the mugger chased her. “Nothing you say will convince me that you’re not accident prone.” I held my hand out.

“Give me the nail.”

With a huff, she finally said, “Fine.”

I installed her pathetic wreath, the plastic branches bent and broken. The color wasn't even right. It looked more neon rather than the lush green shades of a real evergreen.

Once all her decorations were up, she clapped her hands and admired my handiwork. “Thank you. It looks wonderful.”

No, it didn't. It looked like crap. But the joy radiating from her made me wonder what else I could do to give her pleasure. “You're welcome.”

I returned to my desk, still baffled that something so gaudy and cheap brought her so much happiness. Did she love Christmas that much? I called the florist. “I want two fresh wreaths, the best you have. And 6 poinsettias.”

Nothing wrong with a boss giving his intern *and* his assistant plants to decorate their offices for the holidays. Nothing suspicious about it as long as I gave them one wreath and three plants each. Equal split. No playing favorites.

TWENTY



Laura

A few days later, I was engrossed with the Excel sheet I was building when a knock on my door broke my concentration. The sound came from the main door leading to the hall.

Not many people visited me anymore after what had happened with Nathan. He had spread rumors about me, telling people I had made a pass at him, then seduced him into giving me the flash drive with all his hard work on it. Other rumors said that I had tried to claim credit for his hard work, then stabbed him in the back by ratting him out to Mr. Cox with a bunch of lies. Well, I did give the drive to my boss, but I sure as shit didn't try to claim anything. I didn't even know what was on that stupid drive.

So now I heard whispers when I walked through the halls.

“Rat.”

“Slut.”

Whatever. I didn't care. Ok, I did a little. But I was getting better at blocking it out. Besides, I was learning so much, and Mr. Cox knew the truth. That's all that mattered.

Knock. Knock.

So, who was visiting me? “Come in.”

My best friend walked into my office, and my jaw fell to the ground. “Kenny? What are you doing here?”

“LAURA!” He threw a bouquet of wildflowers—my favorites—on my desk, bounded around, and scooped me up in his arms in a bear hug. “You made it. You’re on Wall Street. Well, this building isn’t technically on Wall Street, but you’re in the industry! Same thing!”

I hugged my friend—my bestie since we were in diapers. My only friend, to be honest. I had friends growing up, but when Mom and I had to downgrade from a mansion to a one-bedroom basement apartment because daddy dearest had stolen everything we had and bailed on us, my so-called friends had ditched me.

The summer of my fourteenth birthday, my former friends attended equestrian camp while I worked three jobs to pay the rent, the electrical bill, and to buy food. Not to mention my mom’s medical bills. I was beneath them. Not one of them ever spoke to me again.

Except for Kenny. My constant bestie. My biggest fan.

Still hugging me, he said, “I’m so proud of you. I can’t believe you’re here.”

I hugged him back. I was happy to see him. It was comforting, like returning home, but his last comment pained me a little.

He might have been my biggest fan, always cheering me on and encouraging me to follow my dreams, but I didn’t think he ever believed I’d make it. He never came right out and said it, but I felt he didn’t think I had it in me to overcome all the hardship and pain and make it in this business. Mom was the only one who ever fully believed in me.

Mr. Cox appeared, hovering in the hallway. “Is everything ok in here, Ms. Bloom?”

Kenny put me down, whirled around, and stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m Kenny, Laura’s fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” Mr. Cox crossed his arms and looked at Kenny’s hand as if it was covered in zits.

I laughed and punched Kenny in the arm, hurting my knuckles on his muscles. “No. He isn’t. Kenny is my best friend. He’s like an annoying brother I can’t get rid of.”

Kenny pouted and looked at me with piercing blue eyes. “Too bad. I would have treated you like a queen. And you would never have wanted for anything.”

Was he still hurt that I had rejected him 6 years ago? “I would have made you a terrible wife.”

My boss was still in the hall, watching Kenny with a scowl.

Kenny didn't seem to notice. Or if he did, he ignored it. "Shit, woman. You and your principles." With a finger, he gently poked me in the arm. "You're the only woman in this world who turns down a drop-dead gorgeous billionaire." He leaned toward my boss as if they were best buds and he was letting him on a secret. "She said she wouldn't marry me because I'm rich."

I tsked and batted his finger away. "That's not what I said. I didn't want to marry you *just* because of your money."

Mr. Cox's intense forest-green eyes bore into me, scrutinizing me.

Kenny looked from me to my boss, then to me again. A sly grin formed on his face. "Right, I remember now. You argued you weren't a gold digger, and you wanted to make your own fortune."

"I'm sure Mr. Cox is busy and doesn't need to hear all this."

Kenny put one finger up. "Ah yes, the rejection is coming back to me now. You told me you didn't want to marry. At all. Not me or anyone else. That there was no room for men in your life. Your career was your life."

That's right. I didn't want any man. Not part of the plan.

But if I had wanted one, Kenny would have been perfect. Almost. He was sweet and gentle and caring and fun. And he really was drop-dead gorgeous. He had a swimmer's build, sandy-colored wavy hair, and eyes every woman dreamed of. But the important thing was that he wouldn't have ever abandoned me. As my father had.

I loved Kenny. But not in that way. He was a brother to me. Like a twin. We could be great roommates. We would always be friends. Forever. But never husband and wife. Besides, I couldn't be with someone who didn't fully believe in me. Kenny wanted to rescue me. I wanted to make it on my own.

"What do you think, sir?" Kenny asked my boss. "Sounds like a lonely life to me. What about you?"

Without taking his eyes off of me, his expression unreadable, he said, "It's her life. Her decision. None of my business." Then he turned and left.

Kenny crept up to me and whispered, "You always had a thing for older guys."

I smacked my hand over his mouth. "Shut up, Kenny."

"He's hot. I approve," he mumbled behind my palm, then licked it.

"Eww." I wiped my hand on my pants. It didn't matter if my boss was hot or if Kenny approved. It would never happen. I wouldn't risk my career, my

goals, my dreams for a man. “Why did you say all that to him?”

“Cause my spidey senses told me it needed to be said.” He grabbed my purse. “Come on, I’m taking you to lunch. I want to hear all about your new job.” He lowered his voice. “And your new man.”

Kenny wanted to have lunch at the Starbucks in the building’s lobby, but I didn’t want any of the employees to overhear our conversation because I knew he would want to talk about Mr. Cox. Instead, I dragged him five blocks away until we found a diner.

Over a plate of burgers and fries, Kenny bombarded me with questions about the job. I told him all about it, the good and the bad. It felt really great talking about it with my best friend. It had only been a couple of weeks since I last saw him, but so much had happened that it felt like months.

“And what’s going on between you and your boss? Your eyes light up whenever you mention his name. Did you sleep with him? How did this happen?”

“Nothing is going on. My eyes light up because...he’s a good boss. And mentor. And he challenges me to push myself in my work, and he recognizes my potential.”

“Bullshit. You’re totally lying. You forget I know your tells. Now tell me the truth. How long has it been going on?”

I sighed. He knew me too well, and I knew he wouldn’t let this go. “OK, I have an itty-bitty crush on him. That’s all. I mean, he’s been my role model for years, and he actually believes in me. It’s to be expected.”

“There is more to it than that. You’re totally into him. I’ve never seen you look at someone that way before.” He lowered his eyes and played with his food. “Gotta admit, I was a bit jealous.”

I threw a fry in his face. “Don’t be a moron. As you said, it’s only been two weeks, I can’t possibly be into him. I just have some overactive hormones right now. It’ll pass...I hope.”

He threw the fry back at me, and it bounced off my forehead. “I hope it doesn’t.”

“What? You can’t mean that? It would be disastrous.”

He shrugged. “There must be something special about him for him to have caught your eye, Laura. I’ve been trying to get you to look at me like that since we were teenagers. And I’ve seen you shatter the ego of every guy who has ever tried to get near you. But maybe this guy could make you happy. And he’s rich. He could give you the type of lifestyle you were

accustomed to. You wouldn't have to wait to make your own—”

“Stop it, Kenny.” I was fed up with having the same conversation with him. Why couldn't he get it? “How many times do I have to tell you that I won't be with someone for their money? I want to make my own. And protect it. Keep it as mine so no one can screw me over and take my power away, as my dad did to Mom.”

He reached over and took my hand in his, the familiar comfort soothing me. “That wouldn't happen because you're too smart and too fucking stubborn to let any man have that much control over you. Don't compare other men to your asshole of a father. What's wrong with a guy spoiling you if he's rich?

“Fine. Make your own fortune, but you could still be with someone who has wealth and wants to share it with you.”

I slipped my hand out of his. I didn't want familiar and comfortable. Those were dangerous words to me because that was when you let your guard down. “Are we talking about my boss? Or you?”

“I gave up years ago,” he said as he shook a fry at me. “I know you'll never love me the way I love you, and I've made my peace with that. But I do love you, Laura, and want the best for you. Why live in poverty when you could live in luxury and be comfortable while you're pursuing your dreams?”

“You're getting way ahead of yourself. What makes you think he even wants me? I've only worked for him for two weeks, and you're talking as if the guy wants to be with me or something.”

“I've seen the way he looks at you.”

I scoffed.

“If he asked you out, would you go?”

I shook my head vigorously. “Hell no. It's too risky. It would ruin both our careers. A boss and an intern? Don't be ridiculous, Kenny. My career will always be more important to me than any man.”

TWENTY-ONE



Steven

I had not been this happy in decades. These last couple of weeks were like a dream. But also fucking painful. Yep. Blue balls. It was an actual condition, no doubt about it.

Cold morning showers, lunchtime workouts, weekends in the cage with John and Hawk at Titan's Club. None of it helped. Jerking off three times a day didn't do a thing either.

My dick wanted Laura, and it wasn't the only one. I wanted her too. All of her. Not just her body.

I didn't know why, but being around her simply made me happy. I'd been grinning like an idiot for days. My face was so accustomed to me having a perm-a-frown my whole life that my cheeks were killing me with all the damn smiling.

They didn't call me Hellhound for nothing. I was always focused on the job. Work wasn't a place for fun or laughing. Well, at least that's what I used to tell myself. And everyone else.

This woman stormed into my life like a goddess of destruction. Beautiful. Magnificent.

Dangerous...to me.

I had told myself I wouldn't get close. I would keep it professional. And I had. On the outside.

But she was breaking down my walls, fences, gates, red lights, and stop signs. I didn't recognize myself anymore. Was this a phase?

God, I hoped not. Did she know the effect she had on me? Did she feel the same? She felt something. She must. But not as intense as I did.

We had the most incredible conversations. Her brilliant mind could keep up with mine. It was sexy as hell. The way her eyes lit up when we discussed the financial market trends. How she would squirm in her chair whenever I mentioned the globalization impact on the American economy.

Lips. Those luscious, kissable lips. She licked her lips at the mention of stock options. Sure, everyone in this place loved to talk business. But not like Laura. Not like me. It was almost foreplay to us. Speaking of which...

Laura hurried into my office with a phone in her hand. "Have you seen this?" Her voice squeaking with excitement. She waved her phone in front of me, a blur of light as the screen flashed in front of my face. "Look! Look!"

I chuckled. "Stop moving. I can't see."

"Oh, sorry." She held the phone steady. The screen showed a list of stocks and their prices.

"Methanex stock is up 16.5% today. I was right!" She jumped up and down, her breasts bouncing gloriously.

I averted my eyes before my body could react.

Too late. My dick started to swell. What was exciting each of us was at polar ends of the spectrum. She had that boisterous *joie de vivre*. My dick desperately needed to fuck. "I know. I checked it an hour ago. We've already made our clients a fortune on this one. Good call. You were right. The methanol commodities market had a boom this week, and the company Methanex profited the most in the industry."

God, she was brilliant. She was made for this business. She would become a rising star in this industry, even without my help.

My star. *Mon étoile*. I didn't remember much French from my schooldays, but that word had always stuck in my mind. I beamed up at her as we made eye contact.

We held that gaze for a few seconds longer than the one we had held yesterday. Warmth rushed through my body like a sip of hot cocoa during a blizzard.

Her cheeks turned pink, and her chest heaved as her breath hitched. "Now what about Caldoves? I'm telling you it's a bad idea." She took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the chair across from my desk.

“Everything in the data suggests it’s an excellent investment,” I said as I shifted in my chair, trying to discreetly adjust my pants around my straining erection.

“Not everything.”

“I checked the data myself.”

“The numbers check out, yes. But there is something you’re missing.”

I couldn’t suppress my smile. Gone were the days when John was the only one who could disagree with me. If someone else even tried, I’d swear, yell, tell them to get out, or fire them. You couldn’t blame me. There was no room for errors in this industry, and they were always wrong.

The staff quickly learned not to challenge me unless they had absolute certainty in their information. Eventually, that stupid Hellhound nickname came about, and now no one even said *hi* to me anymore.

But when she challenged me...I smiled.

Probably because she was usually right. I was so damn proud of her.

“Don’t be vague. Tell me about your analysis in detail.”

After a lengthy stimulating conversation about Caldoves, she got up. “Oh, and I finished that report you asked me to do for Mr. Reed. So, what can I do for you now?”

Lots of things.

Naughty things I shouldn’t be thinking about at the office. Delectable things I shouldn’t be thinking about a woman half my age. Raunchy things I shouldn’t be thinking about my intern.

I sighed. “That’ll be all for now, Ms. Bloom.”

TWENTY-TWO



Laura

Mr. Reed's stout form stormed into my office and flung a report at me. "What is this SHIT?" he bellowed. His quivering cheeks turning red.

What the hell was he talking about? And why was he yelling? "Mr. Reed, what—"

"You incompetent TWIT, you used the wrong figures for the projection —"

I sprang up from my chair and stood to my full height of 5-foot-2. I went up on my toes, meeting him eye to eye. Lucky for me, he was short for a man. "Mr. Reed, my work is flawless. And you will not speak to me in such a disrespectful manner."

Here was one of those sharks Andrew had warned me about. This jerk fell into the category of *Sabotage the Intern*. He desperately wanted to find fault in my work to make the CFO look bad.

When he couldn't find mistakes, he made them up.

"Watch your mouth, missy. You're just a cocky intern, and I'll have you out on your ass as soon—"

My boss charged into my office and anchored himself in front of Mr. Reed. His outstretched arm nudged me out of the way and behind the wall of his powerful frame. "MR. REED!"

Glaring at the back of my boss's head, I crossed my arms. I had already

told him I could fight my own battles. I always had, ever since I was 14 years old, when Dad abandoned us. It was the only way. I'd learned early on that I couldn't count on anyone but myself. I never even counted on Kenny even though he always tried to be my knight in shining armor.

But as quickly as that thought entered my mind, another took its place:
Awww, my protector!

Whoa! Where did that come from?

Since when did I gush over the bodyguard type? Was it because of our mentor-mentee relationship? Or a residual effect from him saving me from the mugger? Or maybe my traitorous raging hormones. Why was I getting so turned on whenever he was around? I had to stop lusting after my boss.

"I...ah...Mr. Hell...I mean, Mr. Cox. I...I didn't know you were in your office," Mr. Reed stammered. He shuffled backward. "I...was telling your intern about an error—"

"Show me!" demanded Mr. Cox.

I grabbed the report, handed it to him, and stood at his side. I would not hide behind him. I was confident about my work. My quadruple check system was bulletproof. I didn't graduate top of my class by being sloppy.

He scrutinized the documents. "There is nothing wrong with this, *Mister* Reed. If you found erroneous data, then it seems you are the cocky, incompetent twit." He threw the report in his face. "Do I need to find myself a new Director of Global Financing?"

The papers bounced off Mr. Reed's sweaty face and scattered to the floor as he clenched his hands into fists and bit his lip as if he were holding back his anger. He angled his head slightly, and his eyes bore into me with an accusation as if this was all my fault. He looked me up and down with contempt, and I had the feeling that he was already planning his retaliation.

He turned and bolted out the door.



"Hold still," Steven said.

"Ow!" I winced.

"Stop squirming."

"Don't do that."

"I'm doing this for *you*."

“But it hurts.”

“Should I blow on it?”

“Maybe.”

Mr. Cox puckered his lips and blew, his breath stinging my skin.

“Ow...ow...stop. It hurts.”

“Where is that spunky woman I know and lo...I mean...stop acting like a wuss.” He fumbled with the wrapper.

“No, not that one, it’s too big. It won’t fit.”

“I’ll make it fit.”

My boss sat beside me in my office. He slid the Band-Aid on my finger. “Fucking Reed. Had I known he’d draw blood, my fist would have gone through his nose.”

“It’s only a paper cut from when he flung the report at me.” I shrugged and took my hand back, even though I wanted him to keep holding it. “I didn’t even notice until after. It’s not that bad.”

He threw his arms up in resignation. “Seriously? You whine like a child and now you say it’s nothing?”

The corner of his lips twitched, and I was fighting to stifle my own smile. After a few seconds of silence, we both burst into laughter.

“Did you...did you see his face when I stormed in?” he asked as he laughed.

“I know.” I wiped the tears from my eyes. “He looked like he would crap his pants.”

We both bent over, and our roars of laughter filled the room. My abs were cramping up from the exertion. I clutched my ribs. “Hahaha...Ow...It hurts...Hee-hee.”

“Again...you...with the ‘it hurts’,” he said between bursts of chortling.

Another burst of laughter consumed us, like a couple of teenagers who’d smoked too much weed.

This ridiculous chortling was so uncharacteristic for him. Was it fatigue? Stress of the job?

Whatever the reason, I was thankful for the chance to bond with him in this way. We weren’t just co-workers. We were becoming friends. Laughing together. Sharing moments.

The more I discovered about this man, the more I grew to care for him. Sure, he was rough around the edges, but with me, he was all kindness. Mostly.

We worked well together. We made a great team. He challenged me to take on more responsibilities, to think beyond what I had been taught to think, coaching me on the ins and outs of the business. He wasn't just my boss, but my mentor, my teacher...my friend.

The man was a genius in his field, and I had learned more from him in the last couple of weeks than I had in the last few years at school.

I struggled to keep things strictly professional between us. I think he did too. But our eyes spoke a different truth. Discreet glances in each other's direction while working together on a financial forecast. Long dream-like gazes when we spoke about the economic impact of the upcoming merger.

And the twinkling of his jade eyes whenever he smiled at me.

That smile. That no one else got to see.

This was dangerous. I couldn't let a flirtation get in the way of my plan. I wouldn't let a man distract me from my goals.

TWENTY-THREE



Laura

A few days later, I was working late as usual. I glanced up at the clock. 8:30 p.m.

Stretching my arms up above my head, I let out a loud yawn. Late nights crunching numbers. I loved my life.

Christmas music played from the speakers in the hall. I hummed along to “Jingle Bells.”

I shuffled over to our door.

It was open. It was always open now. Unless he had meetings.

Steven was typing away, his back to me. He had taken off his blazer and vest. His muscles moved slightly under the snug fit of his shirt. The white material had a diagonal crease.

I imagined myself smoothing out the wrinkle. My hand gliding over his muscular back, over the crisp thin material, as his body heat penetrated the fabric, warming my palm.

Heat flooded my body at the thought.

I shook my head to chase it away. “Do you need anything else, boss?”

Without looking up, he said, “No, go home. It’s late.”

“What about you?”

His fingers typed away without pausing. “I still have another couple of hours to put in to finish this merger report for the board of directors.”

Back in my office, I shut down my computer, bundled up, grabbed my purse, and headed out into the hall.

Steven was already waiting for me, wearing a winter coat and gloves.

This was getting ridiculous. The CFO shouldn't be taking time out of his busy schedule to walk me to my car every night. Not that I was complaining. I enjoyed our walks together. Way too much. To the point that I was looking forward to them every night. But it had to stop. I couldn't let myself fall for my boss. "It's ok, you don't need to walk me—"

He held up his hand like a crosswalk monitor. "Enough. We've been through this before. Let's go."

I had thought the first time was a fluke. That he had really only wanted to take a walk.

The second time I thought it was because he was worried I would get attacked again. So, I thought, eventually, he'd let the guards take over. But every evening after work, he insisted on walking me to my car. All the way. I could never talk him out of it. He said either he walked me, or I let him give me a parking spot in the building.

Either he didn't trust Jim to protect me, or he wanted to spend more time with me.

No. Don't think like that. It's useless. Pointless. Men were not part of my plan.

We walked down the hall toward the elevator. Any straggling employees left on the floor stared in bewilderment. "What was happening to their CFO?" seemed to be the question on their faces. I would peek up at him in those moments to see his reaction. Either he was oblivious to their stares, or he simply didn't give a shit about what people thought.

Once we got off the elevator, we walked through the lobby. Employees working late were lined up at the Starbucks on the south side. Next to it was a lounge area with carved wooden benches that looked more like pieces of art rather than something to sit on. The giant TV screens lining the wall displayed the stock prices at closing time, while others displayed real-time data of the overseas market stocks.

A living wall lined the north side, providing lush greenery, bright flowers, and soothing sounds from the built-in waterfall. An oasis.

This was the best. Place. Ever.

I peeked at my boss: a commanding presence, oozing confidence and sex appeal, taking the time to walk me to my car.

Tonight, a young security guard I didn't recognize jumped out of his seat and ran toward us. "I'll escort you, miss. Are you taking the trains, or do you have a car nearby?"

Would tonight be different?

TWENTY-FOUR



Steven

Damn employees. They should be working, not staring at me with dumbass looks on their faces. So what if I was walking my intern to her car? It was late and dark. The streets were dangerous, and Andrew wouldn't replace the octogenarian security guard. No way was I going to leave Laura's safety in Jim's hands.

Should I scowl at those who dared to throw sideways glances at me?

Nah. Couldn't bring myself to look pissed off when I was around her. It was taking all my energy to keep a neutral expression when all I wanted to do was grin from ear to ear because I had the pleasure of walking her safely to her car.

I glanced at the security desk.

Who the hell was this kid running toward us? Where was Jim? This fucking newbie was going to ruin everything.

I put my hand up to stop him in his tracks. "No! I'll do it myself."

Jim shuffled toward the front desk from the Starbucks. "Sit down, you fool," he told the rookie. "Sorry, Mr. Cox. I'll set him straight."

I ignored them both and kept walking. Laura had awoken a protective instinct within me. One I didn't know I had.

Protective instinct? I had money, power, and position. Why didn't I use those to protect her?

No. I needed to see her safely to her car myself. What the hell was happening to me? Was I turning into a caveman?

Laura waved at the guards. "Goodnight, Jim and..."

Oh great, now I looked like a rude prick. I kept forgetting how nice she was to everyone.

"That's Ricky," Jim said. "Good night, Miss Bloom."

Ricky looked up at Jim and mouthed: *What the...?*

There was no way to save face now. I took a mental note to read a book on manners and strode toward the doors as "White Christmas" played in the hall.

It was way too early for Christmas music. Only November 30. They should make it a rule that holiday music should not start before December 15.

Laura caught up and fell in step with me as we walked out into the chilly night.

That Ricky kid looked like he could handle himself. I was glad they finally hired him. He didn't seem too bright, but he had a strong build. But he didn't have as much at stake when it came to losing Laura as I did.

I would do whatever it took to keep her safe. No one could protect her better than me. I wasn't that young anymore, but I was as strong as an ox. Only one guy ever got the best of me and broke my nose. Fucking Hawk. It never did heal straight.

A constant reminder to always keep pushing myself in everything I do.

Never let my guard down.

As we strolled along the sidewalk, she said, "Ohhh, it's snowing."

The snow drifted down lazily. Too early for snow. Damn weather. My employees better not use the snowfall as an excuse to be late tomorrow, whining that traffic was worse than usual.

I hated snow. It messed with my employees' punctuality. And their work efficiency, as if they all turned into giddy schoolkids every year at the first snowfall.

A fat snowflake landed on Laura's eyelash and slowly melted. She leaned her head back and stuck out her pink tongue, catching another snowflake that melted along with my heart.

She giggled.

I loved snow. Best thing ever in the world.

Continuing along the busy streets, now overflowing with too many Christmas decorations, the twinkling lights flooding the streets with white

and green and red, we chatted about the commercialization of Christmas and how it affected the fourth quarter in the market.

Every night, we fell into easy conversation as we walked through the city.

And every night, I inched closer to her.

Tonight, we were so close, our hands accidentally grazed while we were mid-stride.

Fucking gloves. Why did I wear them? I yearned to feel the warmth of her hand again. I remembered the brief moment in her office when I held her hand to guide her away from the desk as I helped her with the decorations. And the time my thumb grazed her hand when she handed me a book on her second day.

My fingers twitched inside the thick material. What would it feel like to be holding hands as we walked?

I peeked down at Laura.

Mon étoile.

She was a bright star in my abyss of anger and bitterness, guiding me out of the darkness of my misery.

I sighed.

Having something you craved so close to you but not being able to touch it made these walks bittersweet. It was Friday, so I would have to spend two painful days without seeing her. How could I spend more time with her?

Fuck it.

I grabbed her gloved hand and tugged on it. "This way." I turned a corner onto another bustling street filled with even more lights and decorations.

TWENTY-FIVE



Steven

She let out a yelp in surprise but followed without struggling. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” I said with a stupid grin plastered on my face.

I kept her hand in mine and realized how natural it felt. Even though I couldn’t feel her skin or her body heat, a warmth spread through my soul.

She made no effort to take her hand back as we walked a few more blocks and turned down another street, finally arriving at my intended destination.

She let go of my hand, clasped both hands over her mouth, and gasped. “Oh, my gawwwd. It’s stunning.”

It was as if some giant elf had puked up every shiny and glittery thing that existed in this world right into Rockefeller Center. Almost every surface had a twinkling light or sparkle or bauble on it. I didn’t care about the mega tree with a huge sparkly star on top of it. I didn’t care about the giant snowflake light show moving over the sides of the buildings.

I only cared about Laura. I gazed at her face. It was the only beautiful thing I wanted to look at. The awe in her eyes was more beautiful than any trinket.

We explored the area, and she took the lead. I followed her wherever she wanted to go. At one point, she handed me her phone and had me take a picture of her with the tree in the background.

Then, without thinking, I put my arm around her shoulder and took a selfie of us. She leaned in for the pic, and I stopped myself from smelling her hair.

I didn't have to force a smile for the camera. It was already plastered on my stupid face.

She scooted away from me, averting her eyes, her cheeks turning even pinker. Finally, she pointed to the skating rink. "Let's go watch."

We spent some time looking at the ice skaters and laughing at the ones who fell on their asses. Her phone dinged, and she took it out of her purse. Taking her gloves off, she tapped on the screen, replying to a text.

Who was texting her at this hour? "Someone checking up on you?"

She peeked at me from beneath her eyelashes while the corner of her lips tugged slightly. "It's Kenny, checking to see if I got home safely." She put the phone back in her pocket. "He needs to stop worrying about me so much. I hope he finds someone who'll make all his dreams come true."

I stamped down the jealousy I felt at the mention of his name. "What are his dreams?"

"Rescue the damsel in distress and lavish her with gifts, I think." She shrugged. "I'm not even sure he knows what he wants yet."

What was wrong with a man wanting to spoil the woman he loved? Not that I wanted her to be with Kenny. But what if I... "You never wanted to be rescued?"

"I don't do *helpless*."

And that was one of the things I fucking admired about her the most. She was brave and strong, ready to take on anything. That first night I walked her to her car was proof of that when she faced her attacker head-on. But there was a difference between being a helpless woman who needed a man to shelter her from the entire world versus being a strong, capable woman who allowed a man to protect her from danger.

I think she was learning that difference. As was I. "No one would ever accuse you of being helpless."

I didn't want this evening to end. I wanted to keep exploring the city. Take her out to supper.

I fantasized about throwing her on my bed, ripping her clothes off, and fucking her hard until I made her come at least three times.

Instead, I escorted her through the city streets back to her car, thankful my winter jacket was long enough to cover the raging hard-on in my pants.

“Well, good night, Ms. Bloom.”

She lingered in the parking lot, her chest heaving under her bulky coat, looking up at me with fuck-me eyes.

I had to be imagining it. No way was she feeling what I was feeling. My hormones must be scrambling my brain.

She tilted her head and slightly raised her chin.

Was she pouting her lips? My dick strained in my pants and my body wanted to pin her against the car and claim her lips. “Drive safe and have a good weekend.” I forced myself to take a step back.

This was all in my head. I wanted it so desperately that I was imagining I saw desire in her eyes too. I turned and retreated to the safety of the sidewalk as I waited for her to get in her car.

She stared at me, looking stunned. “It’s so late. Why don’t I drive you back to the office?”

No way was I getting into her car. I wouldn’t be able to control myself. I had never yearned for someone so strongly before. What the fuck was happening to me? “No. I’ll be fine.” I would need to spend the weekend at the gym to work off this pent-up...energy. “Go,” I said, almost growling like a pathetic caveman.

Fanning her cheeks, even though it was about zero degrees out, she looked at the ground as if she was searching for something. “Yeah, probably a good idea,” she said so softly I almost didn’t hear it.

Just your imagination, Steven. Stop thinking she’s as hot for you as you are for her. She got into her car and drove away. I watched until she was too far away for me to make out her car.

TWENTY-SIX



Steven

John was waiting for me in the hall, arms folded over his chest. “What. The. Hell. Steven?”

I walked past him as if he wasn’t there, refusing to let him ruin the fuzzy feelings from the last couple of hours with Laura, but he followed me into my office and closed the door.

“I’m busy, John. Get out.”

“Oh, *now* you’re busy, but you had time to walk that chick to—”

“Laura.”

“To walk the intern to—”

“Her name is Laura.”

“I don’t give a shit. Are you sleeping with her?”

“What? No! Don’t even fucking say something like that in here.” I glanced at the door and listened for anyone in the hall who might have overheard.

“I had Andrew hire a new kid to escort the women to the trains or their cars. You’re going to stop now. Right?”

I shuffled some papers on my desk, hoping he’d leave if I ignored him. I didn’t want him bringing me back to reality. I didn’t want to face the fact that what I was doing with Laura was dangerous to my career. And hers.

John collapsed into a chair, facing me. “Steven, talk to me, buddy. What’s

going on?”

“It’s nothing. Go back to work.”

“If the chair finds out about this—”

“There is nothing to find out.” I sighed and leaned back in my chair, knowing fully well John wouldn’t leave until we had this talk. “I’m not sleeping with her. Or dating her.”

“Then why her? She’s your intern. Choose someone else. Anyone else.”

“I don’t know. I...can’t help it. I think I want to be with her. I don’t want anyone else.”

“Then fire her, *then* date her.”

I slammed my fist on my desk. “No way! Never. This internship is her dream. It’ll catapult her career. I would never ruin that for her. How dare you even suggest it?” She would hate me. I heard her say the same to that Kenny guy the other day. She didn’t want any man in her life. Her career was her life.

She didn’t want me.

John pinched the bridge of his nose and softened his tone. “We need you more than we need her. I won’t risk our business or your career for her.”

“You won’t risk anything because you’ll keep your mouth shut. And you won’t do anything to Laura.” I pointed my finger at him. “Do you understand?”

“So, what’s your plan, genius? Wait another eleven months for her contract to finish before asking her out?”

I couldn’t wait eleven months. She already consumed my every thought. “I’ll figure something out.”

“There is no other way, not unless... No!” He stood up from his chair and paced the floor. “We worked our asses off for over twenty-five years to get to the top. Together. We rule this place now. Together. We’re partners. You’re not seriously thinking of quitting? You belong here. I don’t want to hear you talk about starting your own hedge fund company again. Wealth Asset Group is your life.”

“I’m not gonna quit.” I didn’t want to leave, even though I often toyed with the idea of punching the chair in the nose and fucking off to start my own firm. But John and I were great partners in business. I couldn’t imagine working without him by my side.

He grabbed my shirt with a fist. “Promise me, Steven.”

“Calm your panties.” I grabbed his wrist and flung his arm away. “Don’t

be so melodramatic.”

John sighed and flopped down on the chair. “I did minor in theater.”

“For the girls.”

“Yeah. Those were the days. You know what’s even crazier? I feel like my best friend from those days is slowly coming back. I forgot how much I missed him. Have to admit, you’re not as much of a grumpy bastard since she started working here.”

“I’ve always been the same. Then. Now. And all the years in between.”

“HA! Are you so delusional you don’t even know your own temperament? Sure, you were always a bit awkward socially, and that made people think you were aloof or rude. But once you got to know someone, you’d relax and let them see your fun side. And man, did we have fun. All those frat parties and—”

“We were young and drank too much. The only difference now is that I matured, and you didn’t. You still go out almost every night and get drunk, except now you get drunk on champagne that costs \$1000 a bottle instead of the cheap beer we managed to scrounge in college.”

“It’s not just the drinking. You didn’t yell at people back then. You didn’t piss everyone off. You didn’t hate the world so much that you turned into... into... Hell, I don’t even know what to compare you to. I was going to say the Hulk, but even he shifts back into the gentle Dr. Banner sometimes. Then I was going to say Mr. Hyde, but he also switched back to mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll. But you, you turned into a grinch, constantly in a bad mood and making everyone around you miserable.”

I *was* different now, and I knew it. I wasn’t an idiot. But I would never admit to it. I had my reasons. “If I’m so awful to be around, then why do you keep barging into my office to hang out?”

“Because I know why you’re the way you are. And I know who you really are, and that you’re the only person I can trust completely. And I knew the old you would resurface someday. I just didn’t think it would take this long for you to get over what Barb did to you.”

Goddammit, why did he have to utter her name? In all these years, he’d never brought up her name until this month. This was the second time he’d mentioned Barb since Laura started working here. Why now? After twenty years? “This conversation is over. Leave.”

“So fucking stubborn. Why don’t you face it and deal with it...process it instead of shoving it deep down like a coward?”

“Get out!”

John leaned back into his chair even more as if telling me he was getting comfortable and had no intention of leaving. “I don’t know how the intern did it, but she’s breaking through to you, and I could kiss her for it.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. Anger boiled in my blood. I pointed a finger threateningly at him. “Don’t you fucking go near her.”

John barked out a laugh. “Whoa, big guy. She’s not my type. Besides, I would never make a move on your girl.”

John still spoke like a teenager. She wasn’t my girl. She was my woman. Or she would be. One day. “She’s not my anything.”

“Whatever.” He waved a hand dismissively. “All I know is that that dark, cold heart of yours is melting and the old Steven is slowly emerging. I’m fucking thrilled to have you back, buddy.”

I needed to turn this conversation around so he wasn’t focusing on me anymore. “You’re not gonna start crying like a little bitch, are you?”

“Have you spoken with her? Does she even like you?”

Shit, he didn’t take the bait. “Of course, she does.” Probably because I could advance her career. Or maybe it was my money that she was drawn to, like every other woman I had ever met. “What’s not to like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A, you’re a jerk. B, you’re a jackass. And C, you’re rude. To. Literally. Everyone.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing’s gonna happen. This feeling will pass soon, and everything will go back to normal.”

This feeling will never pass.

“Whoa! Dude.” His eyebrows shot up. “You’re afraid she’ll choose her job over you?”

Of course, she would. “Ridiculous. Get out.”

“The mighty Steven Cox. The fearless Hellhound is afraid he’ll get rejected by a woman.”

“If you’re going to spit out bullshit, then GET OUT.”

“You know, on the one hand, I want her to reject you so we can lead this company together for another twenty years. But, on the other hand, seeing glimpses of the old Steven over the last few weeks makes me hope she wouldn’t so that you can finally be happy. And I can have my friend back.”

“Are you done? I’m busy. I have work to do.”

“You have feelings for her, don’t you?”

“Get out.”

“She’s nothing like Barb. You know that, right?”

No, I didn’t. “Shut up.”

“I did some more digging on your Ms. Bloom.”

I leaned forward and gave him a menacing look. “You had no right to invade her privacy.”

Unfazed, he said matter-of-factly, “Don’t you want to know what I found?”

He couldn’t have found out anything I hadn’t already uncovered. I wearily rubbed my hands over my face. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“She grew up rich. As rich as we are now, but her dad was a piece of shit. When Laura was fourteen, her mom got sick with cancer. Her dad bailed, stole her college fund and her mom’s fortune. He was living the good life on a yacht in the Bahamas, while his wife went through chemo, and his daughter worked like a dog to support them and pay off the medical bills.”

I didn’t want him to know so much about her. She wouldn’t want people pitying her or treating her differently because of her past. And I didn’t want anyone knowing about her painful past except me. “It’s none of our business.”

“Her mom died a couple of years later, but the medical bills didn’t disappear. But do you know what else I found out?”

“Stop. I already know everything.”

The shock on his face was always comical. “Seriously?”

I nodded.

Of course, I did. I had made it my mission to know as much about her as I could.

“That’s why you said it didn’t matter that it had taken her eight years to graduate from university. You knew she had all those bills and all those jobs, didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t going to hire a lazy, spoiled, entitled hotshot. So, yes, I did my homework to make sure the candidate was honest and hardworking.”

“You’re not only worried that she would choose the job over you. It’s not the rejection you’re worried about, is it?”

“Enough. Get out.”

“You’re worried she *will* accept you. But for your money.”

“She’s not the type.” But I wouldn’t blame her if she was. She grew up in luxury. She would do anything to get that back. Anyone would.

“You think she’s like Barb,” John said. “She’s not.”

Why did he keep mentioning my ex? Probably because he knew me better than anyone else. Even more than Aunt Mable. And he knew I had stayed away from relationships because of what happened with Barb. “You can’t know that.” Except, I think I did know.

She’d passed up on a marriage to a billionaire. With that Kenny guy. Had she meant what she said to him? That she didn’t care about his money? That she wanted to make her own fortune?

He could have given her the world, but she rejected him.

Laura wasn’t anything at all like Barb.

TWENTY-SEVEN



Laura

“Happy Monday morning, Jim.” I waved at the guard as I walked through the lobby.

“Morning, Miss Bloom.” He grinned and waved back with his knobby, arthritic hand.

The disapproving stares from my snooty co-workers didn’t faze me. Was I the only one with manners in this place?

Elvis’s “Blue Christmas” played over the loudspeakers as I made my way up in the elevator. By the time I got to the top floor, Elvis had finished his song, and the festive “Feliz Navidad” played merrily. My visions of Elvis’s rockin’ hips were replaced with mariachi snowmen wearing sombreros.

I trotted to my office, following the beat of the song, imagining myself in a snow globe, dancing around a Christmas tree on a Mexican beach.

I stopped at Mr. Cox’s door to say hello, but he was on the phone. I waved. He waved back and smiled. His smile reached my heart, making heat scorch through my whole body.

Must. Stop. Fantasizing. About. My. Boss.

This was getting out of hand. I had spent the entire weekend replaying the moments we shared at Rockefeller Center in my mind. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. The way he had put his arm around my shoulder for the picture. The weight of his arm was a soothing comfort I didn’t know I had

been craving. But then it quickly sent tingles between my thighs as I imagined more of his body touching mine.

Then, in the parking lot, I stupidly thought he was going to kiss me, and I was hoping for it. Wanted it. Was desperate for it.

I shook the thoughts away and hurried to my office and kicked off my boots. Settling into my chair, I put on the only nice pair of shoes I owned. Black, of course, to match the various colors of all my secondhand suits. I couldn't afford to buy more than one pair of shoes for the office.

Yet.

I focused on work for the next couple of hours, cooling the incessant heat between my thighs.

"Ms. Bloom, please come to my office," said my boss. "I want to discuss the Miller project." His deep, husky voice was like a magnet, propelling my entire being into a universe of lust and desire.

Naughty thoughts flooded my mind, and a grin spread slowly across my face, grinch style. "Yes, Mr. Cox." My voice rose in an embarrassing range of octaves.

I gave my short black curls a quick touch-up with my fingers, and instead of reaching for a notebook, I shoved my hand into my purse, rummaging for the compact mirror.

Wait. Had I just done that? What a girly thing to do. I was not a girly girl. I didn't wear makeup.

The song "Stupid Girl" by Pink played in my head. I would not let some man turn me into a swooning sissy. Even if he was the hunkiest, sexiest, most brilliant man I had ever met.

Men were not part of the plan. This prestigious internship would catapult my career, which was all part of my ten-year career strategy. Nothing would make me veer off that path.

Screw the coif, Laura. You are a young, brilliant, professional career woman.

I marched into his office. All silliness gone. I was myself again. Focused and determined.

Sunlight shimmered in the oversized office, creating a sparkling halo around him in his sleek Armani suit. In contrast, his square jaw already showed a five o'clock shadow, and it wasn't even noon yet, his inner ruggedness in conflict with his clean-cut executive ensemble. I pushed the fantasy scene away and focused on his nameplate to bring me back to reality.

“Let’s begin, Ms. Bloom.”

I glanced up. Steven’s commanding jade eyes met mine. A smile gradually formed on his lips. So full of affection and warmth.

Why did he always do that? It was a smile that reflected blissful thoughts. As if all was right in the world. A smile reserved only for me.

I froze. Professional career woman gone. Instead, a pile of goo lost in a daze created by the warmest of smiles. I wasn’t exactly sure, but I thought my mouth was hanging open.

Stupid Girl...

I snapped my head down and put pen to notebook.

With a slight hint of amusement in his voice, he said, “We need to prepare the documentation for the Miller project and schedule a meeting with...”

His words became a melody of bliss and ecstasy. A heatwave radiated between my thighs, and my entire body got hotter and hotter by the second.

Was I sweating?

Concentrate, woman. Concentrate. My pen hung motionless over the paper. What was he saying?

I needed to refocus. My head snapped up to look at his face. Bad idea. Remember what happened earlier? With the drooling and all?

I looked at his shoulders. Focused on his voice.

Proud of myself for finding a solution, I fixed my gaze.

Strong shoulders. Broad shoulders. Sexy shoulders.

Shoulders I wanted to run my hands over...shoulders I wanted to wrap my arms around...shoulders I wanted on top of me as he thrust himself in and out of me...

What was going on? This wasn’t normal. I’d worked with hot guys before. It never affected me. Why now?

Of course, the attraction was inevitable. But I’d never been attracted to the point of distraction before. That relentless song continued to torment my mind. *Stupid girl...*

Argh. Stop!

I was an intelligent and ambitious woman. Sex did not rule my life. Lust did not control me.

Since when were anyone’s shoulders droolworthy? I couldn’t see the outline of his muscles, thanks to that freakin’ blazer.

But they were so broad. And strong. Pulled back in a dominant posture,

making his muscular chest...

It was bad enough with the shoulders. I didn't want to start with the chest.

"...ensure all these parameters are included in the Excel sheet for the CEO."

SHIT! Shit! Shit! Shit!

I didn't get any of that. What was I going to do? "Right away, Mr. Cox." I would manage. Always did. I would ask for clarification later. On the phone. Not in person.

His smile caught me off guard again. A special smile that was, apparently, so out of character for him.

Steven Cox ran his department the way he lived his life. Discipline. Success. He gave 100,000% to the company and expected the same from his employees. He had no patience for personal matters or compassion. There was no space for tender moments in any part of his life.

Until I started working here.

Based on the rumors about him, no one else got to see the sweet, gentle man behind that mask of discipline and authority. The one who was slowly emerging before me. Behind closed doors. The one who shook my whole being into forgetting my own priorities.

Stop!

On my way back to my office, I reminded myself that men were excluded from my future. I had no choice. It was the only way. They couldn't be trusted.

TWENTY-EIGHT



Steven

That was the most fun I'd had in years.

God, the way she looked at me. I didn't think any woman had ever gawked at me that way. Burning with desire and full of hunger. For me. Maybe I hadn't imagined it on Friday night.

There was no mistaking that look she gave me today. Most women looked at me with a different type of hunger. I could practically see the fucking dollar signs in their eyes.

But not Laura.

She had a thirst for me. For my body. I could live with that. Even if it was only physical for her.

Christ, she would be my ruin. I didn't even know what nonsense I had spewed at her. Half of what I had said came out as gibberish.

Later, once my head was clear, I would send her an email outlining what I really needed for the report. It would be safer that way.

But first...

I locked myself in one of the private executive bathrooms down the hall. I unzipped and fisted my cock.

I wouldn't be able to get anything done until I came for her. Until I fantasized about fucking her so hard she would scream my name.

Stroking my hard cock, I bit back a moan. How many fucking times

would I need to do this at the office? I wanted her in here with me. No. Not here.

On my desk. I wanted to rip her clothes off, throw her on my desk, and taste her, tease her, fuck her, claim her.

Oh God, yeah. That was my favorite fantasy so far. I imagined her big tits bouncing while I pounded into her.

I quickened my strokes and gripped the edge of the counter with my other hand, bracing myself.



Four days later and I still couldn't get my dick under control. Thank God it was Friday 'cause I needed to let off some steam at Titan's Club with Hawk and John. At least I had survived the week without turning into a caveman, dragging her into my office by her hair and claiming what I wanted most in this world.

But my trips to the executive bathrooms were getting out of hand. It's not like I could jerk off in my office. Or in my car. What other options did I have?

I tried to be silent as I walked down the hall, but Aunt Mable always noticed me passing by her office. She probably thought I had the squirts. This week, she left a bottle of Pepto Bismol on my desk, made me some homemade bone broth, and suggested I make an appointment with a gastroenterologist.

I rushed past John's office. His fucking door was open.

"Hey Steven, where ya going, buddy?" he yelled. "Want me to come with?" His laughter echoed down the hall.

Jerk knew where I was going. And why.

I locked myself in the bathroom and unzipped.

My phone dinged. I fished it out of my pocket and read the text.

John: Need a hand?

Prick.

I put the phone on the marble countertop and gripped my pulsating cock. I needed to find another solution. And fast. This was ridiculous. Maybe I should get laid. By anyone. Go to the club with John and let him set me up

with someone for the night.

Nope. Couldn't do it.

Laura was the only one I hungered for. She was the only one I wanted.

Ding.

I glanced at my phone.

John: How's Willie?

Jackass.

I shut my eyes and pumped. Images of Laura wearing black lingerie dominated my mind, her black curls bouncing over her shoulders as she rode me as if I were a bronco.

Ding.

I opened one eye to look at my phone in case it was an emergency. In case it was Laura.

John: I think I hear a choking monkey. Should I call security?

Bastard.

I focused on my visions of Laura, but this time she was on her knees in front of me, peeking up at me under her eyelashes as she took my cock in her mouth.

God, I would love to know what her mouth felt like. What her—

Knock. Knock.

Motherfucking shit. Who the hell was that? Only John and I used these private bathrooms. "Occupied. Find another bathroom."

"Helloooooo," John said in a high-pitched voice, imitating an old lady. "Are you in there, sonny? Granny needs to use the facilities, dearie."

"Fuck you, John. I'll have my revenge in the cage tomorrow."

"Oh dear! Is someone having trouble with their bowel movements? Hang on to the sides of the toilet and squeeze, my dear boy."

"Go away, you prick."

"Someone is grumpy," he said in his normal voice in between guffaws. "It's all that shit you've been holding in all these years. Just squeeze it all out, buddy. Release the load. Shoot it out."

TWENTY-NINE



Laura

“Hand me those streamers,” said Andrew as he stood on a step stool in the hallway.

I grabbed the closest one, pulling it out of the box, remembering the time Steven...I meant my boss leaped onto my desk like a lion and strung up decorations in my office.

“Not that one, silly. Those are for Valentine’s Day. The one that says Merry Christmas on it.” Andrew’s Santa hat pompom bobbed as he pointed with his head.

I shook the memory away. “Oh, sorry.” I reached for the red and green streamer and handed it to him.

He reached up on the tips of his toes, standing on the topmost step of the stool. “Girrrrl, you’re distracted. Tell Uncle Andrew all about it, honey. I need to know.”

Andrew and I had become buds. We just clicked. I spent most of my lunch breaks with him. Escaping my office. Escaping the magnetism of my boss. And if Andrew was busy, then I’d take walks and chat on the phone with Kenny. He wasn’t much help. Total opposite. I needed him to talk me out of doing something stupid, but all Kenny did was encourage me to seduce my boss.

“Andrew, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Be careful, you’re too

close to the edge.”

“Honey, I’ve been in charge of decorations in this company since you were in diapers. I know what I’m doing.” He hung the streamer and hopped off the stool, studying me over the top of his half-rim glasses. “Don’t think you can outsmart me, sweetheart. You can’t change the subject that easily. Tell me.” His gray eyes twinkled with mischief.

I stared at the floor, suddenly fascinated by the linoleum. “It’s just work. Nothing exciting.”

“Humph. I’ll pretend to believe you. For now. But you can’t keep it a secret from me forever.”

Yes, I could. No one at work had to know my hormones were on hyperdrive around my boss.

“Come on, let’s go hang the mistletoe.” Andrew’s skinny butt pranced through the hall as he hummed “Santa Baby.”

It was killing me to keep this a secret. I wanted to tell someone, but I didn’t have anyone. I liked Andrew, but how could I possibly tell him? He worked in HR. What would I say? *Hey, Andrew, I wanna fuck my boss.*

Sure, that would go over really well.

I convinced myself that I was not only protecting myself and Steven, but Andrew too.

I needed to keep my hands off my boss. Three jobs might be at stake here. No one would believe Andrew didn’t know about it, now that we were close.

There was no official regulation against office dating, but there was when it came to executives and their subordinates. And I was sure there was an ethical rule against a director and his intern doing the nasty.

We walked into the crowded break room. My boss was standing in front of the counter next to the microwave, arms folded across his chest with a sour expression on his face. The break room on our floor was under renovation, so he had to use the one on the floor below. This one.

Sheila, the blonde with the long Amazonian legs I had a run-in with on my very first day, took a step toward him. With one hand on her tiny waist, she shifted her big boobs to face him.

All the other co-workers in the room gave Mr. Cox a wide berth. They huddled at the opposite end of the room at the small round dining tables, casting nervous sideways glances his way. They hated it when he showed up in the common areas.

I suppressed a laugh. It always amused me to see how paranoid everyone

was when Steven was around. Like Hellhound wasn't a nickname but an embodiment of his true personality.

As far as I could tell, there were only four of us in the entire building who weren't afraid of him.

Andrew wasn't afraid of anyone. Or anything. Ever. He didn't look it, but he was badass.

Then there was Mr. John Whitby, the CEO. He outranked Steven, but I didn't think that was the reason. They seemed to be longtime friends, judging from the convos I had overheard through the door.

And then Mrs. Barnes. She told me she had been Steven's assistant for over twenty years. But I had a feeling they had known each other longer than that. She was fearless around him and never seemed fazed by his outbursts. She was more like a mom humoring a temperamental two-year-old.

And I was the fourth. Mr. Cox never gave me a reason to fear him. I had heard horror stories from some of the employees. But I had a hard time believing them. I had never seen his bad side. At least not the scary angry side people tried to convince me of.

I'd only seen the side that was making me ache for him.

And then there were the single ladies in the building. Flirting their asses off in front of him, even though they were scared shitless of the man. Shouldn't their instincts scream "run away" instead of "va-va-va-voom?"

I guessed the grumpy-billionaire-boss vibe was sexy these days. Or maybe the bitches were after his money.

I hated people like that. Disgusting. Make your own money. You couldn't rely on anyone to take care of you. Ever.

Sheila was the bravest of them all. And the most persistent. She stirred her coffee and shuffled closer to him. A roll of her head made her long blonde hair flip over her shoulder.

Bitch, stay away from my man.

Whoa! Where had that come from? Green was a new color on me. I didn't get jealous. I'd never needed to because I never had anyone I cared about enough to worry about losing them.

Andrew jumped onto a chair near the counter. "Hi, Mr. Cox. Hey, Sheila. I'm about to hang the mistletoe. Who do you think will be the first to have a go?"

THIRTY



Steven

Sheila giggled and peeked up at me under her lashes.

Fuckin' Andrew with his damn mistletoe. I ignored Sheila and turned my gaze to the most beautiful woman in the building. In the city, even. Laura looked like she wanted to pounce on Sheila.

That would be a sight to see. My curvy, petite Laura taking down the skinny, towering Sheila.

Was she jealous?

The microwave dinged, but I ignored it. I was too busy enjoying the curves in front of me. My eyes drank in every delicious soft inch of Laura's body.

I glanced up at her face. Lips pursed. Eyes glaring at me with a murderous look.

Shit! What was I thinking?

Horrified at myself for offending her, I stared at the floor and rotated on the spot until Sheila's boobs came into view.

Nope. Not good.

I kept shifting until I faced the counter, my eyes safely away from Sheila's boobs. If I wasn't looking at anyone, I couldn't get myself into any more trouble. I took my meal out of the microwave and jabbed at it with a fork.

Why was Laura so mad? She had welcomed my lingering stares before.
Had I imagined that?

God knew she'd stripped me naked with her eyes a hundred times. I would have never dared to stare at her so blatantly if I hadn't caught her drooling over my body.

I thought we had an unspoken understanding. I want you. You want me. Let our eyes and minds get their thrills since we can't act on it.

Had I misunderstood?

I picked up my plate and turned around. I had to make her understand. Show her my regret. I needed her to know I wasn't a dick.

Laura still looked mad as hell, but this time her stare was fixed on Sheila.

Sheila trailed a finger down my arm. "Mr. Cox, should we go over the fiscal budget together?"

What the...?

I looked at her finger in disgust and took a big step away from her. "No. What for? Don't you know how to do your job?"

Was this why Laura was mad? She couldn't possibly think that I was flirting with Sheila, could she?

Steven, you jackass! Of course, she could.

I never told Laura how much I adored her. Never told her that she was the only one for me and that no other woman even came close to her beauty.

Compared to Laura and her brilliant mind, every other chick in here was a neanderthal.

I had to do something. Get Sheila out of here. Get everyone out so I could somehow, without words, let her know I wasn't interested in anyone but her.

There was only one way to clear a room. Everyone already thought I was an ass anyway. Couldn't disappoint them now.

I banged my fist on the counter. "Enough of this foolishness. Everyone, **BACK TO WORK**. Just because it's the holidays doesn't mean I won't fire anyone for slacking off. **GET OUT!**"

Chairs scraped the floors as a dozen people scrambled out of the break room. Sheila stormed out with them, while Andrew ignored me, as always. He climbed onto a table and began hanging mistletoe.

That guy had balls. He never flinched at my outbursts. I didn't want to scare Laura, though. Never. I forced myself to relax and gave her a reassuring smile. And then I was gazing into her eyes.

I didn't have to force anything anymore. Instant joy, as if her beauty was

a shot of Demerol injected straight into my heart. My whole body relaxed.

She threw her head back and laughed. So full of glee. Total abandonment. Not an ounce of fear. No more anger. Jealousy gone.

Mon étoile. She sparkled with beauty.

Her happiness became my happiness. As if her bright light filled up every part of my being. Even the parts that had been so darkly miserable for years. I shivered as the cold shadows of my soul lit up like a Christmas tree.

Andrew's phone rang. He jumped off the table, pushed it back against the wall, and answered his phone while waving goodbye to Laura. He walked out of the break room, leaving me and my intern alone with a mistletoe hanging over us.

Laura looked at the mistletoe, then at me. Her cheeks flushed pink.

"Have you eaten, Lau—Ms. Bloom?"

She shook her head, her curls bouncing off her flushed cheeks, making my fingers twitch with the desire to tousle them.

"I have a sandwich in the fridge." She crossed the room and took a bag from the fridge. "I'll eat at my desk since I used up my break time to help Andrew with the decorations."

I wanted to tell her to take as much time as she wanted to eat, but I knew she wouldn't want special treatment.

"Same. I have a lot of work to do."

We both took a step toward the door. The cramped area didn't have much space with all the tables, so I gestured for Laura to pass ahead of me. She took a step forward and before I could stop myself, my hand found its way to the small of her back to guide her through.

She froze and gasped.

I yanked my hand away. "I apologi—"

She spun around toward me and dropped the bag containing her sandwich, her eyes full of desperate hunger. The same hunger I felt in my core. She brought one hand up and rested her palm on my chest over my heart.

I nearly dropped my meal too, but I held on before my fingers slackened. I chucked the lunch onto the nearest table and grabbed her around the waist with one hand. My other hand ran through her curls, the softness caressing my fingers like a welcoming lover, finally turning my dreams into reality.

I leaned in. I didn't care anymore. I needed to know what she tasted like.

The sound of heels clacking down the hallway broke me from the spell,

and I jumped back until my butt hit the counter. Laura snatched her sandwich and ran out.

We spent the rest of the afternoon avoiding each other, and I tormented myself over my foolish behavior. I didn't get to walk her home because she skipped out at 6 pm while I was in the bathroom for the third time that afternoon, taking care of business. I phoned down to security to make sure she had an escort to her car.

THIRTY-ONE



Laura

Christmas Eve

The cafeteria was abuzz with holiday spirit as all the employees laughed and ate yule log cake, but the only thing on my mind was the almost-kiss yesterday under the mistletoe. I had been up all night thinking about him. Wanting him.

The CEO and Andrew were chatting a few feet away. Mr. Reed was cowering in the corner farthest from us.

Steven, who was behind me, took a step closer. In the middle of the busy cafeteria, his powerful frame was an electrifying presence at my back. The excitement thrumming through my body was so distracting I couldn't focus on my surroundings. He stood closer than any boss should, and I hoped no one was watching. A scandal would be the end of my career.

Steven's woody masculine scent flooded my senses, and I squeezed my thighs together in response. I yearned to have him closer, needing to touch him somehow. The music and chatter surrounding me faded away to nothingness, and everyone in the room became a distant afterthought. I found myself rocking until my back grazed his chest. It was the barest of contact between our bodies, but pleasure electrified my entire being.

It was addictive. I wanted more. If I pushed myself more into him, would

he wrap his arms around me?

I shook the thought from my mind. It was so wrong to flirt with my boss. The risk too great. I should walk away.

Before my foot lifted off the floor, Steven brought his head close, his breath teasing my ears. "Meet me in my office, Laura." His voice oozed sex appeal as his hand caressed my ass.

Hearing my name come from his lips for the first time was intoxicating. Tingles rippled over my skin, and I was getting wet. I focused on breathing so I wouldn't pass out.

I couldn't move away. My body wanted the closeness more than my brain wanted to flee.

"I want you, Laura," he whispered. "I can't hold myself back anymore. And I won't."

The sound of my heart pounding drowned out my thoughts, but luckily, I grasped the last shred of logic in my conscious mind. "But...we're at work." My voice sounded far away as if I wasn't the one speaking.

I wanted to, yes. But we couldn't do this. What if we got caught? An intern and her boss. It would ruin our careers.

Was he worth the risk?

THIRTY-TWO



Steven

My palm was cradling her ass, and my fingers squeezed tight. A loud moan escaped me before I could stop myself. My body was moving against my will, my chest pushing into her soft body. A body I craved to have in my arms. A woman I wanted by my side.

Would she reject me? For the sake of her job?

I would have preferred to do things right. Ask her out on a date. Spoil her. Explore new restaurants with her. Have the first kiss under the moonlight after an evening at a Broadway show. Take things slow.

But I never asked. Never dared. She wanted nothing to do with men, or at least that's what she had told Kenny. Not part of her plan.

She might not want me as a partner in her life, but I knew she lusted for my body. The primal energy between us was powerful and electric. I couldn't resist anymore.

And I didn't think she could either.

Her ravenous eyes. Her flushed cheeks. Her squirming. Her heaving chest. They all told me she hungered for me.

I wanted all of her. Not just her body, that was just the icing. But her brilliant mind. Her gentle soul. Her sharp wit. Her many laughs.

Those were the things I craved the most. But I knew she would turn me down.

Except the woman had urges. And maybe she would let me have the honor of fulfilling those urges.

If this was the only way I could have her, I would take it. Even if it was only once. I would sacrifice everything for a few hours with her, holding nothing back.

I scanned the area. No one was watching. I pressed into her even more. “I don’t care anymore. You’re all I think about. I want you. Don’t make me wait, Laura.”

With every last ounce of will left in me, I pulled myself away from her and marched out of the cafeteria, my body screaming at me to go back to the warmth of her body. But I pushed forward.

Would she follow me?

Or would she reject me?

THIRTY-THREE



Laura

Before I could give my answer, a rush of cold air washed over my back. Loneliness spread through my body, aching for his touch to return. I stood there for a moment, regaining my senses.

And when I turned around, Steven was nowhere in sight.

“Hey, Laura, do you need a refill on your egnog?” Andrew asked as he walked up to me.

I wasn’t even holding a glass. “Errr...”

Andrew grinned. “Ho! Ho! Ohhh! I saw that little display. It was like watching Animal Planet.”

My mind was swimming with thoughts of Steven. My body reeling from the energy. I couldn’t focus on anything.

“Huh?”

“A lion is after his prey. What will she do? Tell me, girl! I know you’re into him. Those chemicals bounced between you two. Tell me. Tell me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” My voice was hoarse.

Why was Andrew being so casual about this? Would he protect us? Did he even have that kind of power at his level? Would he get fired for protecting me?

“Fine. Fine. I’ll go schmooze the chair of the board and distract him so you can make your getaway.” He turned and waltzed away. “You’re

welcome. By. The. Way,” he said over his shoulder.

Steven was waiting for me in his office.

But what were his intentions? A one-time thing? A fuck friend? Or maybe...?

I sprinted down the hall.

Mr. Cox found me so irresistible that he was willing to risk his job for a few clandestine moments.

With me!

I had never seen him look at another woman the way he looked at me. No one else was worth the risk. But I was.

Had I made my decision? There was none to make.

I needed Steven.

Today.

Now.

I was a modern, vibrant woman who had every right to have a one-night stand. Even if it was only once.

Please want more...

Since when did I want more? It wasn't part of the plan. My plan.

Unless I changed it.

I would be the envy of all single women and a few married ones too. If only we could tell people.

Impossible.

This would have to be a secret. Our secret. It was the only way.



I flung my purse onto my desk, and it landed next to a small, gift-wrapped box. I fondled the silky red wrapper. There was no tag on it. Was it from Steven? If so, what did this mean? Was it a customary gift to a co-worker or something special for a woman he cared about?

My heart skipped a beat. Did he have feelings for me? My hand hovered over the crimson box.

Please be from Steven.

I would save it for later.

I peeked into his office. Steven was sitting behind his desk, leaning back in his chair. Hunger filled his eyes as they sparkled like emeralds. He said

nothing. He waited. His shirt was already off. I took in all the sights.

Eager expression...

Masculine hairy chest...

Traces of a six-pack...

And lower...

Whoa!

Was he completely naked?

Yup. The sly Hellhound. The tip of his erection extended above his desk.

I would not make the first move. Although, I think his lack of attire might have been the first move.

We were doing this. It was happening.

Would this be a one-time thing only? I hoped for more, needed mo—

I pushed those thoughts away. This was my one chance to have him. Be with him. I was going to relish every single nanosecond with the man named Steven Cox. The one man I should not be doing this with.

A forbidden encounter.

I leaned against the doorframe, my hip thrust out to the side, and gave him a “What are you gonna do about it, stud?” look.

He marched over and scooped me up.

I yelped. “You’re going to hurt yourself. I’m too heavy for you to pick up. Put. Me. Down.”

He chuckled and ignored my pleas.

No guy had ever picked me up that way. They took one look at me and figured no way in hell were they strong enough for a plumpster like me.

No signs of a struggle from this man. All power. Strength. This was what a real man felt like.

What did he plan to do to me? I wrapped my arms around his neck. He snuggled me into his chest and our eyes met, reflecting the fiery passion and hunger we had for each other. He leaned in. Our lips touched, and I melted into his arms.

He kissed my upper lip, my lower lip, then both my lips. Exploring and teasing. His tongue pushed into my mouth and flicked my tongue. He tasted of rum and spice. My senses swam with the intoxication of it.

I sucked on his tongue. Hard. I craved more of him and wanted to keep him in my mouth.

The top of the desk was bare, save for one lone ruby throw pillow. Computer screens, a keyboard, and papers lay scattered on the floor.

He laid me down, and my head sunk into the silk cushion. My bum, on the edge, faced his chair.

His hands on top of my clothes, he slowly slid them down my neck, over the mounds of my breasts, and across my stomach. His eyes followed the same path, drinking in every curve.

“God, Laura...you’re magnificent.”

With every inch of his journey, my internal temperature rose, degree by degree. His large hands navigated my body, reminding me of the saying, “Any guy can drive in a straight line, but it takes a real man to maneuver the curves”. My boss was a Formula 1 racer.

“I’ve dreamed about this since the first time I saw you on the monitors, dancing in the elevator. Your sexy ass swinging. Your boobs bobbing.”

I gasped. “You SAW that?”

He laughed. “You looked so excited. Your joy was contagious. I didn’t even realize I had been missing that from my life until you showed up.”

His hands slid under my blouse.

His fingers grazed my bare stomach, and millions of tiny sparks danced all over my skin.

“Oh, Steven!”

They squeezed into my flesh.

I froze.

I didn’t enjoy having my stomach touched. It was the only body part I was self-conscious about. And it wasn’t even the biggest part of me.

Fuckin’ female insecurities.

Shame about my bulging stomach overwhelmed me. I grabbed his wrist to make him stop.

“Let go, Laura!”

“It’s just that...um...my belly—”

In a fraction of a second, Steven twisted his wrists until his hands grabbed mine and pinned my arms over my head. His body and all its weight landed on top of me.

I was trapped.

Ravenous eyes stared at me.

“You will not stop me, Laura. I want to see, touch, explore, discover, and kiss every part of you. I desire all of you. I will give pleasure to. Every. Part. Of. Your. Body. Do you understand me?”

I was not one to be dominated and was about to protest when my hips

shifted, and his erection pressed against my clit.

I melted. My body welcomed his authority. And wanted more of it.

A struggle between my feminist beliefs and my raging sex drive erupted in my psyche. My body's carnal desires won out as my hips began to thrust rhythmically, rubbing on his cock.

I was breathless from the sexual tension coursing through me, deep in my soul. "Yes," I panted.

Returning to his initial mandate, he released my hands.

He traced his fingers along my skin. I closed my eyes. My mind went blank, and my body submitted to his light touch.

I surrendered myself to him, feeling completely safe. I knew I was in good hands.

Pun intended!

He found the clasp of my bra and undid it with a single flick of his fingers.

The next thing I knew, he had slid both my bra and blouse off and thrown them onto the floor. Bare-breasted on his desk, I squirmed in anticipation of what he would do next, the cool air of the room teasing my hard nipples.

His hands reached under my skirt and glided up my thighs. He took his time.

I needed to relieve some of the sexual buildup, so I squeezed my breasts.

He froze. Watching me touch myself, he moaned.

He seemed to struggle to contain his excitement as his fingers clutched my thighs. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

A master of self-discipline, he regained his control.

His hands found their way to my undies. He hooked them with his thumbs, then inch by inch, he slid them down my legs while his mischievous grin grew wider and wider. He tossed them onto the floor too and peeked under my skirt. Cradling my leg in his arm, he groaned again.

His kisses started at my ankle and meandered their way upward. His tongue joined in the fun and licked circles on my thighs.

Waves of heat and tingling sensations moved through my entire body. I clenched in anticipation.

The journey was torturously slow.

His breath on my thigh created blissful shivers that drifted over my skin. When his tongue found its way to the sweet spot, I bucked under him, pressing myself into his face as he held onto my hips.

“Your body is so receptive to me. I could feel your clit swelling with my first lick.”

My breath caught as his mouth returned to kissing my sweet spot. His lips licked and flicked in all the right places, the heat and pressure within me building up like a volcano.

The sensation intensified. My eyes rolled into the back of my head. My hands fumbled for something to latch onto. Running my fingers through his salt and pepper hair, I grabbed a handful and held on for the ride.

“I’m going to make you climax over and over until you can’t take it anymore,” he said. “Merry Christmas, gorgeous.”

“A little to the left,” I said.

He immediately followed my orders. His five o’clock shadow brushed against my thigh, and my skin became extra sensitive to the erotic sensation.

“A tiny bit higher.”

His expert tongue found the perfect spot.

Flick. Lick. Flick. Lick. Relentless. The pressure within me amplified. I forgot where I was. I was so wrapped up in the intense pleasure. The force surged through me and a heatwave overcame me.

The final heatwave moved through me like magma and erupted as I cried out. His hand covered my mouth, muffling my orgasmic declarations of “Yes. Yes. Yes. Oh. Yesss.”

He kept licking me until my explosive ecstasy ended and my last “Yesss” trailed off, muffled by his palm.

My arms flopped down to my sides as I panted into his hand. “That... was...amazing.”

Wow! That little word buzzed and bounced around all the nooks and crannies of my mind.

Steven stood, resting himself between my legs.

“Damn, woman, you taste so good. And you are so wet for me.” He admired me with a look of pride mingled with desire. “Get ready for round two.”

I was about to beg for more time to recover when his tongue teased me again with the same skill a samurai warrior had with his sword. Precision. Technique. Stamina.

A finger penetrated and caressed me. I bit my lip to muffle my groans as I thrashed on the desk from the powerful thrill coursing through my body.

Seconds away from another orgasm, all control vanished. Heat swelled,

more intensely than the first time. It was double the delight.

“St...stop.”

He lifted his head, a look of worry in his eyes. “Why?” he said, all the while continuing his job as a gentle stroker, driving me wild.

“Too much...gonna be...loud.”

Tsk was his only reply as his tongue retook its post to finish its mission. He gently placed his palm over my mouth.

He licked.

I moaned.

Lick. Moan. Lick. Flick. My moans intensified in his palm.

His caressing fingers sent ripples of pleasure throughout my body and soul.

With every movement of his finger within me, wave after euphoric wave overtook me. Bigger and stronger. I could feel myself squeeze with each passing surge.

Every time his finger stroked my sweet spot, a euphoric tidal wave crashed through me.

A final wave of immense intensity crashed over me, tsunami style.

I bucked. His tongue used more pressure, and his finger kept the same pace throughout my climax.

I cried out into his palm.

Every inch of my body pulsed from the power and intensity.

When it subsided, my entire body became limp, but my head was still swimming.

THIRTY-FOUR



Steven

This woman would be my death. She was so beautiful.

And her taste.

Was.

Intoxicating.

I couldn't get enough of her. My hands couldn't stop touching her. I needed to memorize the feel of every inch of her softness.

Would this be my only time with her? Would she want more?

Her body was a sanctuary I wanted to lose myself in for all eternity.

And the way she cried out with the orgasms I gave her.

Christ! I almost came at the same time from hearing her primal moans.

My greatest accomplishment in life wasn't the billions of dollars I'd made. It was the pleasure I gave her.

She had no idea how much I cared for her. I couldn't say the words, but I could show her.

I was committed to making her come over and over again. To give her so much pleasure that the feel of my tongue would be permanently branded on her. I wanted her to think of me the next time she was alone, pleasuring herself.

My dick wanted in on the fun. Not yet. I had to keep giving her what she wanted.

“Oh my God, Laura. You’re incredible. Here comes round three.”

“Wait...not yet...Mmm mmm,” she mewed as my tongue found its way home again. This time I was slow and gentle, letting her regain her strength. She sprawled her arms across my desk.

God, she looked sexy lying there. Naked.

I took a quick second to listen for any noise in the hall.

Nothing.

We were still safe.

She received my gift with total abandon as if she was bathing in the unyielding pleasure I gave her.

Without missing a beat with my tongue, my hand cupped a soft breast. A full handful. I squeezed, and it was the most wonderful sensation.

I moaned into her clit.

She shivered.

My fingers caressed her nipples. They were so hard. Little buds begging for my attention.

THIRTY-FIVE



Laura

Synchronized tongue flicking and nipple pinching, each one amplifying the sensation of the other. Connected, they radiated energy and pleasure. This time I went cross-eyed as the buildup came again.

Multiple orgasms were a myth for me. Until now.

Each one incredible and powerful, but different.

The third one was close. And more powerful. But I was missing something. I needed more of...?

I was about to have the fiercest orgasm of my life, but I didn't want it. Not like this.

I ached. Ached for more.

I was feeling separated from him. Distant.

Even with his hands and mouth on me. It wasn't enough.

It was as if my heart ached for him. I wanted a deeper connection. I wished for something profound instead of intense.

It wasn't purely physical anymore. It was emotional.

"Steven," I whimpered, "I need to feel you inside me. Please."

Silence.

His mouth and hands, gone.

THIRTY-SIX



Steven

At her words, I lost all intelligent thought.

Almost.

I yanked the drawer open and took out the condom packet.

Thank God I had bought these yesterday. I opened the foil and fumbled to put it on, almost dropping it.

She propped herself up on her elbows and stared at me. I didn't want to wait. I could barely contain myself anymore. I needed to be inside of her.

But she wanted to look.

And she would get whatever she wanted. I would make sure of that. Not only today, but tomorrow and the day after that, for as long as she would let me. This woman would receive everything and anything she desired. I would make sure of that.

She wrapped her legs around my waist. Her soft flesh enveloped me like a sensual blanket of heat and pleasure.

I groaned.

I was so close, and I wasn't even in her yet. My muscles trembled as they tightened to hold back my climax.

Everything about this woman's body felt beyond amazing.

For weeks, I'd fantasized about her, waking up to wet dreams every other night.

But it wasn't a dream anymore. I had her here.
Beautifully naked.
Wondrously open to me.
I had explored her body. Felt every curve. Tasted her sweetness. Made
her cry out with ecstasy.
I needed to be in her.
Now.

THIRTY-SEVEN



Laura

My legs tightened around his waist, and I grabbed onto his shoulders. I wanted to watch as he thrust his cock into me. I wanted to hold him there and never let go.

He placed his thickness at my entrance and pushed in slowly. Our groans sounded like a sweet chorus. My body instantly reacted to him as he filled me up. I was tight. It had been so long for me. And he was big.

So very large.

And thick.

Slight pain blended with the pleasure, intensifying the sensation as I expanded for him. It wasn't just the familiar heat and passion that coursed through every cell in my body. It was much more than that.

The emptiness from a few moments ago was flooded with warmth and connection. Part of his being seeped into my molecules. As if our two souls combined to become one.

Sadness gone, replaced with a ribbon of joy that connected our hearts.

Entwined.

I kept watching as he slowly brought himself almost fully out, then gradually pushed his thick cock back in until our bodies pressed tight against each other.

He slowed down even more. Did he want me to enjoy the view? Or did he

need to restrain himself so he could last longer?

My body trembled as I got closer and closer to my third Christmas gift. My arms weakened, and I collapsed onto the desk.

Steven closed his mouth over one of my nipples, and the tip of his tongue traced its peak. Mini shockwaves of pleasure spread through me. With our arms intertwined, he thrust faster and harder. A small bead of sweat slid off his nose and onto my chest.

He stopped and squeezed his eyes, his face contorted with the effort. His body quaked and quivered on top of me as he grasped for control. Then he relaxed slightly and started to thrust again.

In.

Out.

Faster.

Stronger.

With each thrust, his body thumped into mine, much to the delight of my clit.

“Laura...ugghh...gonna come...ugghh...*mon étoile!*”

Every uncontrollable sound that escaped from him was inching me closer to my own release. Knowing that I was the source of all his pleasure was magnifying my own.

His attraction to me was so powerful he could no longer resist me. It made him break all his rules. I was a sex siren, luring him into dangerous territory.

“Oh, Steven....”

He moaned even louder at my words and drove into me with unwavering force, clutching my hips to thrust into me even harder and deeper.

I couldn't contain it anymore. I grabbed onto his shoulders and pressed my open mouth to his, crying his name into his mouth. He grunted into mine as tremors shook through both of our bodies like an earthquake.

Our bodies quivered. We convulsed and shuddered in unison.

I felt his cock pulsing. I grabbed his hair and thrust my breasts into his chest. My thighs squeezed his body tighter into mine.

Deeper.

When the tremors stopped, I fell back onto the desk, and Steven sprawled on top of me.

He tried to push himself off, but I hugged him to me.

“Don't...want...crush you.” He struggled to lift his weight off me.

“Stay!” was all I could manage to say. I enjoyed the heaviness of his body on mine.

My safe haven.

We lay there for some time as little aftershocks rippled through our bodies. We held onto each other, and he showered my forehead with kisses. Each one marked my soul. Each one infused into my mind.

Still in each other’s embrace, I mused about what I would say when people asked me what I got for Christmas. Volcanos, tsunamis, and earthquakes...Oh my!



“Did you see the gift on your desk?” he asked as we got dressed.

“I did. Should I open it now or save it for later?” I averted my eyes.

“Whatever you prefer.” He shuffled a bit further away.

“Ok,” I said, suddenly showing far too much interest in one button on the sleeve of my blouse, the mood radar reaching full-blown awkwardness.

How had this happened? Was this only a one-time fuck for him? I wanted more. I felt something. Something I’d never felt before. I couldn’t quite explain it, but I just wanted to be near him.

“Mr. Cox—”

In one long stride, he was beside me, grabbing me. “Ms. Bloo...I mean... Laura.” He squeezed me in his arms. “My brilliant and beautiful Laura.”

He stroked my hair and hugged me tighter. “Laura, I know you don’t feel the same way, but I can’t stand it anymore. I have to...no, I need to ask you”—he let out a huge sigh—“will you—”

Knock, knock, knock.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Steven

Fuck!

Who the hell was it?

Laura and I froze. We stayed silent, barely even breathing, and listened.

“Mr. Cox?” said a woman’s voice from the hall on the other side of my door.

Sheila?

“Mr. Cox, are you in there? I brought you some champagne. Just for you and me.”

Laura had a murderous look in her eyes as she pushed out of my embrace.

Fucking Sheila. What the hell was she doing here? She was going to ruin everything.

Now Laura would think I played around with other women. That I had invited Sheila over.

I grabbed Laura’s shoulders and pleaded with my eyes.

The click-clacking of heels faded down the hall.

“Laura, I didn’t invite her. I swear. I’ve never once given her any encouragement. Never once flirted with her.”

She averted her eyes. “It doesn’t matter. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Look at me. P-p-please.” I hadn’t said the word in so long that it was a tongue twister. I usually barked out orders and never pleaded.

She looked up at me with sad brown eyes.

Did she regret what we had done? Did she think I was a playboy and took a different woman home every night?

“Laura, this wasn’t just sex for me. I don’t do that kind of thing and haven’t been with anyone in a long time. I...care about you. I want to steal you away for Christmas. Will you spend the holiday weekend with me?”

The change was instantaneous. Her face lit up and her eyes glowed.

THIRTY-NINE



Laura

Christmas day.

“Open it already,” Steven said as he walked up to the nine-foot tall Christmas tree in his penthouse, bent down, and picked up the small red package.

I admired the view of his naked rock-hard ass until he turned around and walked toward me.

I enjoyed the frontal view even more as he handed me the gift.

Tracing my finger over the silky wrapper, my heart skipped a beat. I wasn’t used to getting presents, except from Kenny. I wanted to draw out the moment and savor every minute.

I had placed it under the tree last night when Steven brought me to his home. I enjoyed seeing the festive tree and my little gift under it. Any moment not spent in each other’s embrace over the last twenty-four hours, I had spent on the couch admiring the tree. And my gift.

Most people would have been enthralled by the magnificent cityscape. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the metropolis all lit up in green, red, and white snowflakes on the sides of the buildings.

Many would have been in awe of all the extravagant details of his two-floor penthouse, such as the architectural design of the spiral staircase leading

to the bedroom or the six-foot wide wall-mounted electric fireplace in the living room.

But I preferred to look at my gift. It meant more to me than what was inside. It reminded me of a time in my childhood when I felt safe and loved. A time when I never imagined the ones I loved, my family, leaving me or hurting me.

I pushed the thoughts away. I didn't want to think about my father today. Not now. I carefully unwrapped the gift without tearing the paper because I would rewrap it later. A keepsake.

The velvet jewelry box was heavy in my fingers. I opened the lid. Jade, as green as Steven's eyes, came into view. The gemstone was set around a row of diamonds and hung from a gold chain.

"Oh, Steven, it's spectacular."

He took it out of the box and clasped it around my neck. The pendant dangled between my breasts.

"Thank you so much, but..." Was this his way of letting me know we were in a relationship? Yesterday, he had said he cared about me. But what did that mean exactly? Cared for me as a friend with benefits? Or the real deal?

I think he meant the real deal. The way he looked at me. Full of adoration in his gaze.

But I had a plan. And that plan didn't involve men. "I can't accept this." My voice low as if it didn't want to say the words.

"Of course, you can," Steven said with a chuckle.

"It's too expensive. I don't feel right taking it."

"I want to spoil you."

"I can't be bought."

"You make it sound as if I was paying for your time. Laura, I care about you. I want to be with you."

He hooked a finger under my chin and gently lifted my head until we made eye contact. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"It's so sudden. And fast."

"I know. But we've spent twelve hours a day together for the last six weeks. It's not like we only saw each other on a couple of dates every week. We know each other very well already."

You could never really know a person. It's when you think you know someone that they stab you in the back. "Not completely."

“No, but I know everything I need to know. We can take things slow, but I want to be with you. Get to know you more. Tell me why you’re hesitating.”

I squirmed under his gaze. “I have trust issues.”

He sat in front of me and stroked my knee. “Everyone has issues. Tell me about them.”

“I don’t trust men.”

“Because of your father?”

He must have seen the shock on my face because he put a hand up in defense. “I investigate all my candidates before hiring them, so yes, I know some facts about your life and your past. More than what the standard security check reveals. I didn’t know we would end up”—he waved a hand to encompass his condo—“here. Had we met any other way, I would never have invaded your privacy in that way.”

This would be easier to talk about because he already knew what had happened. I nodded. “It’s ok. I understand. I would have done the same in your position. But yes, because of him. I don’t want to end up like Mom did, betrayed and abandoned. It’s been so hard since he left. Especially seeing Mom’s sickness getting worse until she lost the fight. It wasn’t only about the money he stole from us. I can make that back. But it was seeing how devastated she was by his betrayal.” My heart ached with sadness. “She loved him. And she thought he loved her. It’s crazy, but I think she would have had the strength to fight the cancer if he had stayed by her side and supported her. It was like she gave up. Her broken heart took all her strength away, so she had nothing left to fight her sickness with. I refuse to let anyone have that much power over me.”

Steven wiped a tear away from my cheek. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. And I don’t know what’ll happen between us in the future, Laura, no one can know that. But if things don’t work out, for whatever reason, I would never ruin your life. You’re too strong to let me or anyone else take your power away from you. I didn’t know your mom, but she trusted the wrong man. There must have been clues that he was not in love with her before she got sick.”

Memories flooded my mind of my father constantly asking Mom to increase his credit card limit and accusing her of not loving him enough to share her money with him. “There were tons. I couldn’t admit it at the time, but deep down, I think I knew he didn’t love Mom. Or me. He loved money.

Her money. And when she got sick, he seized the opportunity to manipulate her into signing documents that gave him the power to take everything, and then he disappeared.”

“Maybe your mom wasn’t as smart and strong as you, but I can’t imagine you making the same mistake she did. I’m not perfect, but my intentions are true. I care about you and want to get to know you more.”

I wanted the same. Besides, I had nothing of value for him to want, so he couldn’t be anything like my dad. In fact, being with me could hurt his career if we got caught, but he was willing to risk it for me.

That made me feel special somehow.

And what about my plan? Sleeping with him was one thing. But he wanted more. A lot more.

And if I searched my heart, so did I. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be with someone.

I was the one who had made the plan. So, I was the one who could change it. Change my priorities. No, not change, add. I wanted Steven in my life. Wanted him at my side while I pursued my career. Being in a relationship didn’t mean I had to sacrifice my career goals. I didn’t know how, but I would find a way. I always did.

I nodded, and he let out a deep breath as if he had been holding it.

I stroked the pendant, the symbol of affection. “I didn’t get you anything, though.”

He barked out a laugh. “Silly woman. You’re the only gift I could ever need or want.”

He pulled me onto his lap, his chest comforting yet powerful at my back. With our bodies intertwined, we watched the twinkling lights of the tree.

Together.

I hadn’t seen a tree this well-decorated since I was a kid. “I’m guessing you hired the best decorators in town to do your tree.”

He laughed, making my body bounce. “Of course. I almost didn’t get it done this year, but I’m glad I did. I really didn’t think in my wildest dreams that you’d be here for Christmas.”

He nuzzled my neck as I remained transfixed by the twinkling lights. My phone buzzed on the coffee table, and I knew it was probably a text from Kenny wishing me a Merry Christmas, but I decided to ignore it for now. Kenny could wait.

Steven started to pull his arm away, but I held it even tighter. “Where do

you think you're going?"

He chuckled. "Nowhere, but don't you want your phone?"

"Nope. All I want is you right now." I leaned my head back and pressed my lips to his jaw, giving him three quick kisses.

Running my thumb over his wrist, I asked. "How did you get this scar?"

His arms stiffened around me.

I shouldn't have mentioned it. Maybe he wasn't ready to reveal anything about his past yet. "Sorry, you don't have to tell me. I'm being nosey."

"No, it's ok. I want to. I was in a car accident with my parents when I was nine."

He paused for a moment and kissed the top of my head before continuing. "They died. I didn't." His voice was low and sad.

"I'm so sorry, Steven." I brought his wrist up and kissed him tenderly on his scar. Then I hugged his arm to me until the tension eased from his body.

He let out a huge sigh as if releasing a burden. "It was a long time ago. My aunt and uncle raised me, and they were the best substitute parents I could've ever asked for. Oh, by the way, Mrs. Barnes is my Aunt Mable."

That explained so much. "I knew it! I knew she wasn't just your assistant."

With a small laugh, he said, "You can't tell anyone. The only people at work who know are you, John, and Andrew, who handles her personnel file himself so that the information doesn't leak."

He'd kept this secret for twenty years. Maybe our relationship could stay a secret too.

"Home for the Holidays" played on the radio, reminding me of Christmas with Mom when I was younger. I thought I would be spending Christmas alone again. Instead, here I was in the warm embrace of Steven's protective arms.

"Wait, it's Christmas Day. You should be with your aunt and uncle. Not with me."

He hugged me tighter. "I was supposed to be, but I told them Santa was very good to me this year, and I had to stay home to enjoy my gift."

I gently elbowed him in the ribs. "Still, they're family."

"When I told them you were here, they told me they didn't want to see my face until after New Year's."

If he told them about me, that was proof that he did actually care about me and was genuine when he said he wanted to be with me. If I was a

plaything, he probably wouldn't have told them. "They know about me?"

"Of course. They were thrilled. And Aunt Mable was really smug about it, saying how she had known all along that I'd end up taking you home and that I was a stubborn mule for fighting it."

I wasn't much of a catch. Poor. Thief for a father. No power or connections. "Why was she so happy? You can have your pick of practically any single woman in the city. You must have had tons of girlfriends."

"Not exactly. I don't have a winning personality like John."

John was really good at charming people. That's why I didn't trust him. But a grump? There was no facade with this type of man. Scheming and lying weren't a natural part of their personalities. If Steven had been more charismatic, as John was, I would never have allowed myself to open up to him in the least. "Still, you're successful, hardworking, honest, sexy as hell, and rich. Plus, you're a secret softy under that grinchy exterior. Any woman would die for that combo."

"All women saw when they looked at me was money. I didn't want to be with someone who valued money more than love. So, I gave up on dating a long time ago."

"Weren't you married once? I think I had read that in an article about you."

His body stiffened again. I shouldn't have brought that up, but I wanted to know what had caused the marriage to break up. I was probably still looking for red flags.

"I...was engaged."

That was the only answer I got, and immediately those red flags started waving in my mind. If he wanted me to trust him, he had to open up. After a while, I said, "I told you about my dad. And you already know everything about me from your investigations."

He took a deep breath and squeezed me tight. "You're right. Fair is fair. I met her at work...at my first job, right out of college. I was an analyst's assistant. We were young, and we fell in love, or at least I did. I proposed. She said yes, but insisted we delay the wedding a year or two until I had a good enough promotion so I could afford to give her a nice wedding and house. I worked my ass off to support us and work my way up. I didn't move up fast back then. It took a while for someone to recognize my skills and talent. But I was happy. I loved my job and thought I had a happy life at home. A couple of years later, I came home early to surprise her and..."

He shifted behind me and cleared his throat. “She was in our bed with some other prick. That prick was one of the top managers at the company.”

I guess he had trust issues too. No wonder he avoided women after that. We really did have a lot in common. Same issues, different reasons. Hugging his arm tightly, I said, “I see. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not the worst of it. She didn’t even apologize or act embarrassed or guilty, instead telling me she was happy I had found out this way, because she had been planning to leave me anyway. She said I was taking too long to make my fortune, and she had found a rich guy to take care of her.”

What a bitch! I hated women like that. She sounded a lot like my asshole father.

“The funny thing is, she wasn’t greedy when we met. She was a free spirit, who found happiness in things that didn’t cost any money such as picking flowers and spending Sundays cuddling on the couch. She changed while we were together, and I never realized it. Probably because I had been working such long hours. I used to talk to her about climbing the ranks and making a lot of money. I was always telling her about all the things I would buy for her once we were rich. Did my greed rub off on her? Maybe it was all my fault?”

Why was he making excuses for her? I never once gave my dad the benefit of doubt and thought there might have been a good reason for what he did. Deep down, Steven was a better person than me, even if on the outside, I seemed nicer. “That’s ridiculous. You didn’t drive her to have an affair. If her priorities had changed or if she didn’t love you anymore, she should have ended it before having an affair. Cheating is never acceptable.”

“True.” His voice did not sound very convincing. “Then a year later, at my annual review, the big bosses told me I had outperformed most of the analysts. They gave me a huge bonus and a promotion. Barb must have found out because she showed up at my new office the next day in a raincoat. She closed the door and took off her coat to reveal her almost naked body. She said she had made a mistake and wanted me back.”

Bitch wanted his money, not him. No wonder he didn’t date after that. He had been cheated on, thrown away, and once he was rich, she’d tried to waltz back into his life. How could he trust that anyone was interested in him and not his wealth after that? And why was he willing to take a chance on me? How did he know I cared about him and wanted nothing to do with his money?

“I told her to fuck off,” he said. “And to never show her face ever again. Every few years, I’d try to get back on the dating market, but I could see it in their eyes. The eyes never lied. Full of greed. The hunger for the green. I could do no wrong as long as I spent an absurd amount of cash on them. They didn’t care about me.”

“I can’t stand anyone who wants to rely on someone else’s money. If you want something, go out and get it yourself. Don’t these people have any pride?”

Steven ran his fingers along my forearm, trailing little circles. “When Kenny said you refused to marry him even though he was a billionaire, I allowed myself to cling to a glimmer of hope that you weren’t like Barb or most of the other women I’ve been around.”

I wasn’t. But there was no way to prove it to him. And there was no way for him to prove he wasn’t like my dad. Except with time. I guess you really couldn’t ever know for sure who the person you were seeing really was unless you spent more time with them, opening up, peeling back the layers, and deepening your affection for each other. Trust wasn’t automatic or absolute. And it wasn’t earned either, as most people said. There were different levels to trusting someone. It was meant to be discovered in layers.

We stayed intertwined on the couch and talked most of the night away, about our pasts, our fears, and our dreams. Opening up to each other. One layer at a time. Slowly revealing our hearts, building trust.

FORTY



Laura

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee woke me from my sleep. I rolled over on the silk sheets, my eyes still shut, the same mantra as yesterday, the day before, and the day before that playing on repeat in my mind.

Please be real. Please be real. Please be real.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Steven said.

I grinned as I sprawled out across the king-sized mattress. I let out a huge sigh as the manifestation of my morning mantras walked into the bedroom. My toes curled as giddiness spread through my body, and I opened my eyes.

My boss, standing by the bed, held a breakfast tray. I took in all the sights and wonder of this man. His salt-and-pepper hair was disheveled, so uncharacteristic for someone who was always immaculately groomed. He hadn’t shaved in four days—at my insistence—so the five o’clock shadow had grown into a proper sexy scruff over his square jaw.

Strong, broad shoulders and muscular biceps flexed under the weight of the tray. An apron, sporting a cartoon of Ratatouille holding a wooden spoon, covered the rest of his yummy body parts. The fabric hugged his torso but bulged below the waist.

Someone was excited to see me!

As was our custom every morning for the past four days, I sat up and let the sheet slide from my naked breasts to my lap. I looked up into the sexiest,

piercing green eyes I'd ever seen. "Morning, Loverboy."

He set the tray on my lap, leaned in for a kiss, and gave one of my boobs a tender squeeze hello.

"Today, I've decided to spoil you. Waffles with maple syrup. The real stuff from the best maple farm in Vermont. Not the cheap imitation crap." He sat on the edge of the mattress. "Powdered with cinnamon and icing sugar. I diced the fruit the way you like it, in extra-small pieces, and the orange juice is freshly squeezed and organic."

My eyes devoured the feast before me. I was salivating. But first I needed a sip of that coffee.

"Where's my—"

"You'll get your coffee after you drink your orange juice. I want you to have some healthy liquids in your system before you get your caffeine fix."

The waffles were sweet deliciousness and melted in my mouth. I moaned as I savored the delights laid out before me, prepared by my man.

Steven, with a smile as sweet as the waffles, watched me eat.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I nibbled while cooking. I'm saving space for dessert." He waggled his eyebrows and gave my other boob her hello squeeze.

I burst out laughing. Juice, saliva, and syrup splattered across the sheets, and to my horror, onto Steven.

"I'm so sorry." I put the tray down and scooted to the side of the bed. "Let me get—"

"Stop!" He caught my wrist and tugged me to him. "Stay. It's fine." He removed the apron and wiped his face and arms.

I hid my face in my hands. "That was so gross. I can't believe I did that."

He chuckled, which made me feel slightly less mortified. The bed shook from his laughter. "Laura. You're overreacting. Eat your breakfast."

I peeked through my fingers to see his expression.

Amusement. Desire.

Lowering my glance to his six-pack abs, I licked my lips. His hard cock stared up at me. I happily stared back.

"Laura. Eat. You need your strength before we get to that part."

I giggled and ate my breakfast.

Steven's cellphone buzzed on the nightstand beside us. He checked the screen, looked at me, and put a finger to his lips.

I nodded.

“Steven Cox speaking.”

I gingerly placed the tray in front of me and proceeded to crawl off the bed in my best imitation of a stealthy ninja. The mattress was so massive, I felt as if I had to cross miles of terrain to get off it.

“Mr. Ruthers, we need to discuss the Miller investment portfolio.”

Never a day off for my man. The job demanded his attention 365 days of the year. Even on a Sunday during the holidays, he was hard at work.

That wasn't the only thing that was still hard. I glanced down and saw mini-Steven twitch as I got on all fours to slink off the bed. Well, actually, it wasn't exactly mini. I hadn't settled on a nickname yet, but some ideas came to mind. Big Boy, Stupendous Steve, Stevie.

For now, I would call it Stevie.

Stevie had been getting quite the workout over these last four days. It was a wonder it could still spring into action for the task.

Continuing on my mission to get off the bed as quietly as possible, I caught a glimpse of myself in the dresser mirror. Stealthy ninja, I was not. More like a stumbling hippo. Steven watched me with amusement.

“No, Mr. Ruthers, you need to factor in the intrinsic value of the volatility index in order to have a better price estimate of the derivatives...” Steven pinched my ass as I brushed by him.

I suppressed a squeak and glowered at him. A good pinch was always fun, but not when I had to stay in silent mode. Well, two could play that game. Sliding off the bed, I gave my man a full-frontal view of my nakedness. The amusement in his eyes disappeared. Hunger filled them instead as they darkened to a forest green.

I knew what drove him wild. Actually, everything about me seemed to cause Stevie to swell with delight, but this one move always drove both Stevie and Steven wild.

As if he could read my mind, a warning look crossed his face, and he mouthed: *Don't do it.*

Giving him an innocent look, I trailed my fingers over my breasts.

I received another silent warning: *Stop!*

My fingers found their way to my nipples.

His head shook from side to side: *No!*

Then came my signature move. My hands cupped my breasts and squeezed. Stevie twitched, and Steven closed his eyes tight. “What did you say? Please repeat that, Mr. Ruthers.”

The most disciplined man I had ever met was struggling with his concentration. Because of me.

I never imagined I could be an aphrodisiac for anyone, let alone a sexy, high-powered billionaire who could have any woman he wanted.

He might be about fifty in age, but the workouts and healthy eating gave him the stamina of a twenty-five-year-old.

Satisfied with my revenge, I sauntered away. My feet reached the heated marble floor of the luxurious bathroom, but the heat wasn't needed. I was always running on extra hot when I was around my man.

I jumped in the shower and turned a bunch of knobs. I still couldn't remember which knob did what, so I opted for all of them. A warm waterfall cascaded down my head and back, and side jets massaged my body. Sade's greatest hits played on the built-in speakers, ambient lights glimmered in the mist, and the *pièce de résistance*, foot massage jets pulsed under my feet.

Ahhh...

Once I had lathered up my hair, Steven walked into the bathroom and swung open the shower door.

"May I join you, gorgeous?"

Instead of answering with words, I beckoned him with my finger.

Steven hopped in. His eyes darted from one part of my ample body to another, like a kid in a candy shop who had too many delights to look at and didn't know where to start.

"Wash my back," I said, handing him the loofah sponge.

"Yes, ma'am. With pleasure."

He lathered me up, but soon the sponge fell to the floor next to my feet. His growing erection pressed against my back as he wrapped his arms around my chest, resting his chin on my head.

"Your smell is intoxicating, *mon étoile*." He held me in his embrace as the water cascaded over us.

His star? I liked it when he called me that. Was I his shining star? "What do I smell like?"

"Star anise."

Oh. That's why he called me his star. So much for my romantic idea that I was a shining star in his life.

He growled into my neck, sending waves of pleasure throughout my body. I placed my hands over his and guided them to my breasts. Not that he needed much coaxing. His fingers expertly twisted, pinched, and caressed my

nipples, sending ripples of bliss throughout me.

I arched my back and tilted my head to look up at him.

His eyes expressed more than his words. They revealed the same theme every day. Primal hunger. Burning desire. No matter how often he took me, those eyes still had the same expression as they had on Christmas Eve. The same as the first time he saw me naked on his desk.

An intern and her boss: Forbidden.

Sex at the office: Grounds for immediate dismissal.

A man twice my age: Taboo.

He bent down, kissed my cheek, and nibbled on my ear. I reached down and traced circles on my clit.

“Tsk!” He batted my hand away. “That’s my job.” Expert fingers found my nub without hesitation and massaged little figures of eight. His other hand kept the same pace on one of my breasts.

In less than four days, he had become an expert in all that was Laura’s libido. He must have taken mental notes whenever I reacted to his touches. He was a generous lover and a quick learner. My man. My boss.

My hands had nothing to do, so I reached up and grabbed a fistful of his thick hair. My climax was so close. I shifted to the left, angling my other breast into the stream of a jet. The warm water pulsed on my nipple.

Triple treat!

“Ohhhh, Steven!”

And ohhhh, jet!

Steven turned me around, placed his hands on my butt, and lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist. My thighs might have been soft and curvy, but they had incredible strength. I clamped them around his hips and maneuvered my body so that his cock was at my opening.

He wasn’t holding me in place. I was holding myself in the position I wanted to be in. I lowered myself a fraction of an inch and let his tip feel my wetness and warmth.

Steven groaned and dug his fingers into my ass. He tugged me toward him, trying to lower me onto his cock, but I wouldn’t let him.

I rolled my hips so I could feel his tip circling my clit. Teasing him. Pleasuring me.

Once I had thoroughly enjoyed the sensation to the fullest, I slowly lowered myself another inch, only letting his tip penetrate me. He tried to yank me down onto him again, but I tightened my thighs.

I had full control. And the feeling was exhilarating. It wasn't the power I was getting off on. But the fact that a man, who let no one dictate what he should or could do, let *me* take control. And I had become bolder with each passing day.

At first, I was hesitant to take the reins. At work, I was his subordinate and he, the boss. I had to take his orders when it came to work. But between the sheets—and on the dining room table, kitchen island, couch, against the wall, and in the shower—he gradually submitted to my wishes.

He had struggled over the last seventy-two hours to relinquish control. His progress was impressive.

I lifted myself up and down, slowly gliding myself on...off...and back on but only taking in an inch of him. I continued in beat with the jazzy tune of "Smooth Operator" that was playing in the shower.

I worked toward my climax. Slowly. Savoring every moment.

The grunts and groans from Steven told me he was enjoying himself too.

"Laura...*p-p-please*." The word was still so foreign to him. One he'd rarely used in the last twenty-five years but had started using now.

Steven didn't say please. Not to anyone. He gave orders. Took what he wanted. Demanded respect from those around him. A man, full of pride, who never begged for anything.

Until now.

His face strained with the exertion of holding himself back. He was panting. My teasing had tormented him enough.

I relaxed my legs and let my weight drive me down, lowering myself completely onto him.

He moaned and took one step forward.

With my back pressed against the shower wall, he snaked his hands up my sides and grabbed onto my shoulders. His hips thrust in and up while his hands pulled down on my shoulders to bring me slamming onto him with more force.

He drove into me with such strength as if he needed to go even deeper than what was physically possible. His full eight inches fit into me tightly. He was going balls deep with every plunge and grunt, but it didn't seem to be enough for him.

He thrust into me with desperation as if he had been sex-starved for years. Or like a man making love for the last time before a long journey.

As I got closer to my climax, my skin became more sensitive. Our bodies

slapped together, bumping my pleasure into hyperdrive and sending water splashing around us. The jets, no longer a soothing massage, stimulated me with every pulse.

“Laura...gonna come!”

That drove me over the edge, exploding my senses.

As he came, he clung to me as if he was desperate for every inch of our bodies to press together. Joined.

We slumped to the floor. Exhausted from the exertion, he weakly embraced me in silence as water poured down on us like a rainfall. I lay my head on his chest. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat felt like home.

FORTY-ONE



Laura

Forty-three minutes later, Itoweled off and walked into Steven's gigantic walk-in closet. So huge, it felt like I had walked into Saks Fifth Avenue. His designer suits hung neatly, arranged by brand and color.

I could hear Steven's voice in the other room answering another call.

My body was still tingling. We'd done it more times in the last few days than I thought was humanly possible. I stopped counting after twenty-three. Each time was different. Marvelous. Incredible. Stupendous. But always different.

We weren't trying to switch things up. It just kind of happened. We stayed in the moment and let our bodies decide the next action.

For two people who never even sneezed without a strategic plan, these last few days had been completely out of character for both of us.

And entirely liberating. Freeing.

But how would things work once we went back to the office? The unknown scared me. And excited me.

I sat at the vanity and looked at myself in the mirror. Red cheeks. Either from the hot shower or the hot sex. I picked up the comb and began detangling my hair. The pendant around my neck glittered in the reflective glass, the diamonds around the enormous jade stone sparkling.

I turned in my chair and looked around.

I sighed. What was I going to wear?

My only outfits since Christmas Eve were nude, wrapped in a silk sheet, or—my favorite—draped by Steven.

After our Christmas Eve encounter at the office, we had come straight here. We had a combined IQ of 310, but neither of us had anticipated I would need a change of clothing.

Maybe he hadn't expected to beg me to stay another day. And another. And another. We certainly hadn't predicted that I would still be here through Christmas day and the weekend.

Or maybe he did.

Tomorrow, we both needed to return to the office. I would stop by my apartment in the morning before work. I needed clothes. And my own deodorant. Not that men's deodorant couldn't perform the task, but yuck!

Standing in the middle of Steven's closet, surrounded by his designer suits and workout clothes, I decided to give myself a tour. I was curious about what I might find in his closet. The first thing I noticed was his footwear. Shoes in every shade of black, brown, and gray lined the closet walls.

Then I took a peek inside his drawers. One drawer displayed his boxer briefs, neatly folded and organized by color. Luxury brand watches sat in neat rows in three of his other drawers, each drawer housing at least twelve watches. A bit of overkill, if you ask me. How could one man need so many watches?

It reminded me of the time when I was ten years old and my father had taken me shopping. He bought himself three new Rolexes, two Mont Blanc pens, and a pair of diamond cufflinks.

My little legs had struggled to keep up with him as he marched from store to store. Passing the toy store, I saw the new Barbie in the window and squealed with joy. I begged my father to buy me one, but he yanked my arm and said he wouldn't waste money on frivolous things. My younger self had cried all the way home while my father admired one of his new gold watches.

I stared at Steven's watches.

Why so many?

My chest tightened, and the rational Laura in my head crossed her arms and tapped her foot, waiting to say, *I told you so. Men are all the same.*

No! I pushed those thoughts from my mind. Steven was nothing like *that* man. Steven was honest, direct, and had a sense of responsibility, whereas

my father was a narcissist who destroyed the lives of the people he pretended to care about.

Steven could be pretending.

NO! Stop. Go away, you pesky self-sabotaging inner voice. Steven cared about me. I could feel it. He wouldn't throw me away like garbage once he was done with me.

I busied myself by going through his wardrobe to find some clothes that might fit me. But the doubts kept crashing back in. I thought I'd resolved this a couple of days ago on Christmas, but *nooo*. My stupid insecurities reared their ugly head again.

What was I doing here? Breaking my own rules. There was a reason I excluded men from my life plan.

But I found myself wanting to be close to him. To learn everything about him. I already knew so much about my boss, the CFO. And now I was discovering the man away from the office. His true nature. And I wanted to know more. Be with him. Not because I was lonely. Not because I needed to be with someone.

But because I wanted to.

Because it was Steven.

I threw on a pair of sweatpants. They were snug around my waist and hips, and far too long, but I rolled up the hems.

Was I desperate for sex?

No. I may have sworn off relationships, but I still had one-night stands to keep my libido from blowing up like a pressure cooker. It was all strategic and done with clinical detachment.

It had only been six months since my last romp with a stranger I had never seen again. That was enough for me. I didn't have much of a sex drive.

Until now.

Steven awoke a desire within me that had lain dormant for so long. It was no longer about scratching an itch every few months. This yearning to express my erotic feelings for him, with him, was beyond anything I had ever experienced. Greater than anything I could have imagined. It wasn't only about sex. It was about having a connection. Two beings needing to be close. And me needing to express how I felt about him.

Was this love?

Yes. I loved him. I would never risk my career for a man unless it was love. That was the only logical explanation.

“Laura! I’m waiting...” Steven’s voice, full of the promise of carnal pleasures, shook me from my thoughts and made my clit twitch.

“Coming, Loverboy.”

FORTY-TWO



Laura

Work consumed most of our time as soon as we got back to the office on Monday, and late work nights didn't allow any time or energy for us to meet up afterward.

I returned to my place every night and crashed for a few hours before starting again the next day. Apart from a few discreet glances and an occasional pinching of my butt, we didn't get any sexy time. Or alone time in two whole days. I was going through withdrawal.

So, last night I planned something, and I tried it out at home in front of a mirror.

The next day, I sat at my desk fidgeting. I was getting really nervous, and my insecurity was taking over, telling me I was being ridiculous and that Steven would laugh at me.

I stood up, placed my fists on my hips in my Wonder Woman pose, and told my insecurity to *Fuck off! You don't belong here. You're wrong.*

I closed and locked the door to the hall and dashed back to my desk to grab my phone. Marching into Steven's office, I closed his door to the hall and locked it, and I did the same to the adjoining door to Mrs. Barnes's office, even though she was on vacation this week.

"I have a surprise for you, Loverboy," I whispered as I sauntered over to him.

He looked up from his computer screen and grinned. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Push your chair away from your desk," I said.

He followed my order, pushing himself back a few feet and raising his eyebrows questioningly. I stood in front of him, my heart pounding in my chest.

Nerves? A little.

Excitement? Absolutely!

I put my iPhone on his desk and pressed play. As the tango tune "Santa Maria" by Gotan Project filled the room, I closed my eyes and let the music fill my senses. The rhythm and passion of the song begged my body to move sensuously. I swayed my hips to the melody.

I never thought my body was sexy before, but Steven's desire convinced me I was the sexiest woman on earth.

With my newfound confidence about my body's sex appeal, I was excited about moving my curves for my man.

I mimicked the sexy dance moves from the movies *Take the Lead* and *Shall We Dance*.

The hunger in Steven's eyes as he watched me was feral. His ravenous eyes darted from one part of my body to another.

That was all the encouragement I needed.

Any lingering insecurity suddenly vanished.

I closed my eyes and swayed, shimmied, and thrust. I trailed my hands over my curves.

As the rhythm enfolded me, the music seemed palpable, as if it was moving me instead of me moving to it.

As the song ended, I straddled Steven and continued my dance, my breasts shimmying in his face until the music stopped.

I sat down on his lap and instantly, his arms wrapped around my body, and his lips forcefully claimed mine.

He moaned as he pulled me down closer until I could feel his hard cock through his pants. I snaked my hands around his neck and up through his hair, grabbing a fistful of his salt-and-pepper strands.

I pulled, forcing his head back. Forcing him to release his mouth from mine.

We stared into each other's eyes.

I wanted to see him, to look at him.

I needed to see his desire for me in his eyes, not just feel it with his body. His breathing was heavy.

Keeping the pressure on my grip, I ground on his lap against the bulge in his pants. He released me and clutched the arms of his chair as he gulped.

“Ohhh, Laura...” His eyes rolled into the back of his head.

“Look at me!” I commanded.

They fluttered open.

I rode him. Leaning into his body, I pressed my boobs against his panting chest. As I nibbled on his jaw, his intoxicating woody scent filled my senses.

I yearned to be closer to him. I squeezed my legs around his hips, driving our bodies together. His body tensed under mine.

My other hand ran down his chest, undoing the buttons of his shirt as I trailed my fingers along them. I slid my hand over his skin.

I loved the feel of his muscular chest. My thumb found his nipple and lightly flicked it over and over. He bucked under me.

His head strained against the hold I had on it, so I pulled it back another inch. “Not yet, Loverboy.”

I wasn’t playing fair. I knew how sensitive his nipples were, driving him over the edge. He was already struggling to restrain himself.

His eyes, wide and wild, watched as I brought my thumb to my mouth and sucked on it. My wet thumb found its way back to his nipple to tease him even more.

“Arrrgh!” He grabbed my shoulders with more strength than usual as if he was unable to contain himself anymore and had to unleash his passion.

He pulled me down hard, tightly pinning me to his lap. He fought against my grip on his hair and forced his head forward so his lips could ravage mine once more.

I tried to yank his head back, but he didn’t budge, his strength far superior to mine.

The next second, Steven bolted out of the chair with me in his arms and propped me up on his desk. He unzipped, grabbed my wrist, and forced my hand onto his hard cock.

I stroked him.

He let out a primal growl.

As I continued to stroke him, he undid my shirt and popped my breasts out of my bra.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Laura!” His mouth swooped down and

took my nipple. His tongue flicked and teased, and it was my turn to let out carnal sounds, doing my best to muffle them.

I released his cock and wrapped my legs around his waist in a desperate attempt to pull him into me.

The nipple teasing turned to nipple nibbling. He used his teeth, applying the perfect amount of pressure to give me mind-blowing pleasure but straddling the edge of pain.

It was driving me wild. I was so close to my release that my hips bucked wildly under him, wanting him inside of me.

My breath rasped in my throat as I feverishly clutched at his shirt to have something to hang on to.

Steven slid one hand inside my pants and undies. His fingers glided into me as the palm of his hand put pressure on my clit.

I came.

It was a back-arching, hip-bucking, lip-biting, shirt-clutching, and toe-curling type of ecstasy.

After a few minutes for me to catch my breath, I was ready to return the favor.

I pushed him back into his chair and kneeled in front of him.

“Laura, no. We can’t do this again. It’s too risky,” Steven whispered, but his body betrayed him.

His eyes were ravenous. His hands rested on my head without trying to stop me.

“The doors are locked, and you don’t have any meetings today. No one will know.”

I leaned in and trailed kisses on his cock. Then licked it. I took the tip in my mouth as I peeked up at him.

He watched me take him in my mouth, his raw desire on display.

I sucked on his tip, then slid my lips lower, taking in as much of his shaft as I could.

“Ohhh!” His voice quivered as much as his body.

His hands pushed on my head, forcing me to take more of him into my mouth.

But I swatted his arms away.

I sucked on his cock and released it with a *pop*. “I want you to come on my tits.” I squeezed my breasts around his hard cock and moved them up and down, stroking his hard shaft between my soft tits.

“Good God...Laura! Ohhhh!” He gawked at my tits as they bobbed up and down with his cock snuggled between them.

Moans and groans of ecstasy escaped from Steven’s lips as his cum spread across the soft skin of my breasts.

FORTY-THREE



Laura

The next day, I had a very efficient and productive day at work. Mostly because my boss was in back-to-back meetings since the morning, even through his lunch hour.

No sooner would one employee leave his office, another one would enter. We had no alone time whatsoever. We barely even had time to say hello. My door to the hallway was open all day. What was the point of closing it? I wouldn't be able to steal any hidden moments with him.

The adjoining door opened, and Steven walked into my office, letting out a huge, exhausted sigh. Once his tired eyes met mine, he smiled at me until the smile reached his eyes, and he looked instantly rested and happy.

He closed the adjoining door and locked it. Then he crossed to my main door and locked that one too.

My lips curled. Did he have a surprise for me? As I had for him yesterday?

Excitement danced through me. What was he going to do? And why wasn't he doing it yet?

He was still facing away from me.

He fumbled in his blazer pocket, and a few short seconds later, I heard music. My breath hitched as I instantly recognized the soft romantic melody of "At Last" by Etta James. The song made my heart go pitter-patter.

He slowly turned his head around and looked at me from under his dark lashes. There was no smile this time. His eyes, a deep pool. He turned, and in three long strides, he was at my side.

Holding out his hand to me, he said. “Will you dance with me, Laura?”

This was nothing like the surprise I had given him. This was a million times better.

I was silent. Too stunned for words. I had to tell my arm to move so I could place my hand in his.

He waited patiently for me to stand up and gently guided me around my desk and wrapped his other arm around my waist, holding me snugly against his warm, hard body.

I rested a hand on his shoulder as he swayed to the music with me in his embrace. He gazed into my eyes. The silence between us was filled with tenderness.

I lost myself in the blissful abyss. It felt like we were the only two beings in the universe, and we were in perfect harmony. We swayed to the music, moving in a slow dance around my tiny office.

He ran his hand up and down my back, sending shivers of delight over my body. I rested my head on his chest as we moved in unison.

This was the most romantic moment of my life, and I hoped all our days would have these tender moments from now on. He pressed his lips to my forehead in a sweet kiss.

The song ended, but he didn’t stop swaying with me.

We were still dancing when a new song began to play, “I Love You Baby” by Frankie Valli. Steven hummed the tune while we swayed, locked in an embrace. “You’re just too good to be true,” he sang to me.

As the rhythm picked up, Steven followed the beat, twirling me around the office. When I finished spinning, he squeezed me tight. I couldn’t stop myself. I threw my head back and let out a little squeal of delight.

FORTY-FOUR



Laura

New Year's Eve.

Click-clack...click-clack...click-clack.

I glanced up and saw a redhead waltz down the hall in her black leather miniskirt, passing my office and then Steven's.

I huffed and restarted my calculations for the monthly predictions.

Clickity click...clickity click...

My head snapped up in time to see a woman's long blonde hair as she strolled past our offices.

Shit! I'd lost count again.

I zeroed the calculator and started over.

Click...clack click...clack...

Argh! For fuck's sake!

Sheila paraded past my door, her boobs threatening to pop out of her low-cut, skintight dress.

I wasn't biased when I said Steven could have any woman he wanted. The bitches at work were lining up for him. I practically had to beat them off with a stick.

Note to self: buy a stick.

The last three days seemed to be worse than usual. Was the desire to ring

in the New Year with someone instead of as a single spinster driving them to desperation? I glanced at the clock. They had thirteen hours to find a date.

Would I have a date tonight? We hadn't talked about New Year's Eve or the weekend. Would he want to spend more time with me?

Another clicking marathon went past his office.

The constant, not-so-subtle appearances were driving me crazy. How was I supposed to concentrate with that incessant clacking? And why did they all have to wear heels? We were professional women in the Finance Industry, not a bunch of desperate bimbos auditioning for *The Bachelor*.

Click...clack...

I jumped out of my chair and marched to the door.

Slam.

I couldn't blame my co-workers. My infatuation with my boss was greater than theirs. I still couldn't quite understand where my love for Steven came from, but I knew it wasn't about the money. I'd rather earn my own cash.

It wasn't his gorgeous looks either, although I wasn't complaining about his yumminess. But looks weren't enough for me to fall in love. Gorgeous men never affected me. In fact, it was the opposite. I had never trusted hot guys.

Bzzzzz.

I turned my phone over to look at the screen.

Loverboy: You ok?

Me: Yep. Just needed some quiet to work.

Loverboy: I'll send out a memo: No one dare walk in front of the intern's office while she's working!

Me: Humor is not your thing. Stick to numbers.

Loverboy: What??? I'm hilarious! Everyone tells me so.

Me: Does 'everyone' always happen to be female?

Loverboy: Is my little kitten jealous?

Loverboy: Terrible nickname. I retract that last comment.

Loverboy: Is my genius of a girlfriend jealous?

I stared at that last text. The sixth word.

Girlfriend.

I was all butterflies now. He wrote I was his *girlfriend*. He had never said it before. My heart expanded to every corner of the room.

My phone rang, startling me. “Miss Bloom speaking.”

“Is someone in your office?” My boss’s deep husky voice set off fireworks in my panties.

“No, Mr. Cox.”

“Then why so formal?”

“Because we are at work, Mr. Cox.”

“Why didn’t you reply to my text?”

Oh, crap! I was so consumed with excitement over his last text that I forgot to reply.

“Um...I plead the Fifth.”

His deep chuckle coming through the receiver tickled my ear.

My co-workers had told me the Hellhound never laughed. Ever. They were so wrong. He had opened himself up to me and let his true playful nature surface. How long had it been since he could truly be himself around another person?

“Will I need to resort to tickle torture tonight to get an answer?”

Did that mean he wanted me to come over? “Maybe I’ll do the tickling this time.”

“You really are all facets of incredible, Laura.” He cleared his throat.

“Will you have dinner with me tonight? At Logaro’s?”

Oh my God. He was asking me out on an actual date! And on New Year’s Eve. Our first official date. How romantic!

I was about to say a resounding yes when my stomach lurched. What was I going to wear?

Shit! I’d avoided men for so long that I had nothing suitable in terms of dating attire. My closet was almost empty, except for work suits and sweatpants. I could get away with a work suit for a casual outing or dinner, but I had nothing remotely close to acceptable for one of the most expensive restaurants in the city. Did they have a dress code?

“Laura?”

“Why don’t we order in?”

Click.

Not the click of heels in the hallway.

The dial tone sounded through the receiver. Uh-oh.

Steven strode into my office, walked around my desk, and planted himself next to me. “Laura, look at me.”

His eyes searched mine. “We *are* going out tonight.” It wasn’t a question.

He seemed to be staring into my soul. I blinked and averted my eyes.

He gently grabbed my chin and lifted my head. “Talk to me.”

“It’s just that...I have nothing to wear.”

He studied me for what seemed like an eternity. Heat flamed my cheeks in embarrassment. A slight crease formed on his brow, and he released my chin.

Suddenly, he roared with laughter. He slapped the desk three times, his howls getting louder each time.

“Shhh. Steven, stop. People will hear you.”

He grabbed me around the waist and stood up, jerking me out of my chair and lifting me along with him. His shoulders were still shaking and making my whole body convulse.

When his fits of laughter subsided, he held me even tighter. “Christ, woman. You had me scared. Me. Actually scared. That’s a new one for me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I thought you had changed your mind already and didn’t want to go on a date with me.”

Of course, I wanted to go on a date with him. I was even surprised by it. Spending time together was one thing, but officially dating felt like the next level. I didn’t date. Neither did he. This was bigger for both of us than fucking on his desk or having a four-day sexfest in his condo over the holidays.

We were taking risks and would need to be super discreet, but we could do this. Logaro’s had private dining rooms, perfect for two people in a secret office romance.

—l@s

I dashed into the elevator.

“Hold the elevator!” Andrew said from behind me.

No! No! No!

Any other day, I’d have been thrilled to go out for lunch with him. But how would I explain that I needed to shop for a dress to wear on a date with

my boss, who I'm not supposed to be sleeping with? How did I get myself into this?

I repeatedly jabbed my finger at the *close door* button, but Andrew's hand snuck in just as they started to close. Then whoosh, the safety sensor kicked in, and the doors opened.

Fuck!

"*Giirrrrrlllll*, you would not *believe* the morning I've had."

"Oh, hey...there, um, buddy." I shuffled from one foot to the other.

"I just had a talk with John about this. Mr. Reed sent me yet another complaint"—he pushed the lobby button, and our descent began—"and I quote, 'the lack of competence in the HR department with regard to letting twits into our establishment' blah, blah, blah."

Sweat dripped down my back.

I squirmed.

"I mean, first of all, what is his obsession with the word *twit*? And second, who the *hell* does he think he is, telling ME that MY team is incompetent? For someone who hates Mr. Cox, he sure as hell mimics him." He threw his arms up in exasperation. "And if everyone was so incompetent, then how are we the best in the industry on a global scale, and...Laura?" He waved his hand in front of my face. "Hellooo? Laura?" He peered at me over the top of his glasses.

"Yep. I'm listening." The squeak in my voice gave me away.

"*Humph*. Honey, you expect me to believe that? Come on. Tell me. What. Is. Going. On?"

My nervous laugh echoed off the elevator's walls. "Nothing. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ohhh, I *know* what's happening here." He nodded to himself.

Oh, no.

"Oh honey, it's ok. I know the holidays are really hard on single people." He grabbed me in a surprisingly strong bear hug for such a skinny guy. "I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner. You poor thing. You must be so lonely."

I had to lie, even though I hated lying. Andrew might already suspect that there was something between me and Steven, especially after the Christmas Eve office party, but I wouldn't implicate him in this. "Mm-hmm."

Andrew patted my back. "Sweetie, you're gonna spend New Year's Eve with me and Jackson. I won't let you be alone tonight."

Nooooo! How do I get out of this? “Don’t be silly. I can’t barge in on your romantic evening. Nope. I won’t stand for it.” I pushed away from his hug.

The elevator doors opened, and we walked out into the lobby as he took his phone out. “No way. I’m texting Jackson right now to tell him to add a plate for you.”

I yanked his phone away from him. “No!”

Putting a hand to his heart, he said, “Where is this *aggression* coming from?”

“Oh, sorry.” I gave back his phone and softened my tone. “But I can’t go out tonight. I have...I have an outing with a friend. Kenny’s in town, and he’s taking me out.” My voice got louder with each lie.

He watched me over the top of his glasses. “*Humph*. Let’s go eat. I’m starving.” He grabbed my hand and led me to the Starbucks on the other side of the lobby.

As we ate, he told me all about Mr. Reed’s complaint and other tidbits of office gossip. I half-listened and gave the necessary “oh really?” and head nods to show that I was engrossed in his stories.

But my mind was busy devising escape strategies. Steven told me to take the time I needed to get a dress, but I didn’t want to overdo it. I didn’t want to give my haters more ammo. Shopping on company time was not professional.

My cell phone rang. I checked the screen. “Hello, Mr. Cox.”

“Yes, hello, Ms. Bloom. I need you to go to the deli two blocks away to pick up my lunch.” His voice was loud enough for Andrew to hear.

“Right away, Mr. Cox.” I jumped up, waved Andrew goodbye, and sprinted away. “Thank God you called. I was trapped.”

“I know.”

“Were you in the lobby?”

“No.”

“So how?”

“I plead the Fifth.”

“What? That makes no sense?”

“Go buy your dress, shoes, lipstick, and whatever else you need to give me a yes for tonight’s date.”

The word date bounced around in my mind, like the happy bouncing Tigger from Winnie the Pooh.

“Oh, and Laura.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I love watching you wiggle like that.”

I spun around, scanning the entire lobby. “Where are you?”

“My office.”

I gasped. “Noooo...Are you watching me on the security monitors?”

“No comment. Goodbye.”

FORTY-FIVE



Laura

Less than one hour later, bags in hand, I walked back into the building's lobby. Mr. Reed, with his chest puffed out like a bloated peacock, blocked my path to the turnstile.

"Ms. Bloom, may I have a word in private?"

With a forced respectful tone, I said, "I have to get back to my office."

His lips twisted into a sneer. "This won't take long." He turned his phone toward me. On the screen was a picture of me and Steven walking outside at night. He swiped the screen. A picture of me and Steven in his car, probably from Christmas Eve when I went home with him. He swiped the screen again. Another picture slid into view of...

I gasped.

No. This couldn't be happening. What had I done? Why didn't I stick to my original plan?

His sadistic, triumphant laugh grated on my nerves. "I wanted you to know that you're done, you twit. You'll be out of here before the end of the day."

Acid burned my throat. My career was over before it even began. I would lose my internship. And rumors would spread throughout Wall Street, ruining my chances of getting another job. I'd fucked up. I'd broken my own rule. My only rule. Focus on my career and now it was over.

He started to turn away.

Panic seized me. I had to do something. It wasn't just my career at stake. Suddenly, I dropped my bags, grabbed him by the shirt, and pushed him against the wall. "How did you get this last picture?"

Some of the suits walking by stared at us, but I ignored them.

Mr. Reed's sneer grew bigger. "Does it matter? I have it. I dare say that this proves that not only was there inappropriate behavior between an executive and his intern, but there was a gross misuse of company furniture. Desks weren't made for fucking, you whore. You and that arrogant prick are done."

We were done. Had he shown the pictures to anyone yet? How could I stop him from revealing them? "And what about you?"

His grimy hand wrapped around my wrist, making my skin crawl. He yanked on my arm, but I tightened my grip on his shirt.

"I'll be promoted once I get rid of that asshole," he said, still pulling on my wrist.

Steven will get fired. He'll hate me. Oh God, I've ruined his career. "You idiot. You think Mr. Cox will go down without a fight? He'll take you down with him. And if he doesn't, you're done anyway."

His nails dug into my skin. "I'll be a hero in the eyes of the chair."

What do I do? He wants Steven gone. He wants to be buddy-buddy with the chair. How do I convince him this isn't the way? "You think the company wants a man like you, a man who spies on his superior and conspires against him? How did you get this picture? You broke into your superior's office and planted a hidden camera, didn't you? Not only did you break company rules, but you broke the law too."

His smile faltered.

I was on the right track. He just needed more convincing. "They'll never trust you. If you show these to anyone, you're signing your own letter of dismissal. And your arrest warrant."

He shook his head, but there was doubt in his eyes. "No. The chair would protect me. He'll be happy to get rid of the Hellhound," he said in a way that sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Even if I could successfully convince Reed to drop this, he could change his mind any day, and then he would hold this over Steven's head forever. I needed to get my hands on those pics. "Ha! You fool. Wake up. He'll be happy to get rid of you too. He'll want to tidy up the loose ends. That's you.

Then you'll be done."

His brow furrowed, and he looked away for a moment. I had distracted him enough that he dropped his guard. Now was my chance. I let go of his shirt and grabbed the phone out of his hand.

"Hey, give that back!" His nails scratched my skin as I turned away.

He tried to grab me, but holding the phone out of his reach, I sidestepped him, then bolted to the women's bathroom.

I locked myself in one of the stalls, hoping he wouldn't barge in. My fingers shaking, I deleted the pictures and the copies he had saved in the cloud. Then I checked his emails. It looked like he hadn't sent them to anyone yet, so I checked the draft folder and there it was. An email addressed to the chair. I deleted it. Then I tapped on the delete folder and cleared those.

I checked his texts. His social media.

After checking everything I could think of, I dumped his phone in the toilet and flushed it. I knew it was too big to go down the drain, but it felt good anyway. Was water enough to destroy a cell?

I wasn't taking any chances. I fished it out, threw it onto the floor, and stomped on it a few times until it cracked. It was probably pointless, though. He likely had copies somewhere else. But I had to try.

For Steven's sake.

I wasn't even thinking about my career anymore. All I could think about was Steven.

If that picture leaked, things would be worse for him than for me. He was in a position of authority. People would see a powerful executive taking advantage of his intern and fucking her on his desk.

I had ruined both our careers. And for what?

Lust?

My heart ached, and pain spread through my chest.

No. Not lust. It was more than that. But still. Whatever it was, it couldn't go on. I had to protect him.

I wouldn't let that leech Reed ruin Steven's career. He had worked so hard to get where he was. I wouldn't let anyone bring him down. Not because of me.

I could pick up the pieces and start over. I wasn't known yet in this industry. But Steven was. Everyone on Wall Street knew his name. He would never live this down.

I couldn't stay here with him. It would be impossible for us to stay away

from each other if we kept working side by side. The hunger we felt was too intense. The desire for each other, too magnetic.

There was only one solution.

My heart shattered into pieces when I realized it. But it was the only way.

Tears filled my eyes as I resigned myself to what I had to do. I would do whatever it took to protect Steven. Even if it was unbearably painful.

I rushed out of the bathroom and ran straight into Reed, who was hovering like a vulture, his outstretched hands reaching for me. I brushed past him and ran out of the building.

I sprinted down the sidewalk, my lungs burning and my legs aching. I looked over my shoulder. No one was following me. I slowed to a walk, sucking in air, pressing a hand to the stitch in my side. Every few seconds, I looked over my shoulder, but no one I knew was on the crowded sidewalk. Not Reed. Not Steven.

Still panting, I finally reached my car, hopped in, and drove away.

On the way to my apartment, I tried to come up with a plan. I had to end it between Steven and me. But how?

I thought about calling him or meeting him somewhere, but if I heard his voice or saw him, I would waver, and then I wouldn't be able to go through with it. Even now, I wasn't sure I could go through with it at all. Every mile I drove further away from him made the pain in my chest intensify.

My phone rang.

But I didn't pick up.

I kept driving, pushing through the pain.



I arrived at my apartment, but I couldn't stay there. Steven knew where I lived. He would come looking for me and I would cave in and he would lose his job.

So, I packed my bags. Not having a lot of things to my name, it didn't take long.

My phone dinged.

Loverboy: What happened? Are you ok?

My phone rang.

Then dinged.

Then rang.

Then dinged.

I ignored all the messages and ran back to my car with my meager belongings.

I had to end it. But I was still convincing myself of that. Which was hard to admit, even as I was driving away from him. To protect him.

My heart was breaking. Tears blurred my vision.

I couldn't stay in the city either. Not now. Not yet. If I did, I would lose my resolve and go back. Back to my Wall Street job. Back to my boss. Back to the man I loved.

But it was too risky. Only one of us could stay.

An hour later, I stopped for fuel and checked my phone messages.

There were twenty-one missed calls. Most of them from Steven. Five from Andrew and three from Kenny.

I would listen to the messages later. Instead, I checked my texts.

Andrew: Girl, what's happening? Cox said Reed upset you. What's going on, hon?

Where are you? You shouldn't be alone right now. Let me help you.

What did Reed do to you? Cox is having a fit.

Oh shit, Cox just punched Reed!

Daaamn. Cox almost punched me!

Girl, you've got to come back. Take his call before he punches everyone out.

Then I tapped on Steven's messages.

Loverboy: Why aren't you answering?

I checked the cameras. You bolted out. What happened?

Just checked the playback and saw you fight with fuckin' Reed.

What happened? Are you hurt? Where are you?

Andrew says he doesn't know where you are.

I called Kenny, and he says he doesn't know where you are.

Where are you? I'm gonna go find Reed.

Fuckin' Reed won't tell me what happened.

Answer your phone.

Come back. We'll handle Reed together.

Me to Andrew: I'll call you later. I'm fine. Really. Sorry to worry you. I quit. Pls process the paperwork. I'll explain later.

I hesitated before texting Steven. It wasn't right to break up with him by text. I felt like such a coward. But it had to be done and in such a way that he would believe it was real, or else he would know that I was making it up. If only he hadn't seen the fight between me and Reed in the lobby.

Every time I thought I had figured out what to say, I realized he would see right through it. He would never willingly believe that I would quit my job and give up my career. There was only one thing I could do to make him believe it.

I had to hurt him as badly as Barb had so that his pain would blind him to my lies.

Me to Loverboy: I'm leaving you and going back to Kenny. I don't care about you. Never did and never will. I only used you to advance my career. You were right. Wall Street is filled with sharks, and I don't have the strength to fight them anymore. Reed was just being Reed, but I don't want to deal with men like that anymore. And I don't need to because I have Kenny. So, I quit my job. I don't need you anymore. Kenny has always been my home. He knows how to take care of a woman. Goodbye.

I felt like a hundred blades were shredding through my heart with each word I texted. By the end of it, my entire body was shaking, but it was the kind of pain I welcomed as punishment for hurting him so much.

I blocked Steven's number as soon as I sent the last text. I didn't want his reply to sway me. I would do this for him. It was the only way to protect him and everything he had worked toward for almost three decades. I wouldn't let a fling with me ruin him.

Texts from Andrew began flooding my screen, but I wouldn't read those now either. I turned off my phone, put it in my purse, and allowed the tears to fall.

Half an hour later, my chest still heaving, I wiped my eyes and got back on the road. I was heading to my favorite forest, located a few hours away.

Once I got there, I would go for a hike to clear my head. And continue to cry.

FORTY-SIX



Steven

My hand went slack. The phone slid from my palm and crashed to the floor.

The hammering of my heart was deafening.

No. It couldn't be.

She was lying. She had to be. She would never use anyone. She was a good person. She would never have used me like that. But then...maybe she would, and I just hadn't seen it coming.

I hadn't seen it coming with Barb either all those years ago. I thought Laura was different from all the other women, but maybe she wasn't.

I grabbed my computer monitor and flung it across the room. It slammed into the wall and fell to the floor as I dropped to my knees, clenched my fists, and bellowed.

She wasn't different at all.

Was that all I had been to her? A means to advance her career?

John came running into my office. "Steven! What the hell! Andrew said Laura quit, and you were having a fit." He closed the door and sat on the edge of one of the chairs next to my slumped body. "Buddy, what happened? Andrew says you punched Reed. Are you out of your fucking mind? I know you care about this chick, but for Christ's sake, you can't assault an employee."

"ARRGHHH!" I jumped to my feet and grabbed John by his shirt, lifting

him off the chair. “GET OUT!”

He didn’t struggle. Instead, he let his body relax and looked at me as if I was a child having a temper tantrum. He lowered his voice and used a soothing tone. “Steven, buddy. Talk to me. What’s going on?”

I let him go. I paced the floor.

“She’s just like all the other women in this city,” I said. “Ruthless. Selfish. Greedy.”

“We work in the trading world. Everyone here is greedy and ruthless. Especially you. That’s what made you two a great couple. You both had a drive unmatched by most, ambition for success and wealth, but deep down you’re both good people, even if you are a grumpy bastard on the outside. Neither of you ever screwed someone over to get what you wanted.”

“She used me. To advance her career.”

“Then why did she quit? That doesn’t help her career.”

“She went back to that Kenny prick.”

“The guy who’s been after her for years, but she’s always rejected? No way. I don’t buy it. You’re not thinking clearly, man. Get your anger under control so you can see through the storm clouds.”

I drew in a deep breath through clenched teeth. It wasn’t working. I didn’t need to calm down to see the truth. “She fucking left me. It doesn’t matter why. She didn’t need me, and she took off. Just like Barb did when she found someone better.”

John returned to the chair and settled in, smoothing out his shirt. “Andrew said something about Reed.”

“Fucking Reed. Andrew shouldn’t have stopped me after one punch. It’s all his fault. He upset her, and she decided to leave this job and me to go back home. To Kenny.”

John barked out a laugh.

Was the jackass laughing at my pain? “Shut the fuck up, John!”

“You’re such an idiot. Since when did Laura let a guy like Reed get to her? She went through hell to get here. A shit like Reed wouldn’t make her change her mind.”

That sounded slightly logical, but there was no other explanation.

John steepled his fingers. “Didn’t you say her career was her dream? People don’t change lifelong dreams over a lunch break.”

I hated to admit it, but maybe he was right. Even if she changed her mind about me, she wouldn’t quit this internship, no matter how awkward things

would have been between us after a breakup.

John stood up. “Laura is a fighter. She doesn’t take the easy road. Whatever she’s doing right now is her way of fighting.”

I stopped in my tracks. That made sense. She was like that. But fighting what?

“And I bet you a hundred grand,” John said, “that the thing she’s fighting for right now is you.”

“Don’t be a fucking moron. She already had me.”

“I didn’t say she was fighting to *have* you. I said she was fighting *for* you. I know women, Stevieboy. You’ve got a lioness watching your back. You have to trust me on this. So, what are you going to do about it?”



I honked at the prick who cut me off. I glanced at my phone that was hooked to the dash. No new texts.

What was Laura thinking? Why hadn’t she come to me? Could John be right? Or was I about to make a fool of myself and get rejected again?

Whatever Reed had told her couldn’t have been that bad. Did he have something on me? On her?

Didn’t she trust me to take care of it and protect her? Didn’t she know I would do whatever it took to keep her safe, no matter what?

My GPS had me turning left, then right, then onto an on-ramp.

I was now speeding down the highway.

Kenny better be fucking right about her destination, or else I was going the wrong way and would lose her forever.

My chest constricted. Why would she go so far? Maybe she never cared about me in the first place?

No, Reed said something to upset her. To scare her. John had good instincts about these things, and I had to believe he was right about this.

I floored the gas pedal, zigzagging between cars on the freeway.

When I had called Kenny from the office, he had said his best guess was that she was going to her favorite forest. I hoped he was right about her going back to her hometown. If he was wrong, then I was wasting time, and Laura was getting even further away from me.

A car in the fast lane was going way too slow for my taste. I tailgated him

and honked my horn.

As soon as he changed lanes, I punched it. As I watched the speedometer hit 100 mph, I just hoped there were no cops around.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I spotted her beat-up Miata pattering along in the right lane.

I slammed on the brakes and slowed until my car was next to hers. Then I honked.

Laura jumped, looked over at my car, and gasped. Her eyes were puffy and watery, and tears stained her cheeks.

It pained me to see her like that, like a stab through my heart. What the fuck had Reed done to her? I would break every bone in his body.

We were approaching a truck stop, so I motioned for her to pull over, but she shook her head and mouthed *no*.

Stubborn woman. I sped up and nudged my car close to her front bumper. She veered off the highway and pulled into the rest area, screeching to a stop.

When she stormed out of her car, she said, “You almost drove my car off the road. Are you fucking crazy?”

FORTY-SEVEN



Steven

I jumped out of my car. “YES! I AM. That’s the effect you have on me. I’m crazy for you. I won’t let you leave without telling me why.”

“I told you it’s over. I don’t want to be with you. Leave me alone.”

My mouth went dry. Had I made a mistake coming after her?

I softened my tone and said, “No! Please, Laura. Tell me what happened. I know something happened. You wouldn’t leave me. You wouldn’t leave your job without a good reason.”

“Exactly.” She hugged herself and looked up. “I have a good reason. I don’t want to be with you.”

It couldn’t be true. I refused to believe it. I heard the words, but her voice...and those tears. “You’re lying. You—”

She turned and climbed back into her car. I bolted toward her and threw myself on my knees, blocking the door from closing. “Laura, please. Talk to me. I’m not leaving until you tell me what happened.”

“Go away, Steven. It’s for...the...best.” She choked on her words, barely able to get them out.

I cupped her trembling hand in mine. “You’re what’s best for me. Only you.”

Finally, she looked at me, and I saw the agony in her eyes. “I’m doing this for you. To protect you.”

John was right. But from what? And why? It was my job to protect her. Not the other way around. I needed to protect her. I needed to take that pain away, but I didn't know how.

I inched forward. "What do you mean?"

"Reed has pictures of us doing it on your desk on Christmas Eve. He had hidden cameras installed in your office."

My blood boiled. I would kill him. The prick. The bastard. And he had threatened Laura with the pics, instead of threatening me. The fucking coward.

I wanted to soothe Laura. Offer her words of comfort. Promises I would protect her, make everything right.

But my anger at Reed bubbled up into my throat. I let go of her hand. My fists clenched. I dug my nails into my palms until I drew blood. I had to release that rage before I could step up and be what Laura needed me to be.

I jumped to my feet and walked away from her car. Looking up at the sky, I bellowed a war cry filled with fury.

Some truckers, a few parking spots away, eyed me suspiciously. One of them approached Laura, probably worried that she needed help. She spoke to him briefly, and he walked away.

I forced myself to calm down. When my anger subsided, I was hit with the realization of what Laura had done. What she had sacrificed. For me.

She had risked her career to protect me. Her job was the most important thing in the world, and she had quit for my sake.

She didn't leave me because she didn't have feelings for me. She left because she loved me. She had never said it, but she didn't have to.

She loved me.

I walked back to Laura and got into the passenger seat of her car. She was sobbing, her face buried in her hands.

I wrapped my arms around her and held her to me. "It's ok," I said, caressing the back of her head. "Shhh. I'll handle it. I'll fix it. I'll protect you and your career." I kissed her forehead.

"You can't protect my career without destroying your own. You have more to lose than I do. I'm just starting out. I'll come back in six months or a year once things have settled and find a job somewhere else."

She was right. It was too dangerous for us to keep working together. Even if I dealt with Reed, there were probably already rumors about us.

And there would definitely be rumors flying around today. Too many

people had seen Laura and Reed fight. And too many people had seen me punch Reed. Someone was bound to find out about our relationship, and it would ruin both our careers and reputations.

But I wouldn't let her sacrifice herself for me. She was built for this business, and this internship was her golden ticket. I knew exactly what I had to do.

I gently pulled her hands away from her face and looked into her eyes. "I will fix this. Neither of us has to make any sacrifices. I promise. We can still be together, Laura."

"How?" she asked, blinking the tears away.

"Come back to the city. I want to celebrate New Year's Eve with my girlfriend. I'll tell you my plan over supper."

She shook her head. "It's no use. We—"

I put my finger to her lips. "I don't want to hear it. Not until you hear me out first. I'll tell you everything over supper. Please, Laura. Trust me.

Trust in us."

FORTY-EIGHT



Laura

Hours later, we stepped into the hotel elevator. More like I wobbled like a gnome while he stalked like a lion.

Damn heels. I clutched his arm for support.

But I wasn't going to complain. And I would push all the fear, sadness, and anxiety about our jobs and our relationship away for a few hours.

I had promised Steven one more night. So, I would enjoy this evening as we rang in the New Year together.

I smoothed out my dress, my fingers snagging on the sequins.

After making a mad dash through every plus-size boutique within a five-block radius on my lunch break, I had finally found a red sequin dress that hugged all my curves in the most flattering way. The saleswoman had told me I looked like a goddess.

Obviously, I was doubtful. She had just wanted to make a sale. Her comment had embarrassed me. Steven ogled my breasts. The dress revealed a tad too much cleavage for my comfort, but he seemed to thoroughly enjoy the plunging neckline. "Good God, Laura, you are a goddess."

My body was reacting very differently now than it had when the saleswoman had said it. Every one of my cells seemed to vibrate at a higher intensity. I stood to my full height. Head held high. Shoulders back. Tits out. I was embodying the goddess within me. The four-inch heels didn't hurt

either.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to keep my hands off you until after midnight.” His hands cupped my butt as he pressed himself against me.

“Down, boy! The doors are about to open.” He was droolworthy in his black Valentino tuxedo.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened onto the sixty-third floor of the hotel. We walked out into the reception area of Logaro’s, the five-star fine cuisine restaurant.

The hostess led us through the dining area, which was filled to capacity, while I buried my face in Steven’s armpit.

He chuckled. “Relax. No one we know will be here. They can’t afford it.”

“Oh yes, they can. The CEO, for one. Then the chair, other directors, other board members.”

“John knows about us, but he would never say anything. And everyone else who can afford this place is at home with their families.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep. I had Mrs. Barnes check with their assistants. Plus, I paid the manager to show me the reservation list. We’re safe.”

We walked past the live band playing the top hits of the year. Every table in the restaurant was full of people dressed in designer ensembles. “How did you get a reservation at the last minute?”

“I called a couple on the reservation list and made them an offer they couldn’t refuse.”

“You *threatened* them?” I slapped his arm.

He threw his head back and laughed. “I guess that would have been cheaper. But no. They’ll be spending a one-week holiday in the Bahamas. If we didn’t have to be back at work on Monday, I would have whisked you away to an isolated island so that you couldn’t run away again.”

“I’m not going to run away.” At least not tonight.

We entered a private dining room, and the hostess closed the door as she left. I looked around at all the decorations and streamers. Above us, there was a net holding hundreds of champagne-colored balloons to the ceiling. A string attached the net to a lever with a timer on it. Three hours to go.

Steven opened the door to the balcony.

He reached out his arm and waited for me to take his hand. We stepped out onto the private balcony. Stars twinkled above us. The balcony was huge, bigger than my apartment. To get to the railing, we passed a bistro table, two

chairs, and one enormous sofa.

We stood hand in hand, looking out at the city that was breaking out into parties on every street, listening to the loud cheers and honking cars below.

Steven turned to me and took my face in his hands. “You’re magnificent, Laura.” He leaned down and placed his lips on mine, warming them from the chill of the winter breeze.

Soon after, we held each other in a tender embrace and just breathed... together. Enjoying each other’s presence. Our hearts connecting as one. Our souls joining together.

Was it a mistake to come back? It would be even harder to leave tomorrow.



After the main course, the server topped up our champagne glasses and laid out some chocolate delights. “Will there be anything else, sir? The countdown will begin shortly.”

“No, that’s all. We don’t want to be disturbed again.” Without looking at the man, Steven waved his hand dismissively. “We have everything we need.”

“Very good, sir.”

I smiled politely at the server. “Thank you very much. Everything was wonderful.”

“Thank you, miss.” He returned a nervous smile while looking sideways at my date. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.” He scurried out, closed the door behind him, and locked it.

“Why did he lock the door?”

“Here’s my plan,” he said, completely ignoring my question. “Listen carefully. And know that it is non-negotiable.”

I gulped, not wanting to talk about this now. I wanted to keep pretending that we were a normal couple and that everything was fine.

“You, *mon étoile*, will go back to work as the intern for the CFO.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Steven put up his hand. “Remember, this is non-negotiable. As I was saying, you return to your job and I, on the other hand, will quit mine and—”

“NO!” I jumped up from my seat. “No. No. No. I knew it. I knew your

plan would be shit. This is insane. There was only one solution, and you stopped me. I shouldn't have listened to you."

"Laura, beautiful, please sit down and let me finish. I haven't even gotten to the best part, yet."

I huffed and sat down to humor him, but I would not let him ruin his career for me.

"This is a win-win situation. I'll start a hedge fund company. I'll no longer need to answer to that fucking chair ever again. He's been trying to get rid of me for a year now, so I'll beat him to it."

A hedge fund company. If he had enough clients, he could be hugely successful. With his reputation in the trading world, investors would line up to throw their money at him. It would be totally different from his CFO position, but with his personality and brilliant mind, Steven could make it work. And he could potentially make even more money than he did now.

But he would be doing it alone, without his best friend and business partner. "But Wealth Asset Group has been your life for over twenty-five years. You can't just quit like that." Not because of me.

"I promised I would protect you, and I will. You're worth it. This is the only way. Unless you also want to quit and come work for me as an analyst."

An analyst's position? I hadn't even done two months of internship. Was I ready for that? No. I didn't want the job because my boyfriend offered it to me. I wanted to earn it. "I want to finish my internship. But not if you have to quit your job." This was too big of a change for him. He might end up regretting it. Might end up resenting me. "I'm not sure about this, Steven."

"Then let's discuss it more tomorrow. It's almost midnight, and I want to enjoy myself." He plucked a chocolate-covered strawberry from the dessert platter and reached over to me. "Here."

He was right. We could talk more tomorrow. Maybe then he would come to his senses.

I grabbed the strawberry with my tongue, licking his fingers as my lips closed over them, and winning myself a wink. My teeth bit through a rich layer of decadent chocolate and sweet juicy strawberry, the flavors mingling on my tongue.

He picked up his champagne glass and pointed to mine with his head. "A toast. To my beautiful Laura. May the New Year reward you for all your hard work. My wishes for you, a permanent position at a top firm after your internship, a portfolio that doubles in size, and"—he lowered his voice a few

octaves—“lots and lots of sexy time with me.”

I didn't know what the future held. I wasn't sure his plan could work.

FORTY-NINE



Laura

But I wouldn't ruin our night. So, I played along.

"Thank you. Thank you. And *yes, please!*" I thought about wishing him luck with the hedge fund, but that didn't feel right. He was forced into this decision because of me. "What wishes should I grant a man who already has everything?"

"I don't have everything. Not yet."

"Then what are your New Year's resolutions?"

"I don't make resolutions. That's a recipe for failure. I create and implement strategies to reach my goals. This year's plan is a game changer. The stakes are higher. But the rewards should be beyond anything I've ever imagined."

"Fine. Fine. Mr. Fussy Pants. Then what are your goals for the new year? Besides your entrepreneurial endeavors." My arm was getting tired of holding up the glass, waiting for the clink.

"Something I've never had. Something I've secretly wanted my entire life, but I stubbornly never made time for. A wish that never came true."

He gazed into my eyes. A sweet, nervous smile curled on his lips. "I... thought it would...be obvious by now."

I nodded. "Yes. Yes. Your own company. To be your own boss."

"No." He shook his head and swallowed hard. "Love."

My heart skipped a beat. We hadn't said the L-word. Yes, I knew I loved him, and I would do anything and everything for him, even sacrifice my career. And I thought...felt that he loved me too, especially since he was willing to quit his job to protect me. And not only to protect me, but to let me hold on to *my* dreams. He was ready to sacrifice the position that took him years of corporate climbing to achieve so I could have my chance. So, he didn't have to say the words.

"You, Laura. I want you. A life with you." He gazed at me adoringly. "I love you."

I gasped. Even though I knew he would say it, I still wasn't ready for my reaction when I heard his deep voice say those words.

My glass hit the table with a thud, and the champagne spilled out on the crisp white tablecloth. My heart raced. The butterflies in my gut, which seemed to be my constant companion these days, fluttered with excitement.

He loved me. And I believed him. Believed I'd be safe with him. He looked at me with the kind of adoration that my father had never had when he looked at Mom. Steven would never hurt me. He would never leave me. The proof was that he was willing to make sacrifices for my happiness.

He was the opposite of my dad, who expected everyone to change their ways to please him. Even Kenny wouldn't have done this. He would have made sacrifices for me, sure, but according to what he felt was best for me. Not taking into account what I wanted. That's why he'd always tried to talk me out of coming to Wall Street. He wanted me to marry him so I could stay home, where he could keep me safe from the world. That wasn't love. That was control. He thought he knew better than I did what was best for me.

But Steven wasn't like that. He was sacrificing himself so I could pursue *my* dream. A man whose sole ambition for the past twenty-five years was to lead a multibillion-dollar global corporation had suddenly changed his priorities.

Not because we got caught.

But because he loved me.

He wanted *me*.

His voice, which normally oozed sex appeal, now held a sweet tone that seemed to speak directly from his heart.

Love.

Was I ready to change my priorities too?

I already had when I tried to quit earlier. I had chosen him over my

career. We would find a way. He was right. His plan would work. We could be together. He had found a compromise he was willing to make when it came to his dream so that we could both stay in the industry.

I reflexively clutched the emerald pendant around my neck. The one he had gifted me at Christmas.

I had to push my fears away and trust my heart.

Trust him.

Why was it so difficult? Did I still fear rejection? A part of me still believed that he would tire of me once he had his fun. That he was confusing love with the thrill of a forbidden office romance. Men like Steven lived for challenges. They got off on the danger. That's what made them phenomenal investment traders.

Only a shadow of fear lingered in my heart, but the layers of trust that had built up outweighed that. Besides, fear had never stopped me from reaching a goal, and I wasn't about to let it start now. I would approach this relationship the same way I lived my life. Take the challenges head-on. No regrets.

Not just for me, but for him, too. The overwhelming need to let this man know he was loved was greater than my fear.

As Steven studied me, I could see his eyes revert to a blank stare. I was taking too long to reply, and he was putting up his walls.

"I...Steven, I...love you," I stammered. They were words I had never said to any man.

He eyed me suspiciously. It wasn't good enough. I needed for this man to know the depth of my feelings, not some blubbery, half-hearted declarations. "I love you, Steven. With all my heart."

The noise from the outer dining area was deafening as everyone cheered "Happy New Year", blew on kazoos, and pulled poppers. The shouts, honking cars, and fireworks from outside added to the racket.

"I LOVE YOU," I shouted, hoping he could hear me over the noise.

A shower of balloons fell over us. We stared at each other, our chests heaving. His mask had lifted, and his beautiful face was full of tenderness, desire, and relief.

And love.

With one swoop of his arm, he cleared the table of plates, food, drinks, and most of the balloons. He lunged across the table, scooped me up into his arms and claimed my lips.

We clasped each other, trying to get even closer. Our bodies were pressed

tightly together, but it wasn't enough. It was as if our physical forms were preventing our souls from joining even closer.

I thrust my breasts into his chest. He pulled me in tighter. My hands ran over his body, trying to find the best place to grasp him, to pull him closer to me.

Our tongues engaged in a tango-like dance. He tasted of champagne, wildflowers, and delicious masculine sexiness.

He grabbed my butt and lifted me off the floor. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he walked out onto the balcony, carrying me in his arms. He gently laid me down on the sofa and hurried to take off his jacket.

I yanked him down by his bowtie and desperately tried to untie it. I gave up after 1.5 seconds and ripped his shirt open, buttons flying everywhere.

Big, strong hands reached under my dress and ripped off my undies. I tore open his belt and unbuttoned his pants. The hunger in our eyes intensified with each passing moment.

He wiggled his pants off and hiked my dress up to my waist. Our lips found each other, and we kissed with urgency, the tenderness now gone. We were desperate for each other. He reached between his legs and guided the tip of his shaft to my opening.

“Oh, Laura...I...love you...I...need you...” He thrust into me, filling me up, stretching me completely. We groaned into each other's mouths.

He humped me hard and fast.

My hips matched his quickening pace. The need to reach our peak together drove us.

Our proclamations of love for each other had opened up a whole other level of desperate desire. The floodgates were fully open, and we held nothing back this time. The force of our feelings spilled out of us. Burning love and immense hunger.

It was so powerful that words, thoughts, and any tenderness disappeared, and primal instinct took over.

No holding back.

No inhibitions.

We completely opened up to each other. In body, mind, and soul. The sex was carnal, but my heart overflowed with the love I received from this man and with the love I poured into him.

Sexual pressure surged within me. Every contact with him was so electrically stimulating, I felt like sparklers were going off all over my body.

His hands clutched my hips, the heat of the contact branding my skin... my soul, as his body slammed into my clit.

I was close to my climax. The pressure was overwhelming. My nails dug into his back. I wanted to tell him I was close. But only one word escaped as a strangled cry into the night sky.

“STEVEN!”

His grunts got louder. His groans more guttural. His thrusts more powerful. His last few thrusts slowing as he pushed himself deeper inside me.

“Laura!”

We climaxed together, as explosive as the fireworks above us. My nails scraped his skin, marking him as mine.

His fingers, like talons, clutched the flesh of my hips. Our howls, so loud and primitive, were declarations of love and worship for each other in front of the entire world, the whole universe, and all of humanity.

Claiming each other.

The sound of our voices escaped into the night, mingling with all the cheers, laughter, honks, and loud blasts of the fireworks.

Everyone in the city was celebrating the coming of the New Year, while Steven and I celebrated the dawn of our relationship. The genesis of our love. Two journeys merging into one new path.

FIFTY



Laura

3 months later.

The elevator doors opened, and Andrew walked in. “Giiirl, someone is dressed to kill or in your case, to *kiss*.” He looked at me over his half-rim glasses with mischief in his eyes. “What’s the occasion?”

I smoothed out my skintight black Valentino Couture dress. “It’s our three-month dating anniversary. We’re going back to Logaro’s where we had our first date.”

“I would tell you to convince Steven to come by the office sometime to say hi, but the chair is still really pissed that he left with ten of our best analysts. Poor John has to deal with the walrus without his best friend at his side.”

I snorted. “I think John has less headaches dealing with the chair since Steven left. John can charm anyone.”

“Oh, did you hear? Reed has finally found a job. Some hedge fund in Napa Valley hired him. Good riddance, I say.”

“I hope that leech learned his lesson. Sometimes I still worry that he might have backups of those pictures, but neither Steven nor I have heard from him.”

“Even if he did and he leaked them, it wouldn’t do anything to either of

you now.”

Andrew was right, and Steven kept reassuring me every week. Those pictures couldn't hurt our careers anymore, even if they got out.

“How's Steven's company doing? I heard it reached one billion in investor money last week.”

I grinned, so proud of my man. “It did. He's doing really great. And he loves not having to answer to anyone. He misses working with John sometimes, but they talk all the time. Every day actually, like a couple of teenagers. And every weekend, they meet up with some guy called Hawk at Titan's Club.”

“I've heard of it. It's an exclusive club for the super-rich and powerful. Mostly billionaire investors who need to exert even more power by beating each other up in the cage. As if beating each other on the Wall Street trading floor isn't enough. But what about you? Any plans to leave us soon to work at your man's side?”

“I'm still learning so much from the new CFO the board of directors appointed. At first, I was worried he would be biased against me because of the chair's hatred of Steven, but Mr. Smith is super awesome. He refuses to be swayed by the chair, and he's recognized my talent and potential. He's been a great mentor, but after my internship, I want to find a job on my own. Prove to myself I can make it without Steven's influence. But we still discuss my theories on the weekends.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows. “You actually have time on the weekend to talk shop?”

I felt my cheeks get hot. “Well, not that much time.”

“You vixen. I love it.”

The elevator stopped at the lobby, and we walked out.

“See ya tomorrow at lunch,” Andrew said with a wave. “I want all the juicy details.”

—l@s—

Steven and I held our champagne flutes in the air, unable to take our eyes off each other in the private dining room at Logaro's, which we had officially named our favorite restaurant, and not because the food was divine, even though it totally was.

“*Mon étoile*, you have been my true north, my guiding star, leading me out of the darkness, brightening my life, filling my soul with love and purpose. I love you, Laura. Happy anniversary.”

“And to you, my Steven, your love, loyalty, and devotion have taught me that I can let myself trust again, and that I don’t have to sacrifice who I am or spend my life alone. I love you, Steven.”

We clinked our glasses and sipped our drinks. The bubbles tickled my throat.

“Before I forget,” Steven said, “we’re not having our usual Sunday dinner at Aunt Mable’s this weekend. She and Uncle Harold are going on a cruise for their fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

“Good for her. I was worried you were working her too hard at your new company.”

“Don’t be absurd. I never work anyone too hard.” A smirk curling his lips.

“I guess workaholism is a family trait then.”

The server brought us dessert and asked if we needed anything else.

“No, thank you,” said Steven. “And we don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the evening.”

“Of course, sir.” The man closed the doors to the private dining room and locked it.

Steven fed me a chocolate-covered strawberry, his smirk widening. “Do these strawberries remind you of something? Should we recreate our acts of love from New Year’s Eve?”

“Why do you think I didn’t wear any underwear tonight?”

His mouth hung open, and hunger flared in his eyes. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met.” He lunged across the table, and his lips claimed mine. Scooping me up in his arms, he carried me to the couch on the private balcony where, just a few months ago, we expressed our love and passion for each other through the language of touch.

EPILOGUE



Laura

1 year later.

I fidgeted from one foot to the other in the lobby of Steven's condo. Earlier that day, professional movers had moved four boxes containing all my belongings into Steven's penthouse. No matter how many times I had insisted that we could do it ourselves, Steven didn't want me to lift a finger and had insisted on hiring the best movers in Manhattan. The look of disbelief on their faces would have been hilarious, had I not been so mortified for them to see how little I had.

Steven slid his arm around my shoulders. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

I squeezed his hand. "No, of course not."

I wasn't. Because I had proven to myself that I didn't need him or his money.

Despite what my apartment—correction, former apartment—looked like, I wasn't poor anymore, and it wasn't because of Steven's money. I had made it. Pursued my career and started raking in the big bucks.

As soon as I had finished my internship, every investment firm in the city had lined up to recruit me. I had made a name for myself on Wall Street as the most sought after, up-and-coming analyst. At first, I was worried it was because of my relationship with Steven, but I kicked my insecurities in the

ass and reminded myself that as an intern, I had outperformed most of the top analysts and traders at Wealth Asset Group. My year-end bonus had been huge, and I quickly invested it, multiplying my portfolio.

People saw my value. The value of my mind, my abilities, and my skills. The perfect “fuck you” to my university professors and anyone else in my past who hadn’t believed in me.

I squeezed my Chanel purse. The one I had bought for myself. With my money.

Sure, Steven had showered me with countless gifts over the last year. More than I could fit in my apartment, so I had kept them at his place. Even before the move, I had more clothes, jewels, shoes, and books at his place than at mine.

But now I could afford to treat myself to designer stuff here and there. But I was still thrifty. You never knew what the future would bring. Better to save and invest. I wouldn’t rely on Steven’s billions. Or on him. My plans hadn’t changed. I would still become a legend on Wall Street and make my fortune, except now I had the most amazing, wonderful, and hunky man at my side.

So, why was I nervous to move in with him?

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped in. Steven pressed the button for the penthouse, and the doors slid closed. “Laura, are you sure everything is ok?”

“Just nerves. Not sure why, though. Maybe some residual issues from my past.”

Steven turned toward me and placed his palms on my cheeks. His dark forest green eyes looked deeply into mine. “I love you. I would do anything for you. Everything for you.” His face was so full of affection and devotion. So intensely beautiful.

“Tell me how to make you feel better, Laura. What do I need to do to make your doubts disappear?”

Those words. That look. His beauty.

My heart started racing. My thighs clenched. My doubts disappeared. I only had one thought. I wanted him, needed him.

I grabbed a fistful of his dark and silver hair and pulled him toward me until our lips were locked.

“I love you,” I mumbled into his mouth as my free hand yanked on his pants. “Take these off. Now!”

We took off our pants and underwear at lightning speed. While I struggled to get my pant leg off, Steven grabbed my ass, scooped me up, and placed my butt on the elevator railing, my pants now hanging from one of my ankles.

Shit. What were we doing? We were in the elevator. Luckily, these didn't have surveillance cameras. But what if it stopped before we got to his penthouse?

Steven's hand slid under my shirt and cupped one of my breasts.

I gasped. All thoughts of getting caught forgotten. Who cared if someone saw us? We weren't a secret anymore. We weren't forbidden anymore. Maybe we could get in trouble for indecent exposure, but Steven had the best lawyers in the city to clear us of any charges.

With his other hand, he slid a finger inside me. Instant pleasure coursed through my body.

I arched my back and moaned loudly. His thumb stroked tiny circles on my clit. Intense sensations washed over every part of me.

I grabbed his shoulders to brace myself. "I'm so close. Pinch my nipples," I said.

He pinched them through the fabric of my bra.

My body tingled with pleasure, but it wasn't enough. "Take. Bra. Off."

He slid his hand under my shirt and fumbled with my bra strap.

"Now. Steven. Now."

I could feel his fingers working the attachment, but my bra wasn't coming off.

"It won't unhook," he said as he abandoned the clasp, and slid my bra over my breasts until it bunched up under my neck. His fingers pinched my nipple, and I let out another loud moan as the pleasure intensified.

"I want you, Steven. Take me. Now."

He pulled out his finger and thrust his big cock into me with a groan. He filled me up, inching deeper and deeper with every thrust.

The elevator dinged, but he didn't stop. I had no idea what floor we were on, but I didn't care.

He fucked me harder, with more desperation.

The doors slid open. I peeked over his shoulder and saw the familiar entryway of his condo. Our condo.

His thrusts quickened. His body slapped into mine at the perfect angle, hitting my clit just right. Waves of heat and pleasure pulsed through me. I

grabbed his hair again and arched my back as I rode to my climax, yelling his name in my bliss.

Seconds later, he shuddered and pumped into me a few more times.

My body went limp, and he caught me before I slid off the railing. I wrapped my legs around his waist and nuzzled my head on his shoulder.

He walked out of the elevator with me in his arms, his hands cradling my ass. “Welcome home, *mon étoile*.”

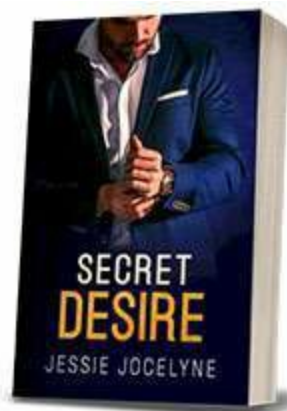


Did you swoon for Steven? If you enjoyed this sexy read, then you'll love

Hawk's story: [SECRET OBSESSION](#)

That's right. Our mysterious bad boy, Hawk from Titan's Club gets his spicy passionate story.

He's savage. Damaged. Obsessed with her...the only woman who doesn't recoil from him.



Did you enjoy Steven and Laura's love story in *Secret Desire* by Jessie Jocelyne? Then let others know. Thank you for leaving a rating or review on Amazon (or on the next page swipe). It's super helpful!

Here's a teaser from [SECRET OBSESSION](#) just for you.



Saturday mornings were usually for sleeping in, curled next to some chick I picked up at a bar, and railed until we both passed out...fully satiated on the carnal pleasure of a no strings attached fuck with a random stranger.

But this morning was different.

I yawned as I shuffled across the parking lot, groggy from my sleepless night but at least I taught that prick a lesson he'd never forget. Even if it took half the night to track him down and the other half to deliver my personal brand of justice.

That was the last time Bob would skim money off the top. Actually, it was probably the first time too. But I never let anyone get away with screwing me over, no matter how minor the wrongdoing. I had a reputation to uphold.

My knuckles were still sore from the number of times my fist made contact with his ugly face. I shook off the pain and entered the animal shelter. Rest would come later once I got back to my condo in Manhattan. But at this moment, I needed to do my volunteer shift.

My sanity depended on it.

Or maybe it was my humanity.

In the shelter, a chorus of happy yips from nearly twenty dogs drowned

out my words. It was almost deafening, but I didn't mind because the welcoming barks surrounded me like a hug and chased away the stresses of the last few days.

This was my happy place.

And the best part. No human in sight. "Hi, bubbas. Uncle Hawk is here."

A scraping sound from the end of the kennel caught my attention. Probably Rambo clawing at the cage so he could get to me. He was always so goofy. I couldn't wait to take him outside and play wrestle. Poor pup has been here for over two months. I wished I could've taken him home. But he deserved better. "Comin', Rambo. Hang on, buddy." There was a cheery hitch to my tone that was so unlike me.

As I approached the last cage, my stomach sank. An empty cage.

No Rambo.

I'd never see his goofy grin again? My good mood disappeared, and I was kicking myself for not adopting him when I had the chance. But every rescue needed a home, and I couldn't take them all. It was the excuse I had given myself. But now that he was gone...

No. It was best if some regular family took him in. He'd be happier with some guy taking him for a stroll in the park every morning and a couple of teenagers to wrestle with in the evening.

I had nothing good to offer a dog. Instead, it would be a sprint through the city, constantly looking over our shoulders, the peril of an ambush at every corner. Instead of playtime with someone's kids, it would be defense lessons from my crew. Rambo was too gentle a soul to be turned into an attack dog.

So why was I still staring at his empty cage?

I was usually thrilled about each adoption, even when I had grown attached to them. Every dog deserved a good home. So why did I suddenly feel like I had lost a friend? It was crazy, but I couldn't stop thinking about his stupid, crooked grin.

Should I find the new owners and make them an offer?

I quickly shook that thought from my mind.

Don't be a jerk, Hawk. Let him have a normal life with a normal family.

The clawing sound continued, followed by a metallic clang. In the next kennel, Fido pawed at his empty food and water bowls. Water seeped from his cage into the aisle. I took a mental note to get a mop later and clean it up.

"Are you hungry, buddy? I'll get you your food."

"No, he's not," said an amused voice from the other end of the kennel.

My body tensed. I hadn't heard anyone come in. No one had ever snuck up on me like that. I shouldn't have let my guard down.

Walking up the aisle must be this Lila chick I had heard about. "He's already eaten. He's just being a temperamental pig."

I didn't get a good look at her because all I could focus on was the dog trotting alongside her with a lopsided lolling tongue.

Rambo!

Relief washed over me, and I had the strange urge to smile.

With two excited yips, he bounded forward.

Lila gasped and braced herself. "No!"

As the massive dog barreled toward me, he yanked Lila along. Her steps stumbled as she struggled to keep up. Her screams were barely audible over all the excited barking from our audience.

As he neared me, Rambo lunged. With one foot behind me for anchoring, I prepared myself for impact. The Rottweiler planted his big front paws on my chest with so much force that it would have sent me flying if I hadn't been ready for it.

A second later, Lila collided with both Rambo and me. The force made her bounce back, her arms flailing. I grabbed her shoulders to stop her from falling on her ass.

The cheerful dog, probably thinking we were having a group hug, licked my cheek. Then hers. Then mine. Then the space in between us, as if he couldn't shift fast enough to shower us with kisses. I got a waft of doggie breath, freshly cut grass, and something sweet like black cherry candies. In his excitement, Rambo struggled to stay on his hind legs. The claws from his front paws dug through my shirt and into my skin.

Lila tried to steady herself, but Rambo's wiggling kept making her lose her balance while the wet floor had her slipping and sliding. The only thing keeping her up was my grip on her.

"Rambo," I said sternly. "Down."

He immediately obeyed with a whine, sat at my side, and leaned his one-hundred-forty-pound body into my leg while looking up longingly at me with those puppy dog eyes.

I pulled Lila in. She wrapped her arms around me, clinging to me as she found her footing. The sweetness of her black cherry scent intensified now that she was pressed up against me.

"Holy fucking shit," she breathed against my chest. "I nearly wiped out."

Her hot breath stung the raw scratches left by Rambo, but the pain didn't register. I was too busy enjoying her softness. I could feel all her perfect curves fit snugly against my body. I didn't even know what she looked like, but I had the urge to run my hands over her body. My dick twitched at the thought.

I always was a sucker for a plus-sized queen. I never cared who they were, what they wore, or even what their names were. All I needed for a meaningless one-night stand was a big set of tits and an ass so round I couldn't stop myself from spanking it.

This klutz still had her arms wrapped around me, her tits crushed against my hard chest. Fuck, that felt good. I peeked over her shoulder to check out her ass. Big and round, just the way I liked it. I nearly let out a sound of approval.

What the hell was I doing? This was the shelter. I couldn't fuck around with another volunteer. This place was too important to me. I wouldn't use it as a pick-up joint.

I gritted my teeth. "Let go, woman."

Read more sizzle: [SECRET OBSESSION: A MAFIA ROMANCE](#)

—l@s—

Thanks so much for reading *Secret Desire*.
Have a wonderful day.

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Jessie
Jocelyne



www.jessiejocelyne.com