

B. LOVE PRESENTS

TAMING

A BILLIONAIRE BULLY

CRYSTAL COLLIER

Taming a Billionaire Bully

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B. Love Publications

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Synopsis

In the high-stakes world of business, Kazimir “Kaz” Sumpter reigns supreme, his empire extending to every corner of the globe. With a chip on his shoulder and ice in his heart, he’s a brilliant businessman with no room for love, relationships, or vulnerability. To Kaz, the world is a chessboard, and every move he makes is calculated for maximum gain.

Enter XoeY Pepperman, a small-town girl from Anniston, Alabama, seeking a fresh start in the sprawling metropolis of Cleveland, Ohio. When she lands a job at Kaz’s prestigious company, she’s simultaneously enamored and put off by the enigmatic billionaire. Their first encounter is a clash of wills, and their relationship only seems to spiral further downhill.

As XoeY navigates the unfamiliar corporate world, she can’t shake the feeling that she’s back on the grade school playground, facing down bullies. XoeY, strong-willed and resolute, refuses to let anything deter her. Over time, the icy walls around Kaz’s heart begin to crack, and an unexpected bond forms between them.

Yet, their connection is as precarious as it is undeniable. Can Kaz and XoeY overcome their pasts and the obstacles of the present to find the happiness they both deserve? In this gripping story of love, redemption, and second chances, will they seize their shot at a happily ever after, or will the ghosts of their histories threaten to tear it all apart? Find out in this compelling story of two hearts destined to collide in *Taming a Billionaire Bully*.

Chapter One

Xoey Pepperman

The soft rays of dawn filtered through the sheer curtains of Xoeys bedroom, gently coaxing her awake. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the new day. Today was a significant day in her life—her first day at her new job, and she could hardly contain her excitement and nervousness.

Xoeys morning ritual began with a deliberate stretch that spread warmth through her body, awakening her senses. She pushed the covers aside and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, the cool, hardwood floor sending a shiver up her spine.

In her tiny apartment, the soft hum of the refrigerator provided a constant soundtrack to her solitary mornings. Padding into the kitchen, she filled the kettle with water, the clinking of metal against porcelain breaking the early morning stillness. Carefully, she plucked her beloved tea blend from the orderly row of tea canisters, immersing herself in its comforting fragrance.

While the kettle heated, Xoeys hurried to take care of her hygiene. When the tasks were complete, she stood before the mirror, her reflection scrutinizing her every move. She smoothed her hands over her simple yet elegant attire—a navy blue blazer, crisp white blouse, and tailored black slacks. Her

long, jet-black sister locs were pulled into a neat bun, framing her face and accentuating her doe-shaped eyes.

As the tea steeped, she filled a small bowl with fresh berries and a dollop of yogurt. Her breakfast was light; she needed a rational mind and an even keel today. She sipped her tea slowly, savoring the warmth and the calming effect it had on her frayed nerves.

After breakfast, XoeY gathered her belongings, carefully placing her laptop, notebooks, and pens into her leather tote bag. She checked her reflection once more, adjusting her blazer slightly and ensuring her appearance was impeccable. Projecting confidence was crucial for her on her first day.

With her keys in hand, XoeY stepped out of her apartment and locked the door behind her. She descended the staircase, choosing to get in her steps over riding the elevator, her heels tapping on each step. Outside, the city was already bustling with life. People rushed by, lost in their own worlds, oblivious to their surroundings.

She walked briskly to the bus stop, her heart racing as she watched the minutes tick away on the electronic display. Would she make it in time? The uncertainty gnawed at her, but she couldn't afford to let it show.

XoeY joined the crowd as the bus arrived, the sound of air brakes hissing in the background. As the bus swayed back and forth, the chaotic mix of bodies made her feel increasingly uneasy. It was at that moment, she wished she had opted to drive in instead of taking public transportation.

Popping a couple of mini Altoids into her mouth, she prayed the mints would soothe the nausea bubbling within. She held onto the overhead rail, her knuckles cracking from the vice grip, and tried to focus on the notes she'd made on the new hire packet that had been emailed to her a week ago.

Finally, the bus pulled up to her stop, and XoeY stepped off onto the sidewalk. As September drew to a close, Cleveland's trees started to display delicate touches of crimson and gold, foreshadowing the onset of autumn. The sky stretched out before her, a soft shade of blue with fluffy clouds drifting

lazily across the horizon. Casting long shadows, the low-hanging sun enveloped the city in a serene, golden aura. As she breathed in, she felt the crispness of the air, a reminder of the approaching winter.

As XoeY stepped off the bus, a gentle breeze brushed against her, carrying the distant scent of smoke and an earthy fragrance she appreciated. Her footsteps on the pavement echoed softly, matching the rhythmic count she'd been repeating in her head to keep her nerves at bay. The office building she was about to enter stood before her, its sleek glass and steel design commanding attention. She gazed upward, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and fear.

Taking a deep breath, XoeY squared her shoulders and walked toward the entrance, reciting affirming statements in her mind. As she entered, there was a long, white marble reception desk at the center of the lobby. Behind it, a friendly receptionist greeted her with a friendly, cheeky smile. Her attire was professional, and she looked well put together.

“Good morning. Welcome to Sumpter Solutions. How can I help you?” the receptionist asked, her smile showcasing the braces that adorned her teeth.

“Hi, good morning. My name is XoeY Pepperman. I'm here for my first day of work.” XoeY beamed, taking in her surroundings. The lobby of Sumpter Solutions was elegant and modern. Visitors crossed the threshold and were immediately greeted by an ambiance of sophistication.

The first thing that caught her eye was the grand, double-height ceiling, adorned with a chandelier that cast a soft, shimmering glow throughout the space. Its crystals refracted the light into a kaleidoscope of colors that danced on the polished marble floor below.

The decor embodied a perfect fusion of natural elements and contemporary design principles. The floor-to-ceiling windows in the area offered an unobstructed view of the meticulously landscaped garden while flooding the space with natural light.

The walls were adorned with tasteful artwork, a curated collection of paintings and sculptures. Plush, custom-made sofas and armchairs in soft shades of neutral colors invited visitors to relax, while sleek, low-slung coffee tables with elegant flower arrangements provided a sense of comfort and hospitality. This was an environment Xoezy could get used to. It was a far cry from what she had come from.

“Ah, yes. I was told we’d be getting a newbie. My name is Krystina. Nice to meet you, Xoezy.” She extended her hand for a handshake, which Xoezy took, providing a firm shake.

“It’s nice to meet you as well.” The corners of her lips turned upward as she released the woman’s hand.

“You can have a seat right over there, and someone will be down to escort you to where you’ll be working. Would you like something to drink while you wait?”

“No, thank you.” Xoezy stepped away from the desk, almost bumping into someone who seemed to be in a hurry. She apologized for the almost mishap, but she wasn’t sure the woman had even heard her since she was halfway across the lobby that quickly.

In a corner of the lobby, Xoezy spotted a small café that offered a selection of gourmet coffees and teas, along with an array of pastries and snacks. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air, creating an inviting atmosphere. She made a mental note of the place so she could stop by for lunch since she hadn’t packed one.

Another ten minutes or so passed as she sat, legs crossed at the ankles, waiting for someone to retrieve her.

“Are you Xoezy?” she heard as she looked up from the notes she had taken back out to continue studying.

“Yes, that would be me.” She stood, smoothing her clothes. The individuals in the building were all dressed so nicely. One thing Xoezy knew for sure was that their threads cost a pretty penny, and they had most likely been tailor-made for them.

“I’m Clarissa Hawthorne, executive assistant and the one you need to impress if you want to keep this job.” Her upraised chin, aloof gaze, and tight lips were a stark contrast to the friendly woman she’d met at the receptionist’s desk. “I hope you can keep up; today is the only training you’ll receive. Follow me.” Without waiting for a response, Clarissa turned on her heels and walked toward the elevators ahead. Krystina gave her a thumbs up as they passed the desk, which helped her shoulders fall away from her ears, and XoeY gave her a small, nervous smile. She hadn’t even realized the tension she felt had caused her shoulders to hike in suspense.

“How was your weekend?” XoeY questioned after anxiously clearing her throat, trying to make small talk to kill the awkward silence in the elevator.

Clarissa shifted her eyes to the right, making eye contact with XoeY. She smirked, dropping the hand that held her phone to her side.

“Look, XoeY...” She recited her name like it left a bitterness on her tongue. “Rule number one to being successful here is that we don’t do small talk here. We actually don’t do small *anything* here, but definitely not small talk. We are here to do a job, not socialize and make friends. If that’s something you can’t handle, you can head back downstairs and exit the same way you came in. I am not your friend; I am your supervisor. Let’s not confuse our roles here. Got it?”

In a haste, XoeY nodded. When Clarissa went back to busying herself on her phone, XoeY stared straight ahead at the elevator doors. She had to remind herself to exhale as she started to lose oxygen to her brain from holding her breath. A nervous wreck she was, and she didn’t want to make the wrong move.

The elevator dinged, signaling it was time for them to exit, but she didn’t dare move. Everything she did from now on, she wanted to follow Clarissa’s lead. Heels click-clacked against the waxed marble floor as Clarissa exited the elevator and headed down a corridor. On both sides were doors to what she could only assume were offices.

“This will be your desk. Keep any knick-knacks and decorations to a minimum. We don’t care about your pets, family, or significant others, and we don’t need to see them plastered everywhere. This is a professional setting and, as you may have noticed, we like a clean, minimalistic look. Understood?” Quickly, she nodded. That wouldn’t be a problem for her because she didn’t have any of the things she mentioned. No pets. No family. No significant other. No problem.

“Here is where you’ll find the break area. If you took the time to read your new hire packet, you’ll know that part of your duties is to restock the fridge as soon as you get here. You’re also responsible for making a list of anything that needs to be replaced. I won’t be going into detail about what needs to be done here; refer to your packet.” Clarissa tapped on the screen of the iPad she now held in her hand. “Moving along, this is the conference room. Anytime we have meetings, you’ll need to go through the checklist of expectations, making sure nothing is left undone.” She took quick steps toward another door; this one had a gold nameplate on it. From the distance she was at, it was hard to read what it said, but given she hadn’t seen one of those signs on any of the other doors, whoever this office belonged to must have been very important.

“This office belongs to the boss, the owner of Sumpter Solutions. As you know, you will be responsible for handling his needs—whatever those needs may be. They are subject to change at a moment’s notice, so be prepared. One thing you must know about Mr. Sumpter is that he hates being bothered, so please avoid being a nag. If you have something to ask him, don’t. If you don’t know something, figure it out. You were hired because we expect you to be able to solve problems and make our lives easier. If you cannot do that without your hand being held or being babysat, please let me know now so we can find someone who is capable.” Clarissa stared at her pensively.

“No, I-I can handle it. I’m up for the challenge.” The confidence she had walked up to the building with had been

left outside the door. She had been intimidated since the moment she walked in.

“Next time you say it, be more believable.” She looked at her sternly. “And straighten up. Good posture is important,” she instructed before turning and walking away. Xoey was right behind her. So close, she bumped into her when Clarissa abruptly stopped and turned around.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stuttered, taking a quick step back.

Clarissa adjusted the clipboard in her hand. “And do something about that accent. You’re not in the country anymore.” Xoey bit down hard at the statement. Since she’d moved to Ohio, people had commented on her accent. Most of the people she’d encountered seemed to love her Southern drawl, but apparently, Clarissa wasn’t a fan. It was okay, though, because code-switching was something she was very familiar with.

Not saying anything, she followed Clarissa, making sure to maintain a safe distance. They arrived back at the area that would be her workstation, and she set her things down.

“Your login information and everything you need to do for today are in the new hire packet. Treat that packet like your Bible. You should know it cover to cover. Do you have any questions?”

Xoey was scared to ask anything, so she shook her head no.

“I see you catch on quickly. Maybe this will work after all,” Clarissa said before waltzing away.

“Yeah, let’s hope it does,” Xoey replied under her breath once she could no longer see Clarissa’s backside.

She took out the new hire packet and turned to the page that had the information she needed. Plugging her credentials into the system, a bright blue welcome screen appeared, and it had her name on it. She went to the training video she needed to watch and got comfortable, looking around the space. There wasn’t anyone else in the office yet, so she figured she’d be

starting her days alone or with Clarissa. She hoped it would be the former as opposed to the latter.

Chapter Two

Kazimir “Kaz” Sumpter

Her skin, smooth and rich with a deep ebony tone, seemed to emit a radiant glow that was anything but ordinary. Her name was Amina, and she was a vision of beauty that left an indelible mark on those who had the privilege of knowing her. But for him, she was just a fuck—nothing more or less.

His hips circled as he worked his dick into the depths of her throat. Amina was sprawled out on the king-size bed, on her back, her head hanging slightly off the edge of the bed, positioned exactly as Kaz wanted. At six feet four, he had to bend his knees and get into a squat position to drop his dick off in her mouth. For some reason, this angle helped him reach that level of ecstasy he yearned for. From this vantage point, he saw her tonsils dangling in the back of her throat, his thick, veiny dick tapping them each time he dipped lower.

At this angle, he saw Amina’s face in a new way. She was a masterpiece. Her high cheekbones framed almond-shaped eyes the color of deep, endless pools of mahogany. Those succulent lips that wrapped around all eight inches of him were full and painted a shade of deep plum; at least they had been before she’d smeared it off.

Her hair was tightly coiled and jet-black and fell in an ebony waterfall of curls around the nutmeg-colored sheets beneath her. It had a life of its own, defying gravity with a

wild grace, and it carried with it a sense of pride, a testament to her African heritage.

“Eat this dick up, mama,” he coached, the position of his legs mimicking a demi pli . All he got in response were gurgling sounds as her mouth overflowed with a mixture of cum and saliva, egging him on.

“Yeah, that’s it. Swallow that shit like a good girl,” he told her, leaning forward and massaging her throat as if that would help her digest it. Amina reached between her legs and toyed with her clit, causing a moan to force its way out. She wrapped her lips around his meaty flesh tighter, the vibration from her groans of pleasure spurring him to his climax. Kaz watched as her knees fell out to the side, and she rolled her hips rhythmically. Her body was a work of art. His eyes snapped shut, needing a moment to focus on something else since he wasn’t quite ready to release yet.

Amina had an hourglass shape. For the most part, her stomach was flat, but there was enough meat to hold on to, which he appreciated. Her thighs were what he often referred to as thunder thighs, and her breasts were the biggest he’d ever seen at a size 38K. They were the first thing he noticed on her, and he reached down and grabbed hold of them. He held them like they were reins and he needed them to guide him to his final destination. Between his fingers, he toyed with her large nipples that were already erect. The sensation from her flicking her bean and him tugging and rolling her nipples between his fingers had her howling as she shook and came all over her fingers.

Now that she had gotten another release, he was ready to bust. Releasing her fun bags, he placed both hands on the bed on either side of her, hunched over, and stuffed her throat with his dick. She squirmed and slapped the bed, but he didn’t let up. Instead, he took his right hand and placed it under her jaw, tilting her chin up toward the ceiling, giving him more room to sink deeper. Amina reached behind her and grabbed his nuts, squeezing them like stress balls. That did it.

A guttural sound erupted from his core, and he sprayed a load so heavy, he practically choked her. When he pulled out

of her mouth, she hurried to get off her back and turn over, coughing and spitting out the sperm cocktail.

“You tried to kill me,” she whined.

“But did you die?” he responded, shrugging nonchalantly as he headed to his bathroom to clean himself up. The water in the shower turned on, and he waited for a moment before stepping in. With the system he had in his home, it didn’t take long for the water to reach the desired temperature.

Quickly but thoroughly, he lathered his body, rinsed, and repeated the process before stepping out and wrapping a towel around his waist. Now that he had started his morning with a good release, he was ready to tackle his other responsibilities for the day.

When he walked back into his room, Amina was still sitting in the bed, pouting. He laughed and shook his head, sauntering into his large walk-in closet. On the left was where he kept all his business attire. He had so many suits, most of which were black, his signature color. Grabbing what he needed from the closet, he began getting dressed as he dropped the towel.

“Aye, I’ on know why you acting like you don’t know the deal, but I’ ma need you to make like eggs and scramble, ma.” He heard her scoff as he closed the drawer that housed his dress socks.

The bed dipped slightly as he sat on it to put on his socks. He made a mental note to double-check his calendar to see when his nail tech would be coming through to service him. Catalina had been doing his manicure and pedicures for the last eight years. She’d also been bouncing on his dick like a pogo stick for just as long. He was a man who believed in keeping up with his grooming, and it was about time for another session.

“You need to be outta here by the time I get ready to walk out that door.”

“Why do you always do this? We fuck and then you kick me out like I’m nothing.” She huffed and puffed as she got off

the bed, gathering her belongings.

“You just answered your own question, ma. You know what it is. This ain’t nothing but a fuck, so once that’s done, ain’t shit left for us to do but go our separate ways.”

“So it’s really like that? That’s all I am to you, a nut?”

“Been that way, gon’ always be that way,” he replied, buttoning up his shirt as he looked in the mirror.

Amina hastily gathered the rest of her belongings, her hands trembling with a mixture of frustration and hurt.

“So you’re just going to keep doing what you’re doing?” she exclaimed, her voice trembling with emotion as she stuffed her clothes into a bag. “You don’t care about my feelings!”

“You right, I don’t.” He reached for his scent of the day. “Don’t even waste your time with the monologue, yo. Save yourself the embarrassment, shorty.”

His indifference only fueled her anger. She ran up on him, ready to swing, but Kaz grabbed her hand mid-air, gripping it tightly as he shoved her back into the wall, her hand raised above her head. Staring down at her, his face was in a snarl as he said, “Clearly, you was on yo’ back wit’ ya head hanging off the bed too long, and you done forgot who the fuck you talking to. Get yo’ shit and get out before shit get ugly in here. I’on know who the fuck you thought you was dealing wit’, but let this be the last time you act like you ’bout to lay a hand on me. I ain’t no bitch made man who beats on females, but I’ll yoke yo’ ass the fuck up and have yo’ people looking for your body parts, ya dig?” he said in a growl into her ear. He was so close to her, her face rubbed against his beard as she nodded her understanding shakily. “Good. Now get the fuck out, and don’t hit my line no more or that’s yo’ life.”

Amina’s eyes flashed with fear as she zipped up her bag and flung it over her shoulder. She turned on her heel and headed for the door, her steps echoing in the tense silence that hung between them. As she reached the doorway, Amina glanced back one last time. His eyes held nothing, while hers

held tears. She slammed the door behind her, the sound reverberating through the hallway. Kaz was seemingly unperturbed by her tantrum as he put the finishing touches on his ensemble, gathered the things he would need for the day, and headed into the office.

* * *

Kaz adjusted his tie and checked his watch as he walked briskly toward his car. Today, he'd decided to keep it low-key and was driving the rust-colored 2024 Bentley Flying Spur. The sun had just begun to peak over the skyline, so he donned his Cartier sunglasses once in the car to shield his eyes from the brightness.

His playlist began as the car came to life, and he pulled out of the driveway of his home. As he waited for the cars to pass, he pulled onto the street, watching as the gate to his place closed behind him.

Mid-rap, the song was interrupted as a call came through on his business phone. He wasn't even at work yet and was already working. Pressing the button to answer the call, a pang of annoyance shot through him. He didn't usually take work calls during his commute, but this one was persistent.

"What is it?" he answered, his voice curt.

"Kaz—"

"Last time I checked, we ain't friends, so address me with respect." He cut the caller off.

"My a-apologies, sir. Mr. Sumpter, it's John from—" He interrupted the voice on the other end again.

"John, it's 2023. Don't you think I'm aware of who's calling me? Get to why you've been blowing my phone up so early in the morning," he said.

"I, uh, sorry about that, sir. It's just a hab—"

"Get to the point or get off my phone. All that sputtering is pissing me off. I don't have time for this."

“Right. Uh, we’ve got a problem,” John said, his tone grave.

“Don’t I pay you to solve problems, John?”

“Uh, y-yes, sir.”

“So help me understand why you’re coming to me with something that is supposed to be your responsibility? Do I need to hire someone who can actually do what they’re paid to do?”

“N-no. No, not at all. I-I can handle the job; it’s just the Johnson account has gone south. They’re threatening to pull the deal if we don’t address their concerns immediately, and I don’t have the power to give them what they’re asking for without first speaking with you.” His voice was shaky.

Kaz’s brow furrowed. The Johnson account had been a major coup for their firm, and the thought of losing it sent a surge of anger coursing through him.

“What is their issue?”

“Their chief concern is the delivery timeline,” John enlightened. “They’re saying our initial estimate was unrealistic, and now they’re doubting our ability to deliver on time.”

“So these motherfuckers are doubting me?” he questioned, more to himself than to his employee. “Let those uppity fucks know we always deliver on time, and we deliver nothing but quality results. Then make sure you do your job and ensure it gets done ahead of schedule. Don’t fuck this up,” he barked and ended the call, going back to the song he was listening to.

Kaz clamped his jaw, his mind reeling. One thing he detested was being underestimated. He took that as a challenge.

His life and accomplishments were a result of constantly proving people wrong. When people said he wouldn’t finish school because he was so far behind due to negligent guardians growing up, he did them one better and graduated from high school at the top of his class. When they said he wouldn’t successfully complete college, he graduated with a

master's in business, though he truly had no desire to attend college. When they said he wouldn't amount to anything and would end up being a disappointment, he started a business, which had grown into a multi-billion-dollar company in the first three years it was open and was still growing. Everything they said he couldn't or wouldn't do, he did just to slap his dick on their mouths and shut them up. This project would be no different, even if he had to jump in on it and get it done by himself.

The weight of responsibility was taking a toll on him. There was no escape from the relentless demands of his business, but he wouldn't trade it for the world. His business was everything to him; it was all he had in this world.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived in the garage and parked in his designated spot. Adjusting his suit, he secured his vehicle and headed to the elevator that went directly to his office. Kaz wasn't much of a people person unless he was doing a business deal, so avoiding the masses as he entered was important to him.

Kaz entered his office and got right to work, looking into the Johnson project to see what he could do. As he began his search, there was a knock on the door. He called for the person to enter, and Clarissa's made-up face peeked around the door before she entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Sumpter," Clarissa eagerly greeted with a respectful smile.

Mr. Sumpter looked up from his work, acknowledging Clarissa with a nod. He didn't bother speaking as he stared at her expectantly.

Clarissa hurriedly consulted her iPad, organized with precision. "You have a busy day ahead, sir. First, you have a conference call with the board of directors at nine thirty a.m. to discuss the quarterly financial report. They're expecting your insights on the projections." She looked up from her device, and his face was stoic. "As always, I'll remind you fifteen minutes before the call." She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her narrow nose. "After the conference call, you

have a meeting with the marketing team at eleven a.m. to discuss the marketing campaign we'll be running on social media to attract new clients. They need your approval.”

“Make sure they have all the necessary data. I don't want any last-minute surprises.”

“Understood, Mr. Sumpter,” Clarissa affirmed. “At one p.m., you have a working lunch with Mr. Saxton from VividWave Technologies. He'd like to discuss the new contract proposal.”

Kaz leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowing. “The latest contract draft has already been sent to you via email for you to review and finalize as soon as you can.”

Clarissa continued. “Last, you have a three-p.m. meeting with the IT department to address the security concerns raised in the recent audit. They've prepared a presentation for you.”

Mr. Sumpter sat up straight. “Let's make that a priority. There's no reason we should have any security threats.”

Promptly, Clarissa nodded and made adjustments to the information on her screen. “Before I head out, the new hire arrived this morning. She's at her desk,” she informed.

With a stiff nod, he engrossed himself in the documents he had been going over, which was her cue to exit.

It was almost the end of the day before he was able to take a moment to come up for air. Most days were like this; he was busy from the moment he walked in and even after he left the building. But the hustle and bustle kept him afloat, so Kaz didn't mind too much.

Most of the employees had left for the day, so he was in the clear to walk out to what he called Gen-Pop to stretch his long, muscular legs. As he walked past the mini offices that were a step above a cubicle, Kaz was deep in thought, his mind preoccupied with the tasks he still needed to complete once he left the office. As he turned the corner, his brisk pace collided with an unexpected obstacle. A young woman he didn't recognize, clutching a neon-green energy drink, appeared seemingly out of nowhere. The collision sent the

energy drink flying from her grasp, and it splattered across Kaz's suit, staining the fabric of his bright white shirt.

"Fuck!" Kaz snapped, his irritation boiling over. He glanced down at his ruined attire, his anger intensifying. "You know how much this shit cost?" It really wasn't about the money for him; it was the principle.

The woman, wide-eyed and flustered, stammered out an apology. "I'm so sorry! I didn't see you coming. I didn't mean to spill my drink on you. It was an accident."

Kaz's irritation showed no sign of subsiding as he scowled at her. "What you doing here, anyway? You part of the maid service or something?" he questioned, taking his blazer off to further assess the damage.

The woman, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment, nodded. "No, I am not part of the *cleaning* service. I am, however, the new hire, acting as an assistant to you and Clarissa. It's my first day."

"Ms. Hawthorne," he corrected.

"Correct, Ms. Hawthorne."

Kaz's annoyance only deepened at the revelation. This was the new hire Clarissa had told him about. "You ain't making a very good impression..." he aired, dragging the end of the statement as he waited for her to provide a name.

"Xoey. Xoey Pepperman."

The woman continued to apologize profusely, her voice quivering with apprehension. "I'll pay to have it dry cleaned or pay to buy you another one," she offered. Kaz looked at her and laughed.

"Nice of you to offer to rectify your mishap, but you couldn't afford either of those bills, so don't worry about it."

Kaz exhaled, his anger gradually giving way to resignation as he looked at her expression. He knew berating her further wouldn't undo the damage. "Just watch where you going next time," he grumbled, trying to salvage what little remained of his composure. "Pay better attention to your surroundings."

The woman nodded vigorously, her eyes filled with remorse. "I will, I promise. I'm really sorry, again."

Kaz, though still annoyed, couldn't help but notice the genuine contrition in her eyes. What he also couldn't ignore was her natural beauty. Her skin looked as if it had been mellowed by the sun, and from where he stood, it was flawless. A beauty mark rested above full, pouty lips that were painted with a rich burgundy color. Her bottom lip hung lower as if it were heavy, slightly exposing the whiteness of her teeth as she sat, staring at the computer with her mouth open. Her hair was pulled up on top of her head, but he appreciated the locs that were the same color as his. Her eyes were a mesmerizing shade of deep brown, framed by thick, expressive brows. They held a depth that seemed to draw him in, causing him to clear his throat. Those voluptuous lips curved into a smile that held warmth in it.

The beauty's statuesque figure was a testament to the good meals she must have consumed over the years. In the slacks she wore, he was able to make out the fullness of her thighs, and he saw the ampleness of her behind from the front. The blazer she wore would fit better if it had been tailored, but he could see where her waist dipped in, creating an hourglass silhouette. She was just his type, but he had a rule of not fraternizing with the help.

Chapter Three

Xoey

Xoey awoke in a rush, her eyes shooting open to the sound of birds chirping loudly near the window of her bedroom. She blinked, trying to adjust to the brightness the sun cast into her room. Panic coursed through her veins as she glanced at the clock on her nightstand, which read 8:45 a.m. Her second day at the new job was not off to a good start.

Frantically, she threw off her tangled bedsheets and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her locs, which she hadn't bothered to tuck safely under her satin bonnet the night before, fell in disarray around her face, and she didn't have a moment to spare. Rushing to her feet, she stumbled toward the closet, hastily picking out the first set of professional clothes she could find. Her trembling fingers struggled with the buttons of her blouse, and her skirt seemed determined to twist itself into a knot.

The one thing she'd had enough strength to do the night before was shower, which was saving her in this moment as she rushed to put herself together as quickly as possible. Her makeup routine was abandoned in favor of a hasty swipe of mascara and a dash of lipstick after she rushed to brush her teeth. Xoey managed to tug on a pair of mismatched shoes, one black and one brown, before grabbing her handbag. As she dashed out of her apartment, she cursed herself for not organizing things the night before.

Xoey's commute to work was a chaotic blur. She descended into the vortex of the city's morning rush, where traffic was a slow-moving behemoth, snaking its way through the maze of honking cars and impatient drivers.

Xoey climbed into her slightly battered sedan, fumbling with the keys. Her heart raced as she joined the gridlock, weaving in and out of lanes with a fusion of determination and desperation.

The stoplights seemed to conspire against her, each one turning red just as she approached, prolonging her agony. The blaring horns created a boisterous symphony, overwhelming her senses. Her fingers drummed on the steering wheel in rhythm with her racing thoughts.

A construction zone up ahead had traffic bottlenecked to a crawl. Xoey gritted her teeth, staring at the sea of orange cones and the workers in fluorescent vests. She cursed her luck and contemplated making an illegal U-turn to escape the gridlock, but the risk of a ticket or an accident was too great.

Minutes felt like hours as she inched through the construction zone, narrowly avoiding a collision with a merging big rig. Her phone buzzed with texts and missed calls from Clarissa, each notification adding to her growing sense of dread.

A delivery truck was double-parked in front of her, forcing her to maneuver around it, dodging pedestrians and cyclists who seemed equally determined to thwart her progress. Despite her frazzled nerves, Xoey's determination never wavered. With grit and a hint of recklessness, she sped through the city streets, narrowly avoiding collisions with other vehicles and pedestrians.

As she approached her workplace, she exhaled a sigh of relief, amalgamated with frustration. Xoey's disheveled appearance had been further exacerbated by her frenzied commute, but she had made it to the office, albeit a tad late. She parked her car, hardly caring if it was within the lines, and rushed toward the entrance, ready to face the consequences of her morning ordeal.

By the time XoeY arrived at the elevators, her face was flushed, and her breathing was erratic. She clutched her handbag to her chest and pushed the button with the remaining energy she had. The elevator ride felt agonizingly slow, and she tapped her foot impatiently. Upon reaching her floor, she made a dash for her desk, dropping her belongings onto the desk in a heap.

She tried to catch her breath, but it was a futile endeavor. Her blouse was partially unbuttoned, so she rushed to button it to prevent exposing herself. Clarissa raised an eyebrow and cleared her throat.

“You’re late,” she remarked, her tone filled with disapproval.

XoeY managed to offer a meek, apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“I don’t ca—”

“In my office. Now.” The stern, deep voice that interrupted Clarissa caused XoeY’s spine to both straighten and stiffen. Tensely, XoeY pushed back from the desk, doing her best to smooth out her clothes. Clarissa stared at her in disgust, causing XoeY to hang her head as she did the walk of shame to her boss’s office. She felt like a child being sent to the principal’s office.

“Shut the door,” he ordered as he rounded the large desk that sat in the center of the spacious office. XoeY stood near the door, eyes pointed to the floor beneath her. It was then she realized she was wearing shoes that didn’t match; she cursed herself silently.

“I’m sorry fo—”

“Don’t speak.” He held his hand up, halting her words. His scowl was menacing, and XoeY didn’t know where to look. Her insides trembled with fear the longer he studied her without saying anything. He cleared his throat, his elbows pressed down on the Cherrywood desk. Kaz steepled his fingers in front of him, continuing to stare her down.

“Our mission is to excel with an *unwavering* commitment to punctuality. We believe that timeliness is not just a virtue; it is a testament to our dedication, respect for others’ time, and the hallmark of our reliability,” he recited. “Does that sound familiar to you?”

Xoey paused, not sure whether he really wanted her to answer or not.

“Speak,” he said coolly.

“I, uh, yes... It’s part of the mission statement, if I’m not mistaken.”

“We understand that every second counts, and we pledge to honor them, ensuring that punctuality remains at the forefront of our values as we strive for excellence in all that we do.” He dropped his hands and leaned back in the oversized chair. “You know why my company is a billion-dollar company? I’ll tell you why. It’s because we don’t waste time, and we solve problems, two of the most important things in any successful business. That means *every* person, from the top of the chain to the bottom, must adhere to the same standards. Have I made myself clear?”

Frantically, Xoey nodded, her bottom lip inadvertently going into her mouth. It was a nervous tick of hers.

Xoey’s voice wavered noticeably, betraying the nervousness she tried to hide as she said, “I understand and I’m sor—”

“Your apologies are meaningless to me. Save the I’m sorry and do better. Be better or you’ll find yourself seeking employment somewhere else. Is that understood?” She nodded and his brow hiked. “Is that understood?” he echoed, this time with more bass.

Xoey flinched, her cheeks growing even warmer under Kaz’s harsh glare. He didn’t miss the glint of hesitancy before she responded. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Remove yourself from my office,” he dismissed, turning toward his computer. As she rushed to grab the handle to exit, he called out to her. “And let this be the last time you step into

this building looking like you just rolled out of bed. There is a standard here at Sumpter Solutions. Rise to it or find somewhere else to work.” She stared at his profile since he hadn’t bothered to look away from the computer screen. Feeling lower than low, she scurried out of the office and back to her desk. XoeY was tempted to grab her things and leave, but she needed the job, so that wasn’t an option.

Once she got back to her desk, it wasn’t long before Clarissa came back over. As if she hadn’t been made to feel three inches tall by the big boss, now she had to listen to his minion finish her off.

“This is only your second day. You’re not making a good impression, and seeing as how you’re under me, you’re not making me look good, and that’s where we have a problem.”

XoeY, attempting to maintain her composure, stuttered in response, “I’m so sorry, Clarissa.”

“Ms. Hawthorne,” she corrected.

“Right, my apologies. Ms. Hawthorne, I didn’t hear my alarm and then there was tr—”

“Spare me the excuses. Get here on time. Matter of fact, get here before you’re scheduled to be here so we don’t have this problem anymore.” She adjusted the iPad in her hand and scanned it. “And do something about your attire.” She sneered, waving a hand in her direction.

Not wanting to say the wrong thing, XoeY simply nodded as she logged in to the computer to start her work for the day. There was nothing she could do to change her clothes; she’d just have to stay at her desk and out of sight as much as possible.

“Make sure all your outstanding emails are responded to or delegated appropriately. Really important, Mr. Sumpter has a *big* meeting next Friday, and I’ll need you to send out reminders and go through the checklist on page thirty-nine of your new hire packet to ensure everything is in order for that. Do *not* screw that up. Last, compile a brief status report on the ongoing projects for our afternoon meeting. All tasks need to

be completed before the end of business today. No excuses,” Clarissa dictated, then turned and walked away. Xoey dashed to write what she’d said since none of those things were on the list of things she originally planned to do. The night before, she had mentally mapped out her agenda for the day, but it looked like it would have to be adjusted.

Blowing out a breath, Xoey pulled her locs away from her face and got to work, praying she’d be able to complete the tasks on time.

Chapter Four

Kaz

In his home office, Kaz settled at his desk, basking in the dim warmth of the desk lamp that brought to life the jumble of papers, folders, and the glow of his laptop screen. He ran a hand through his locs, going over the notes he'd made for the presentation he was preparing for. It was for a big client, and he couldn't afford any missteps.

This contract was huge—a potential deal that could catapult his billion-dollar marketing agency to the next level. Kaz had spent countless hours refining his proposal, rehearsing his presentation, and now, with the presentation looming tomorrow, it was time to go through it one more time.

He took a deep breath and clicked open his PowerPoint file. The title slide, displaying the client's logo, appeared on the screen, and Kaz sighed. He had worked tirelessly on this pitch, and he knew every slide inside out. The only thing he couldn't predict was the client's reaction.

Kaz leaned back in his chair, running his fingers through his beard. He believed in the project, in his team's capabilities, and in the value they could bring to the client's business. Like a constant companion, self-doubt had been lurking in the corners of his mind.

With a quick glance at his Rolex, he knew it was time to dive in. The presentation began with an introduction that

highlighted the client's current challenges and a brief history of Kaz's agency.

“Gentlemen, we here at Sumpter Solutions appreciate the opportunity to show you why we're the best in the game. Having been in business the last three years, we've had the privilege of working with top companies, many of which you might be familiar with,” he said, switching the slide to one that contained familiar logos such as Nike, Lacoste, and Amazon. “Since we've started, we've been able to achieve remarkable results for our clients, and we can do the same for you.”

As he continued rehearsing, Kaz outlined the strengths and unique selling points of his agency, emphasizing their track record and commitment to the client's success. He shifted to the core of the presentation, laying out their proposed marketing strategy.

“Yeah. That's good shit.” He complimented himself. Kaz went through the rest of the slides, reciting the words he'd committed to memory. The more he rehearsed, the more confident he felt that he would walk out of the conference room tomorrow with another brand under his belt. He heard the money being deposited into his account as he stretched his legs out in front of him. Looking out the panoramic windows, he took in the view. Behind his home was a beautiful lake and his boat that he sometimes took out when he needed to get out and clear his mind.

Kaz was proud of himself. With the way his childhood was, no one expected him to make it to the point he had in life, but he was living the dream—his dream.

His hand swiped across his face as he brought himself back to the present moment. The past often left a sour taste in his mouth, so he didn't like dwelling on it for too long.

The time in the bottom right corner of the computer screen let him know it was probably time to call it a night. He had been holed up in his home office since he'd come in from the office, and it was now almost three in the morning. Kaz would need some shuteye to ensure he was ready for the big day ahead.

Kaz's phone went off, back to back, waking him from his sleep. Annoyed that his phone was ringing so early, with one eye open, he silenced it, not bothering to see who was calling. Whoever it was would have to wait until later. He stretched beneath the warm embrace of his comforter, his mind already racing ahead to the day's agenda. Today was the day he'd been preparing for—the presentation that would change the course of his business.

Shortly after he shut his eyes again, his alarm went off. He silenced the alarm with a groggy swipe. The room was still cloaked in the predawn darkness, but Kaz was determined to face the day head-on. He sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes to shake off the lingering tendrils of sleep.

With purpose in every movement, Kaz rose from the bed, more appreciative than ever of the heated floors he had throughout his home. He strolled into the adjoining bathroom, the light above the mirror flicking on at his touch. The reflection that greeted him was one of determination, etched with a hint of cockiness.

Kaz pushed the button to start the shower and waited until the display showed his perfect temperature before entering and letting the warm cascade wash away the remnants of sleep. The sensation was rejuvenating, invigorating him for the day ahead. As he showered, he mentally reviewed his presentation, each point falling into place as the water flowed over him.

Dressed in a crisp, tailored suit, he stood before the mirror. His beard, neatly trimmed, and his hair confined to a bun, made him look astonishingly handsome and professional. He knew presentation day demanded nothing less. With each buttoned cuff and tie neatly knotted, he completed the transformation.

Kaz descended to the kitchen, preparing the machine to brew coffee. Moments later, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the air. He filled a mug and drank from it, the robust flavor infusing him with the energy he needed. The kitchen table held a stack of papers and his meticulously organized notes.

Kaz gathered his documents and notes, ensuring nothing was left behind. He didn't have room for error. The dining room clock signaled that it was time to go. Out the door he went, the crisp morning air welcoming him.

The car's engine purred to life, and Kaz headed to the office. As he navigated through traffic, he ran through his presentation once more, rehearsing his cadence and pacing. He was ready to deliver it with unwavering confidence, but he knew true success required a blend of preparation and adaptability.

Arriving at the office, he parked and glanced up at the towering building. Today, everything hinged on his performance in that conference room.

Kaz stepped inside, ready to face the day. He couldn't wait to get this presentation over with and move on to securing the next deal.

His size twelve loafer had barely made it over the threshold of his office before there was a knock on his door.

"What is it?" he questioned crossly.

Clarissa, his usually composed and impeccably professional assistant, entered the office with an air of palpable panic. Her steps were swift, and her normally calm, bland face was etched with anxiety as she pushed the door open.

Kaz took his seat, setting the paperwork he'd brought in down in front of him. Clarissa's unusual haste caused him to arch an inquisitive eyebrow.

Clarissa's voice trembled as she spoke. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've been trying to get a hold of you all morning." When she said that, he recalled silencing his phone, so he took it out of his blazer and checked the notifications.

"Mr. Johnson and his team are here and have been here, sir. I tried to stall as much as I could, but they're ready to leave and no longer want to hear the presentation." She stepped back when he slammed his open palm against the desk, causing papers to maneuver from their resting place.

“You’re shitting me right now, Clarissa! What the hell do you mean, they don’t wanna hear the presentation? The meeting wasn’t until ten, anyway. Why are they here already?”

“Uh, sir, that’s the thing. When the reminder for the meeting was sent out, it, uh... it said eight, not ten, so they’ve been here for over an hour.” Her words were rushed, and her eyes darted around the room as if searching for answers.

“Eight? Since when do we have meetings at eight? Who sent out the reminder, and why wasn’t this double-checked before it went out?” Kaz rattled off question after question, not leaving room for her to respond.

He stared into her flushed face, and it was evident she was frightened. She should be. Kaz was livid, and whoever was responsible would be dealt with accordingly.

“Let me go and clean up this mess. By the time I get out of this meeting, I only want the person responsible left behind. Everyone else needs to be gone, do I make myself clear?”

“Y-yes, sir. Understood,” she faltered.

Kaz stood, adjusting his suit as he rushed to the conference room to salvage this business deal. He had worked too hard to have it slip through his fingers because of a negligent mistake.

“Gentlemen, my apologies for my late arrival. It seems there was a mix-up with the timing of this meeting, but if you’d allow me, we can move forward, and I’ll get you out of here in no time,” he said, glancing at the old, wrinkled faces before him. Having to come in like he was felt too much like ass-kissing to him, but it was what needed to be done in order to secure the deal, so he would deal with it.

“If we weren’t intrigued by your capabilities, Mr. Sumpter, we would have left a long time ago. Let’s get this going so we can make it to our other meetings.”

Kaz hadn’t even grabbed the papers with his notes on them, but he would have to do without; he couldn’t waste another minute of their time.

“Gentlemen, we here at Sumpter Solutions appreciate the opportunity to show you why we’re the best in the game.

Having been in business for the last three years, we've had the privilege of working with top companies, many of which you might be familiar with. Our proposal centers on a multi-tiered approach, which we believe will not only boost your brand recognition but also drive higher engagement and ultimately lead to increased revenue."

Kaz clicked to the next slide, showing a comprehensive breakdown of the marketing strategy. He spoke with confidence, illustrating the details of their digital advertising campaigns, social media initiatives, and targeted content creation.

As he discussed each aspect of the strategy, he knew he had them, hook, line, and sinker. The presentation was top tier, and the creative visuals and detailed analytics were his persuasion tools.

"We believe our approach aligns seamlessly with your goals and your target audience. But what truly sets us apart is our ability to adapt to a rapidly changing digital landscape. This means your brand will remain not just relevant but ahead of the curve."

As he neared the end of the presentation, he took in the expressions of the people in the room. He knew they were pleased with what he had said thus far, and he was about to bring it home.

"In conclusion, we're confident that our tailored strategy will exceed your expectations and help you achieve your objectives. We're not just here to work for you; we're here to work *with* you. We're excited about this opportunity and the possibilities it brings."

Kaz set the remote he'd been using to change the slides down and stuffed his hands into his pockets. The men in the room applauded and chatted among themselves briefly before one man spoke.

"We're glad we stuck around for that, Mr. Sumpter. You've got yourself a new client." He beamed, leaning forward to shake Kaz's hand.

“I’m glad to hear that, Mr. Johnson. We look forward to working with you and helping your business reach new heights. Thank you for trusting us with the job.”

The men spoke with each other briefly while contracts were reviewed and signed, then he escorted them to the elevator. As he walked back to his office, he passed the new hire, who was now the only other person on the floor. That let him know she was responsible for the mishap that almost cost him a million-dollar deal.

“Follow me.” His tone was curt, and he didn’t stop his gait. Leaving the door slightly ajar, he went to his seat and waited for her to enter. Kaz took in her appearance. Her locs were pulled up into a ponytail, and she had one loc hanging by each of her temples with a gold jewel attached to them. Her skin was a little ashened today, and her eyes... he couldn’t quite pinpoint what it was about them, but something was off. From where he sat, he saw her hands trembling as she held her sweater pulled tight in front of her. Maybe it was fear he saw in her eyes, but they were glossy like she’d been crying or was about to cry.

“Are you always this problematic?” Kaz didn’t miss the stunned expression that was quickly dropped as her eyes cast downward. “I’m looking for a response to my question.”

“N-no. I’m not trying to be a problem. May I ask what I did?”

Kaz’s annoyance and anger were evident in his body language as he sat, watching Xoey. His eyes bore into Xoey with a piercing intensity that left no doubt about the depth of his wrath. His tense posture conveyed his displeasure. His brow was furrowed, and his jaw clenched, a clear sign of his vexation.

As he spoke, his voice was sharp and clipped. “You’ve been here less than two weeks, and this is the second time you’ve had to be disciplined for something. First, you were late, and I believe that happened on just your second day of work. Now you’ve almost cost me a million dollars. Do you

have a million dollars on standby to give me for your shortcomings?”

She stared, her mouth separating like she wasn't sure if she was supposed to say something. Kaz's shoulders were squared, and his body seemed rigid as if he were physically restraining himself from lashing out. When he moved in his seat, she rushed to say, “N-no. I-I don't.”

“I ain't think so. How hard is it to do your job? I didn't think the job required a rocket scientist. I've asked nothing major of you but to show up on time and not fuck up. Yet, you, a seemingly functioning adult, can't do something as simple as getting a time right on an important email. Because of your slip, I almost missed the opportunity to give the presentation I've been preparing for, for weeks. Because of you, I looked bad today in front of my peers. Because of you, I had to brown-nose, and that's one thing I hate more than anything.” Kaz stood and strode over to her. He towered her easily, his massive body swallowing her thick frame. The air around him was charged with tension, and his impatience was palpable.

“Because of you—”

Before he could finish his rant, he leaped into action when XoeY passed out, hitting her head on the door in the process.

Chapter Five

Xoey

Xoey's eyes fluttered open to a sterile, fluorescent-lit room. The beeping of medical equipment and the faint scent of antiseptic filled the air. She blinked a few times, trying to clear her groggy mind. It took a moment for her surroundings to register, and then a wave of confusion washed over her.

She turned her head slowly, wincing at the dull ache in her temples, and saw a nurse hurrying about, organizing trays of medical supplies. Xoey hesitated for a moment before summoning the strength to speak.

“Um, excuse me, but... where am I? What happened?”

The nurse turned to her with a welcoming and reassuring smile, relief evident in her eyes as she saw Xoey was awake.

“You're in the hospital, dear. You were brought in after you passed out at work.”

“I passed out? I can't remember...” Xoey frowned, struggling to recall the events leading up to her hospitalization. Her mind felt foggy, and the memories were elusive. She remembered being in the office with her boss, and then nothing.

“It's not uncommon to have some memory lapses after fainting. It can be disorienting. Don't worry; we're here to

help you. Do you remember anything unusual happening recently, or have you been feeling unwell?”

“I-I’ve been feeling exhausted lately, and I’ve had some dizziness. I just figured it was because of my new job and not sleeping as much as I should.” The nurse nodded.

“Who brought me in?”

“A gentleman. He didn’t give us a name, but he said he was with you at the time. Poor man was frazzled.” The nurse chuckled.

The nurse’s expression grew more serious as she approached Xoe’s bedside, carrying a clipboard.

“Your tiredness and dizziness could be due to severe anemia. We’ve done some tests, and your iron and blood levels were dangerously low when you came in. That’s likely what caused you to faint. But don’t worry; we’ve started treating you.”

Xoe’s eyes widened in alarm, and she swallowed hard, her concern mounting.

“Anemia? But I didn’t even know I was anemic. What’s the treatment?”

The nurse flipped through the papers on her clipboard, her tone gentle and soothing.

“You’re receiving iron through an IV to help your body build up your iron stores. It’s a standard treatment, and we’ll be monitoring your progress closely. You also need a blood transfusion, but we need your consent before giving that to you. If you’d like to consent, I’ll get the paperwork for you to sign, and we’ll get that started as well.”

Xoe felt a blend of relief and anxiety. She was grateful for the treatment, but worried about the underlying cause of her condition.

“How long will I be here? Is this going to be a long recovery process?”

The nurse’s smile returned, accompanied by an empathetic gaze.

“Recovery varies from person to person, but we’re here to support you every step of the way. It might take some time for your body to fully recover, but you’ll start feeling better soon. In the meantime, we’ll keep you here for observation to ensure everything’s going smoothly.”

Xoey nodded, her mind racing with questions and concerns. She was grateful to be in the care of the medical professionals, but the sudden onset of illness and the extent of her anemia left her feeling overwhelmed.

“Is there anyone we should contact for you? A family member or a friend? It’s always helpful to have someone here for support during your recovery.”

Xoey hesitated, her heart heavy with the realization that she had no one to call. She was in this state all alone, but even in the place she used to call home, she had no one. Nodding somberly, Xoey didn’t miss the look of pity on the nurse’s face.

“What about the gentleman who brought you in? Maybe he’d like an update?”

“He’s my boss. I’ll have to report that I won’t be in for work, so I’m sure he’ll find out then,” she said dryly, turning over on her side.

The nurse nodded in understanding.

As Xoey lay in the hospital bed, the IV slowly infusing her with iron and the rhythmic beeping of the machines accompanying her, she allowed the tears that stung her eyes to fall freely. Loneliness had never been an issue for her, but waking up in the hospital to this news with not a soul to call really hit her.

* * *

The next morning, there was a knock on her door that woke her up; it was a nurse bringing in her breakfast.

“Good morning. How are you feeling today?” the cheerful nurse asked, setting the tray of food on the table.

“Good morning. I’m feeling okay. My head is still a little sore, but other than that, I’m fine.”

Nodding, the nurse grabbed the clipboard from the foot of the bed. “It looks like you hit your head as you fainted. From the tests, it doesn’t look like you had any bleeding or a concussion, so that’s good. Is it sore to the point you think you need medication for it?”

“No, it’s not that bad. I’ll be fine without it,” she told the nurse.

“If you change your mind or the pain gets worse, just press the call button, and someone will bring you something for it. Is there anything else I can get for you while I’m here?”

“No, thank you.” XoeY adjusted the bed so she would be able to reach the tray and eat her food. On the tray was scrambled eggs, two pieces of bacon, toast, and orange juice. What she would have liked was an iced caramel macchiato, but this would have to do.

After breakfast, XoeY saw there was a *Law & Order: SVU* marathon on, so she got comfortable under the covers and locked in. She ended up dozing off while watching TV, and when she woke up, someone was at her door again. Given the time on the clock on the wall, she figured they were delivering dinner.

“Come in,” she called, clearing her throat once she realized how hoarse she sounded.

Sitting up in the bed, she was taken aback when his colossal frame came into view.

“Uh, h-hi,” she spoke absentmindedly.

“Don’t think you passing out excuses you. You dropped the ball majorly, and it’s unacceptable at Sumpter Solutions,” was what he said when he fully entered the space.

The nerve of this man.

“So, what, you came here to fire me?” She tilted her head, crossing her arms over her ample chest.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, feet shoulder-width apart, shoulders squared. Kaz stared her down without a word. "It's fine if you are. I don't know when I'll be able to come back in to work, anyway, so it's probably better that way." Her attention went back to the television. From her peripheral, she saw his shoulders drop slightly.

"What you got?"

Xoey's face twisted. "Since I'm fired, anyway... are you *always* an asshole? Does it pain you to be a decent human being?"

Kaz's thick brows rose, and a smirk quirked the corner of his lip upward.

"Asshole? Is that what you think of me, Xoey?" The way those two syllables fell from his tongue enticed her, drew her in so deep, her orbs were now locked on his. A collage of images conjugated in her mind, none of which were wholesome.

Kaz was an Adonis of a man. He stood tall, his commanding presence demanding attention. This handsome Black man possessed a magnetism that drew people toward him, her included. As much as she tried to resist, in this moment, especially, it was practically impossible. His strong jawline, high cheekbones, and wide, expressive mouth coupled with his velvety, healthy ebony skin that gleamed like polished obsidian, was a witness to his origin.

His eyes were deep and expressive, like twin pools of dark chocolate. They held a wisdom that seemed to go beyond his years. His eyebrows were thick and perfectly sculpted, framing those eyes that pinned her to the hospital bed.

A neatly groomed beard adorned his face, accentuating the lines of his jaw, and a meticulously maintained lineup added the right touch to his handsome features. He moved with powerful yet fluid steps as he went to the seat beside the bed.

Dressed impeccably in a tailored suit, his style exuded confidence and eloquence. The deep, charcoal fabric of the suit accentuated the radiance of his skin, creating a refined

contrast. He carried himself with a self-assured posture, shoulders back and head held high, his presence undeniable.

Though he'd been nothing but an ass to her since they'd met, she couldn't deny Kazimir Sumpter was a masterpiece.

"You slow or something? Why is it I ask you questions, and you sit there with yo' mouth open like you stuck on stupid or something?"

That snapped XoeY out of the lustful haze she was in. Positioning herself so that she was sitting upright in the bed, she turned in his direction slightly.

"As valedictorian of my high school, graduating number one in my class, and then going on to college, graduating summa cum laude, my intelligence should never be in question. That's first. Second, I have no problem answering your questions; however, you seem to only like people to speak when you've given permission, so I'm unaware of when I can actually say something or not. At least, I was because I wanted to keep my job. Now, however, I don't give two squirts of a piss about stepping out of line with you... you big bully." XoeY's movements were animated and filled with fervor as she addressed Kaz. Her gestures were expressive, punctuating her words with waves of her hands and occasional finger-pointing. She leaned forward, her body language leaning toward confrontation, as she voiced her angst with a hint of frustration in her tone. Her facial expressions mirrored her passionate stance.

Neither of them said anything for a moment but the silence was interrupted by Kaz's thunderous laughter.

"Where you been hiding that thick ass accent?" He laughed some more, and she glared at him evilly before giving him the finger. "She cussed me out and now she's giving me the bird? You really have been holding back, huh?" His expression was more playful than she'd ever seen it. "Two squirts of a piss." His laughter shook his shoulders. It was also contagious because it wasn't long before XoeY chuckled, too. She couldn't believe she had said that to him.

"Well, you deserve it. You haven't been very nice, mister."

“Did you know the original definition of nice meant silly or foolish? I’m neither of those things, so you’re right. I’m not nice.”

“I didn’t know that, but what I do know is that you know what I mean when I say nice. You’re not kind. Not kind at all.” She shook her head. “You’re a bully. A jerk. An asshole.”

“Anything else you need to get off your chest while you’re at it?” He smirked, resting his back against the chair.

For a moment, she paused. “Yes, actually, there is. What brings you here? Did you really come here to fire me? Because, if so, that’s a real jackass move to fire someone as they lay in a hospital bed, fighting for their life.”

“Fighting for your life? What’s wrong with you? Seriously.”

“Are you allowed to ask such personal questions as my boss?” Xoe’s nose was scrunched.

“I’m allowed to ask whatever I want. Now answer the question,” he told her.

“I’m severely anemic. My iron and blood levels are low, hence the IVs supplying me with blood and iron.” She tried to read his expression but couldn’t. “It’s not life-threatening. Well, not really. I’ll be fine as long as I stay on top of my iron.” He nodded in understanding. It got quiet, and her attention went back to the TV.

“I didn’t come to fire you,” he said, causing her attention to return to him. Her jaw sagged slightly. She had talked to him crazy, and she wasn’t even fired.

“Well, I guess if I wasn’t fired before, I am now, huh?” She laughed humorlessly.

“I’ll keep you around. Don’t need you trying to sue for discrimination or nothing.” Xoe chuckled and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. His smile caused heat to spread through her stomach, and she became uneasy suddenly. “Just make sure there are no more fuck ups, you understand? Three strikes... well, you know the rest.”

“What was my second strike?”

“You don’t remember? Oh yeah, I forgot; you conveniently passed out when I was talking to you about it,” he joked, and she rolled her eyes. She went to her mental rolodex and recalled them having a conversation, but she couldn’t remember all the details.

“Refresh my memory. I did hit my head, so things are a bit hazy.”

“I bet. And that reminds me, you owe me for the dent in my door you created when that head of yours hit it.” XoeY gasped, then tossed the remote at him, which he caught. “Assaulting the boss? You must really wanna be down in that unemployment line.”

“Try me,” she uttered sassily, tilting her neck. XoeY and Kaz went back and forth with the playful banter, and this was a side of him she never expected. He’d been the Grinch the entire time she’d known him, but she was starting to believe there was more to Mr. Kaz Sumpter than what met the eye, and her interest had been piqued.

Chapter Six

Kaz

After Kaz dropped XoeY off at the hospital, he had no intentions of going back. He figured she would either return to work or call in because she wouldn't be able to come in. However, the whole night, he barely got any sleep as he thought about her and her condition. He didn't know what had happened, and he had never been in a situation like that before. No lie, it had him spooked because he wasn't sure if she was going to live or not. She had hit her head pretty hard and was seemingly unconscious as he rushed her to the hospital that was only five minutes away from the building.

Heading home after he went to check on her, he was glad he had stopped by. Kaz wasn't sure what to expect from the visit, but if he were being honest, he had to admit it wasn't a horrible time.

Entering his car, he brought it to life, revving the engine before pulling out into traffic and heading home. Their conversations populated in his mind, and he laughed at her accent and the sayings she used. He had learned that she was from Anniston, Alabama, born and raised, and she was as country as country could get, but he would have never guessed. She had done a hell of a job masking her accent, an accent he would never admit out loud he found cute.

Shaking his head, he needed to rid himself of those thoughts. It was bad enough he found her physically attractive; finding other things to appreciate about her would only lead to trouble.

The music spilled out of the speakers, and Kaz cranked up the volume as he weaved in and out of the lanes. Stopping at the gas station, he filled his car then got back on his route to his home. As he pulled through the gate, his phone dinged; it was Amina. She had been blowing him up, asking to come through, but Kaz hadn't been in the mood to deal with her. He sent a final threat; the next move would be taking action.

On his way inside, he stopped by the mailbox and took out the mail that was overflowing, tossing it on the entryway table once he was inside and the door was secure. He'd go through it later. Right now, he was about to hop in the shower, get comfortable, and catch up on some work he needed to get done.

An hour later, Kaz was stretched out on his large sectional, laptop resting on his lap as the TV showed sports highlights. There was another big brand he was trying to secure to expand his portfolio, so he was doing his research to see how his company could help theirs. He needed a solid strategy before he approached them if this was going to work in his favor.

With a satisfied exhale, he stood from the couch, setting the laptop aside, and stretched his arms above his head, feeling the satisfying pops in his shoulders as he released tension.

“Shit.” He grunted as he continued to stretch on his way to his bedroom. It was time to call it a night.

* * *

Kaz sat in his office, a stack of files neatly arranged on his desk. Clarissa entered the room, her eyes scanning the organized chaos that was her boss's workspace.

“I've prepared a list of the upcoming projects you wanted to discuss.”

Kaz nodded appreciatively and gestured for her to take a seat.

“Continue,” he said.

They began to discuss the projects, the details flowing smoothly as Clarissa presented her well-organized notes.

“The first project, as you know, is the Waymaker account. We’re set to meet with them next week to finalize the contract.”

“Good, and what’s the latest on the Henderson project?”

“Henderson has requested a timeline extension due to some internal restructuring. I’ve informed them that we’ll accommodate it within reason.”

Again, Kaz nodded. The room fell silent, causing Kaz to look up from the documents that had his attention. Clarissa cleared her throat before saying, “I, uh, was just wondering... what’s the plan for Xoe? Her performance has been—”

Kaz cut her off, his voice unyielding.

“Clarissa, I’ve got the situation with Xoe under control. That’s my responsibility. You just focus on your work.”

Clarissa bit her lip, realizing that her concern might not be well-received. She nodded, her eyes downcast.

“Of course. I just thought it was important for us to address any issues within the team.”

Kaz could sense her lingering hesitation but chose not to engage further on the matter.

“Do you enjoy your job, Clarissa?”

“Oh, y-yes, sir, absolutely. I love working here.”

“And I like you working here. But when it comes to personnel issues, I’ll handle them. Now, back to our project list.”

Clarissa nodded, a hint of disappointment in her eyes, but she continued with the meeting, shifting her focus back to the topic at hand. Kaz, too, redirected his attention to the

upcoming projects, leaving the contentious issue of XoeY temporarily in the background. He'd already reconciled in his mind that he wasn't going to let XoeY go. There was something about her that urged him to keep her around, so he was listening to that gut feeling; it had never led him astray before.

"Is that all you have?" Kaz questioned when Clarissa stopped rambling.

"Yes, I've covered everything."

"Good. You can leave then. Close the door behind you." He didn't make eye contact with her, so he missed the pout that formed on her pale face.

"Yes, sir. I'll be at my desk should you need anything." The door shut and Kaz looked up. The picturesque view from his office was spectacular, and he cherished it in moments like this when he needed something to steal his focus, if only for a moment.

For the last three hours, Kaz had been engrossed in the work before him. He was making headway with gathering information for the tech company he was looking to acquire as a client and was almost ready to start putting together a pitch for them.

Needing to stretch his limbs, he stood, his legs like stilts carrying him across the office in only a few steps. As he walked out into Gen-Pop, he surveyed the scene, and everyone was working like worker bees, just like he liked. Heading toward the break room, he heard a commotion that grabbed his attention.

"You can easily be replaced, so I suggest you start making yourself more useful. Handle these tasks, and I need them done by the close of business today," he heard Clarissa order.

When he stepped forward, the look on XoeY's face bothered him. Her face, which he hadn't seen since four days ago at the hospital, also made him feel something else—desire.

"What's going on here?" He injected himself into the conversation.

“O-Oh, nothing. Just giving her some assignments to handle.” Kaz grabbed the paper Clarissa had slammed onto the desk when she was speaking to XoeY and reviewed it. His brows met in the center of his forehead, and he looked at her. If she could be any paler, she would have been, and her eyes darted left to right quickly. She looked like she was about to defend herself, but Kaz silenced her with a hand gesture.

“Clarissa, why are your responsibilities being handed to XoeY?” XoeY’s eyes bulged, and she turned her attention to Clarissa, her eyes narrowing.

“I... I... Well, actually—”

“Well, actually, nothing. If she’s doing your job, what good are you to me? I can just keep her,” he spoke. Clarissa nearly snapped her neck, she shook it so hard.

“N-no, sir. That won’t be necessary at all. I can handle it. I just figured—”

“You figured you could get over on the new hire.” He handed the paper back to Clarissa. “I expect *you* to do your job; she has her own duties and responsibilities. Also, watch how you speak to her. If you can’t do so respectfully, then don’t speak to her at all. Understood?”

Nodding, she fumbled with the items in her hands and adjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

“Good. Get back to work. I expect everything on that list to be handled by the close of business today,” he demanded, telling her the same thing she had told XoeY.

“Yes, sir.”

Once she was gone, he nodded at XoeY and continued his stride to the break room to grab a drink. On his way back, XoeY said, “Thank you,” quietly.

“For what?”

“For standing up for me. For stepping in.” She looked away shyly, tucking her locs behind her ear that was adorned with an ear cuff.

“Don’t mention it, *Bama*.” He winked, and she blushed as he headed back to his office. Kaz didn’t know what had come over him, but he suddenly felt protective over her, like he needed to keep her safe and away from the harshness of the world.

Chapter Seven

Xoey

“My man, thank you to my man,” Xoey harmonized as she twirled around her living room with a glass of wine.

The day hadn’t started off that great, but by the end of it, she was floating on a cloud. Kaz had stepped in and stood up for her, and she couldn’t explain it, but it did something to her insides. Not only that, it activated her lady parts in a way that had her ready to grind up against something.

Holding her head back, she emptied the contents of the glass and set it down, still singing the catchy lyrics. No, Kaz wasn’t her man, but still.

Her phone ringing interrupted her horrid singing. Going to her phone, she wasn’t sure who would be calling her because she didn’t talk to anyone on the phone. The only notifications she got were emails or text messages from Clarissa and notifications from the vocabulary app she used to stay up on her word game.

“Hello?” she said, out of breath. Silence. She pulled the phone away from her ear and looked to see if the call was still connected. It was. “Hello?” she said again. When she still didn’t get a response, she hung up. Going to her call log, the number wasn’t one she recognized, nor had it appeared in her call log before today. She figured maybe it was the wrong number or something and went to the kitchen to turn the oven

off. XoeY had made her famous baked spaghetti so she would have something to eat during the week instead of spending money on eating out.

Taking the casserole dish out of the oven, she carefully set it on the stovetop and pulled a plate from the drying rack. Digging into the spaghetti, she nearly drooled at the cheese pull that formed. Once she added the spaghetti, she grabbed the bowl that had Caesar salad in it and picked up two pieces of garlic bread from the toaster. Setting her plate down, she refilled her wineglass, then took the glass and plate to the living room so she could sit in front of the TV. There were new episodes of her guilty pleasure, *Love is Blind*, and she couldn't wait to watch.

Halfway through the meal, she was so into the show, she had to put the plate aside.

“Girl, stand up! I *know* you're not crying over this man you met three seconds ago. Puh-lease!” She rolled her eyes, picking up her plate and filling her mouth with a forkful of spaghetti.

“Lord, am I that desperate?” she questioned. “Nah, I can't be *that* bad. If I was, I'd be with someone right now.” She continued talking to herself.

Once the last episode for the week went off, she got up and took her things to the kitchen. Her phone rang again, and it was the most active it had been in months. Answering, she got the same thing: no response. This time, however, she called the number back after hanging up. Of course, it went straight to a voicemail that wasn't set up.

Not worrying about it, XoeY went to brush her teeth and do her skincare routine before calling it a night. The sun would be up before she knew it.

* * *

XoeY woke up early enough that she was able to stop by a local coffee shop and grab breakfast and a coffee, which was a

bonus for her. She loved the pastries at this place, and the coffee was always made to perfection.

As she walked into the lobby, she greeted Krystina.

“You look like you’re glowing today, girl. What gives?” Krystina inquired.

“Sustenance,” Xoey replied, holding up the bag that contained her pastries and breakfast sandwich, and her cup of coffee in the other hand.

“Food makes me glow like that, too.” Krystina laughed. “Have a good day!”

“You too.” Krystina had become a cool acquaintance for Xoey, and she looked forward to their exchanges, even if they were brief.

On the ride up to her floor, she caught herself humming and realized she really was in a good mood today. There was no particular reason for it, but she wasn’t complaining.

Stepping off the elevator, she set her things down and powered up the computers. As they loaded, she sipped her coffee, enjoying the robustness of it. She squirted the hand sanitizer in her hand and rubbed them together, shaking them gently to dry them off. Removing the pastry from the bag, she placed it on a napkin after taking a bite. As she entered her credentials into the computer, she heard a loud bang and what sounded like someone yelling. Getting up, she walked in the direction she heard the sound. Usually, she was the only one here this early, so she wasn’t expecting anyone else.

Knocking on the door, she said, “Uh, is everything okay?” There was no response, but she heard movement behind the door. Just as she was about to walk away and mind her business, the door swung open, and Kaz stood there, huffing and puffing.

“What do you want?” She shifted her weight to her other leg and folded her arms across her chest.

“We’re back to this again?” Her brow raised.

“I don’t have time for this. What do you want?”

“I was just checking to see if you were okay. I heard a loud noise and yelling and—”

“And you decided to be nosy,” he finished.

“Helpful. I decided to be helpful. But never mind.” She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her. The pads of his fingers pressed into her softness, and she looked between his hand and his face, saying more with that gesture than she could with her mouth. He smirked, but he let her go.

Snatching her arm back to her side, she went to walk off again. “I’m drawing a blank. I never get stuck like this,” she heard behind her.

“I’m sorry. Is this you inserting me in your business, Mr. Sumpter?” This time, she simpered at him, and his face remained stoic. For a moment, they just stood there, staring each other down. “What is it you’re stuck on? Maybe I can help.”

She shook her head and walked back toward his office when he stepped inside without a word.

“Close the door,” he requested, which was odd, given they were the only ones there. “I’ve been researching this company I want to add to my portfolio. I’ve gotten all the information I need on them, and now I’m putting together a pitch. I’ve done this a million times; it should be a no-brainer. But I’m drawing a blank on what to offer. The truth is, they have a pretty solid marketing strategy already, but there’s always room for improvement, room for expansion.”

“Let me see what you have,” she requested, taking a seat at the desk. Kaz turned the computer so she was able to see as well, and he went through the information about the company and what he’d come up with for the pitch so far.”

“Can I be honest?”

“Nah, I want you to lie to my face,” he said sarcastically.

“You know what, I don’t have to deal with your smart aleck remarks. You can keep struggling like you were doing before.” XoeY stood, and so did Kaz.

“Man, sit down. For real, I wanna hear what you gotta say, Bama.”

“My name is not Bama.”

“I know your name, Xoe, but I’m gonna call ya country ass Bama.”

“As long as I can call you asshole, we’re even.” She looked at him in challenge.

“I’ve been called worse.” He shrugged.

“Oh, I’m sure of it.” She took her seat again. “Your pitch is boring. Yes, this is a tech company, but just from their website, I can tell they aren’t your typical tech company. They’re young, hip, modern, and even comedic—all the things you aren’t, clearly. You have to approach them differently than you would any other company you’ve worked with. Give me until the end of the day, and I’ll have something for you.”

He sat back in his chair, listening to her advice. Tugging on the end of his beard, he nodded.

“We’ll be here late, so tell your man not to wait up.”

“If that’s your way of trying to get up in my business and see if I have a man, nice try.”

“I don’t give two squirts of a piss if you do or don’t.” Xoe’s laughter covered his, but they both got a good chuckle out of him taking her line.

“Am I interrupting?” Xoe heard from behind her. It was Clarissa.

“Since when do you come in without knocking?” The lightheartedness he’d just displayed was replaced with the iciness he usually wore in his mien.

“I did knock. I guess you didn’t hear it over the laughter.”

“And I know you didn’t hear me tell you to come in. Let this be the last time you encroach upon my territory without permission. Do we need a refresher on the expectations here, Clarissa?”

“No, sir.”

Xoey felt like she was sitting in on a conversation that was supposed to be private, and it made her feel awkward. So, she stood and headed for the door.

“Don’t forget we’ll be burning the midnight oil tonight. Ain’t that what y’all say where you from?”

Discreetly, she flipped him the bird as she walked out and headed back to her desk. She wasn’t sure what tonight would bring, but she couldn’t lie; she was excited to spend time with him again, alone.

Chapter Eight

Kaz

“So, what did you come up with?” he asked as soon as she stepped into the office. Looking up from her phone, she gave him an incredulous look.

“Did your parents not teach you any manners? It’s polite, and expected, that you greet someone when you see them.” Her eyes rolled as she strode over and took a seat, setting her belongings down. Kaz watched as she crossed her legs, resting her hands on her knees as she stared at him like she was waiting for something.

“Nah, they didn’t, actually. Now, about what you were supposed to deliver; do you have it, or have you dropped the ball again?” Kaz observed Xoe, a faint smirk playing on his lips as he noticed the subtle signs of irritation etching across her face. She sat across from him, her brow furrowing in response to his rebuttal. Her tapping fingers and impatient glances toward him betrayed her annoyance. Kaz found it rather amusing, the way she began to crack under the weight of his pensive stare. He was secretly pleased with his ability to provoke such a reaction.

“Let’s get this understood, Mr. Sumpter. The only time I may have dropped the ball was showing up late on my second day. Other than that—”

“Have we forgotten you almost cost me a shitload of money?” His brow hitched.

“I didn’t. It wasn’t my error that caused you to almost miss out on money you don’t really need, anyway. Had you bothered to give me a chance to explain myself instead of berating me like I was your child, you would have known that.” Xoe pulled out the iPad she had been given by the company to complete her tasks and handed it to him. Kaz perused the screen as she continued. “As you can see, the information in the body of the email says exactly what it should have. It seems the error was made by the person who input it in the calendar, a calendar I’m not privy to; they forgot to switch the time zone, which created the hiccup.” Kaz set the iPad on the desk closer to her than him, but he didn’t speak. “An apology would be nice.”

That caused him to laugh and adjust his posture. “An apology? What exactly am I apologizing to you for?”

“For wrongly accusing me. What, you can’t admit when you’re wrong? I’m actually not surprised.”

“If I were wro—”

“You were and you are, but I won’t force you to exercise manners you obviously don’t have. Let’s get this done and over with so I can leave, please, and thank you.” Kaz didn’t know how to handle her flippant attitude. It seemed since their exchange in the hospital, she had gotten more comfortable with the way she talked to him. Her accent poked through at times, and her mouth... her mouth would land her in trouble if she kept it up.

“Like I told you earlier, your pitch is boring, and it isn’t going to work with this company. If you want a fighting chance, you’re going to have to speak their language. As you saw, the CEO of the company is young and is big on social media marketing. They leverage influencers heavily to promote their products. I see their ads no less than three times when I’m scrolling my For You Page on TikTok. This is what you need to sell them.”

“TikTok? That’s your solution?” He leaned back in his seat with a look of disappointment.

“Yes, TikTok is the solution. It’s what is going to get you the deal. Create a few different reels, incorporate some of the trending songs and dances, and voilà, you’ve got yourself a new client. I’m telling you, this is how you speak their language.” Her smile showed how proud she was of the solution she had come up with.

“It’s juvenile, and I’m not doing it. What do I look like? I thought you were bringing real sol—”

“You look like someone who cares more about making money than anything else. This is how you do that. So what if you have to do a little shucking and jiving to get it done; I’m sure you’ve done something strange for a piece of change before. You look like the type.”

“The type? What exactly are you insinuating, Bama?”

“I’m not insinuating anything, *Bully*. I’m saying that you look like the type who isn’t above doing whatever it takes to secure a deal. Whether that be stepping on toes or sleeping with these dried-up women who come in with their husbands, yet still seem to throw themselves at you.”

“Bully? What happened to asshole?”

“I like to limit my cursing.” Kaz smirked as she shrugged. The office grew quiet as XoeY picked up her iPad and began to tap on the screen. His eyes were glued to her, taking in her appearance. She was focused, her button nose scrunched, the point of her tongue sliding across her plump bottom lip. His dick twitched in his pants as the thought of it being on the surface of her tongue appeared in his mind’s eye.

Clearing his throat allowed him to come back to the moment before he drifted too deep into that memory. XoeY looked up briefly before stating, “Here, take a look at this. It’s just a draft for now, so don’t be too critical of it.”

The time on the clock showed that he and XoeY had been working tirelessly for hours. Kaz sat at his desk, surrounded by stacks of papers, his fingers deftly typing away on his

keyboard as he reviewed analytics from his other projects. His brow was furrowed in deep concentration, and a cup of coffee was within reach.

On the other side of the office, XoeY was huddled in front of her iPad, meticulously fine-tuning the videos she'd put together. Her eyes darted across the screen, her hands moving with precision as she manipulated the content to her liking. The occasional taps on the screen were the only sound that punctuated the room's otherwise tranquil atmosphere.

Kaz caught her yawning for the umpteenth time and said, "We can wrap this up. I'm sure you need to be getting home. It's late."

XoeY looked at the watch on her wrist and she looked surprised. "I didn't realize it was so late. I guess I was really into this," she uttered. "I only have a couple of things to tweak, so I'll do that and head out." Kaz nodded, then went back to his work.

His unexpected grumbling caused XoeY to look in his direction for an explanation, but he didn't provide one. Instead, he tossed the card onto his desk after reading it.

"Everything okay?" As Kaz continued to stare at the card as if it were going to morph into something else, his attention was momentarily diverted when he heard XoeY's voice. It was a sweet and calming melody that effortlessly cut through the silence of the office. Her question was delivered with a calming cadence that immediately put him at ease, a feeling he wasn't anticipating at this moment. XoeY's voice carried a tenderness that could melt away the tension in any room, and as he looked up to meet her gaze, he found himself momentarily captivated.

"Yeah. I'm straight." His tone was a stark contrast to hers. Kaz's tone was cold and snappy. It cut through the air like a frosty gust of wind, laced with impatience and annoyance. Each word seemed to carry an edge, devoid of the warmth or courtesy hers exuded. His voice was terse and his words curt, leaving no room for misunderstanding his seemingly constant displeasure.

She walked over to his desk and reached for the card that had him perturbed. He reached out to grab it at the same time but was a second too slow. Instead of clutching the card, his hand grabbed hers, and a wave of energy flooded his body, causing him to drop her hand like it was on fire. “Do you make a habit of touching things that don’t belong to you?” Xoei didn’t answer; instead, she read over the card.

“This hissy fit because you’ve been invited to a ball? Seriously?” Kaz grumbled some more, everything he said inaudible.

“What’s the problem? You get to go to a beautiful venue, indulge in what I’m sure will be amazing, high-quality food and drinks, and you get to dress up,” she emphasized, but none of that appealed to Kaz. He hated attending the Billionaire Ball. He hated socializing, period. But he needed to continue to bump elbows with the other billionaires in the community to continue networking and expanding. It was the only reason he went every year.

“I’m not interested in any of that. It’s the same shit every year. A bunch of old-ass White people who don’t believe I belong there no way.”

“Party pooper.” She placed the card back down on the desk and went back to the sofa she’d been sitting on. “If I were you, I’d be ecstatic to attend an event like that. You should be more grateful for the opportunities you have, Mr. Sumpter.” Kaz thought about what she said, then let those thoughts dissipate into nothing.

Her voice filled the space again minutes later, beckoning his attention. His focus was on her as her thick legs carried her from the sofa, back over to his desk. “I sent the videos over to your email so you can review them. Let me know what you think. If I need to change anything, I’ll take care of it tomorrow.”

He nodded, and she shook her head and began putting away the iPad.

“Speak your mind,” he told her.

“No, thank you. It won’t make a difference anyway.” She slung the straps of her tote onto her shoulder with her keys in hand.

“I wasn’t aware you were psychic.”

Tilting her head, her eyes turned into slits. “I’m not, but history has a tendency of repeating itself.” Kaz couldn’t argue there. It was why he was determined not to let this mystery of a woman before him penetrate the wall he’d built over the years.

“Problems don’t get resolved if you don’t speak on them. But suit yourself. Goodnight.” That was his way of dismissing her as he went back to reviewing the numbers in front of him. It wasn’t long before the door slammed shut, causing him to lift his head. The gust of air that was created by her slamming the door carried her scent over to him. She smelled of vanilla and baked goods, which enticed Kaz’s senses.

Chapter Nine

Xoey

It was her first payday since working for Sumpter Solutions, and as she checked her banking app, Xoey squealed with excitement. She'd been surviving on noodles and crackers the last few days because she was down to her last few dollars, and she had to make that stretch for gas. Now that she had been paid, she was treating herself to her favorite coffee spot. Along with her usual order, she grabbed something for Krystina, too, and gave it to her as she entered the building.

“That direct deposit hit your account, too, huh?” Krystina said as she took the cup of coffee and the small bag that contained a muffin. “Thank you, girl. I owe you one.”

Waving her off, Xoey said, “You know it did. I was so glad to see that money while it lasted. After paying bills, it was almost like I hadn't even been paid. Adulting,” she groaned.

“Girl, tell me about it. That's how I feel *every* check.” The two women chatted for a minute more before someone came up and asked Krystina a question; that was Xoey's opportunity to head up to her desk so she wouldn't be late.

Once she got to her desk, she saw something that caught her attention. Her desk was usually tidy since she liked to clean it at the end of each day, so the fact that there was something sitting out was a shock. Looking around the office, she didn't see anyone, and there wasn't a name on the

envelope. It was on her desk, so she assumed it was for her and proceeded to open it. When she did, she immediately realized what it was.

Is this...? Wait, what does this mean? Am I being invited to the Billionaire Ball? As his date? Or am I going in his place? But I'm not a billionaire, so certainly they wouldn't allow me in alone. What does this mean?

Her internal dialogue was going so fast, she could barely keep up with her thoughts. She took a seat, reading over the card again like she hadn't already done so twice before. Before she worked herself up, she decided to go see if her boss was in the office. Getting up, she adjusted the pantsuit and walked down the hall to his office. In front of the large door, she took a deep breath and knocked. There was no answer. Again, she knocked, but there was no answer. That made her believe he wasn't in yet. *So when had he left the envelope?* she wondered. Had it even been him?

Turning on her heel, she headed back to her desk. A sound that could only be compared to a high-pitched squeal escaped her mouth, and her hand went to her chest.

“Oh my God, you scared me. You should make more noise to let people know you're coming.” Dropping her hand to her side, she looked up at him.

“Perhaps you should just be more aware of your surroundings, Bama.” Kaz sidestepped her and continued to his office.

“Did you leave that envelope on my desk?” she asked to his back.

“How else would it have gotten there?” He didn't bother turning to her or stopping his stride.

“I expect you to attend since you were so interested,” he stated, standing in the doorway to his office.

“What? I-I can't. I don't have anything—”

“It isn't a request; you will be there. Your shopping needs will be taken care of on Friday; just make sure you're here on time.” With that, he went into his office and closed the door.

For a moment, Xoey just stood there, not sure what to think. She had never been to a ball, especially not a ball full of billionaires. Her stomach churned with nervousness as she took shaky steps back to her desk.

For the remainder of the day, Xoey tried hard to focus on the tasks laid out before her, but she found it difficult. She kept thinking about the envelope and the fact that she'd be accompanying the man who had given her a hard time since her first day. Her rational mind knew this was, in no way, shape, or form, a date or an intimate moment between the two of them, but that delusional, hopeful romantic part of her envisioned a night out with her man where he showed her off and made her feel like she was the only woman in the world. There were hearts in her eyes until she heard Clarissa clear her throat.

“Have you finished with those documents I asked you to review?”

“I have.” Xoey wanted to comment on the fact Clarissa had snatched the papers from her, but she didn't. It seemed since Kaz had stepped in and reprimanded her for the way she spoke to Xoey when they were alone, she was even nastier to her. Xoey couldn't understand why.

“Here's your next assignment. It's an urgent matter, so it'll need to be handled first, and I need it by the end of the day. You may want to have a working lunch to ensure it gets done.”

“I won't be working through my lunch, but I will take care of these papers.” Her smile was as phony as the hair on Clarissa's head, but if she wanted to be nasty, she'd just kill her with her Southern charm. “Will there be anything else?” That was Xoey's way of sending her on her way. Clarissa scowled and went to say something, but Kaz called her from down the hall, saving her yet again from her lethal tongue. Xoey's smile widened, and she turned toward her desk as Clarissa scampered away.

The rest of Xoey's shift skated by. She had just delivered the documents Clarissa had requested and was on her way out.

As she touched down in the lobby, she noticed Krystina was still there.

“What are you still doing here? You’re usually long gone by now,” XoeY asked.

“Girl, these no-good coworkers of mine. Simone called in, talking about she was going to be late, which then turned into she wasn’t coming in at all, so I was stuck working until someone could come relieve me. I am exhausted, and I need a strong one. Wanna hit up the bar on the corner and grab a drink with me?”

For a moment, XoeY hesitated to answer. She had plans to go home and finish the bottle of wine she had opened the night before since she preferred drinking alone. Actually, she preferred doing everything alone. But she had promised herself when she moved to Ohio that things would be different. She wasn’t going to be a hermit, locked up in the house, doing nothing all the time. She was thirty-five years old but acted more like she was eighty-five.

“Sure. Just let me drop these things off at my car.”

“No problem. I’ll meet you at the corner,” she told her as they walked out the door, headed in different directions.

As XoeY and Krystina pushed open the heavy wooden door of the bar, a wave of raucous laughter and the soft, mellow strains of live jazz enveloped them. The bar exuded a cozy, old-fashioned charm with its mahogany bar counter, vintage, stained glass windows, and antique brass fixtures. Dimly lit, the space was bathed in the warm, amber glow of pendant lights hanging low from the ceiling. A scattering of patrons occupied the cushioned leather barstools and wooden booths along the walls.

Krystina led the way with a poised stride, her eyes scanning the room for an empty booth. “You’ll love this place, XoeY. Great drinks, even better music,” she said, her voice slightly raised to be heard over the live jazz quartet in the corner.

Xoey's eyes were wide with curiosity, taking in the atmosphere, feeling a bit overwhelmed. Her nervous system was in overdrive from all that was taking place, but she calmed herself by taking big, soothing breaths and smiling.

As they made their way to empty seats at the bar, a few of the patrons offered friendly nods and smiles in acknowledgment. "Don't worry," Krystina reassured her, sliding onto the stool. "Everyone's friendly here. You'll fit right in."

Getting comfortable on the slightly tattered cushion, Xoey nodded and took the drink menu Krystina handed to her.

"What do you usually get?" she asked Krystina.

"I'm a basic bitch, so a lemon drop is my go-to. But they have all kinds of specialty drinks. Try one." Perusing the long list of drinks, she came across one called Amnesia, which intrigued her.

"Hey, Krys. Who do we have here?" the bartender inquired.

"Hey, Zip. This is my coworker, Xoey. She's new to the area, so be nice," she joked. He extended his hand, and Xoey took it.

"Nice to meet you, beautiful." He lifted her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Nice to meet you as well," she drawled.

"Oh yeah, she definitely isn't from around here. What part of the South bred this beauty?"

"Alabama," she said proudly.

"A Bama girl. I can dig it." Zip eyed her with a smirk.

"All right now, enough of that. Stop eye-fucking my friend before I tell your wife on you." It was then Xoey noticed the wedding band on his ring finger. She shook her head. Though he wasn't her type and she wasn't interested, she couldn't believe the way he was flirting, knowing he had a woman waiting for him at home.

Men ain't worth two rusty pennies.

“Here you go.” He waved Krystina off. “You want your usual?” he asked, getting back to his job.

“You know it.”

“And what about you? What you drinking?”

“I’ll take the Amnesia, please.” She handed the menu back to him.

“Good choice. Give me a sec’, and I’ll have that right out.”

Zip moved behind the counter with grace and precision. His fingers skillfully measured out the perfect proportions of rum, citrus juices, and syrups, his every movement deliberate and fluid. With a flick of the wrist, he sent ice cubes spinning into the air before catching them in the glasses below. The sound of liquid cascading over the ice and the rhythmic shaking of the cocktails filled the air, leaving XoeY captivated.

The cocktails he crafted were garnished with fresh fruit, herbs, and edible flowers to create a feast for the eyes as well as the palate.

“Showoff,” Krystina stated once he set the drinks in front of them.

“Hater,” he rebutted with a sly smirk. “Let me know how you like it,” he directed toward XoeY. Taking a sip, her eyes bucked as the flavors landed on her tongue. It had a unique taste, but it was pleasing to her palate.

“I really like it. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything like it.” He smiled proudly before walking away to serve other customers.

XoeY looked around the bar at the different faces; there was a diverse group of individuals in the place.

“I take it you come here pretty often,” she said to break the quiet that fell between the two of them.

“Yeah, it’s my go-to spot when I leave work.” Krystina drank from the cup that held her drink. “I’m not an alcoholic or anything, though,” she rushed to clarify.

“I wouldn’t care if you were.” Xoezy chuckled. “That isn’t any of my business, and I have no room to judge. We all have our vice.”

“You’re right. So what’s yours?” Krystina cast a playful yet inquisitive expression as she fixed her gaze on Xoezy. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity and a hint of mischief, like someone who was anxious to hear a juicy secret. There was a mischievous quirk to the corner of her lips.

“My vice? A glass of wine is usually my go-to.”

“I should have known it would be something safe.” She laughed, taking another swallow.

“What does that mean?” Xoezy feigned offense.

“Just that you don’t peg me as the type to get wild. At least not for real. You’re one of the good ones, I can tell.” She nodded like she was agreeing with her own statement. “Don’t get me wrong; that’s not a bad thing. Nothing wrong with being one of the good ones.” Xoezy drank to that. She wasn’t a prude or anything, but she had grown up in a very strict, religious household, so she had been sheltered most of her life. It wasn’t until she became an adult and moved out on her own that she started to do what many of her peers had already done. For her, that included simple things like listening to secular music, going to parties, and dating. Xoezy didn’t have a real relationship until she was well into her twenties.

“How are you liking working with that fine-ass man?” Krystina fanned herself with her hand.

“Who? Mr. Sumpter?”

“Who else, girl? Yes, Mr. Fine-Ass Sumpter.”

Xoezy shrugged nonchalantly before answering. “It’s been okay. He’s a bit of a bully, but nothing I can’t handle.” Talking about him reminded her that she was going to be attending the ball with him, but she wasn’t going to share that information with Krystina.

“He could bully me any day. That’s one good-looking man.” Krystina continued to drone on and on about Kaz as they finished their drinks and ordered another round. Xoezy had

decided two drinks was her maximum because she still had to drive home, and she didn't want to be too intoxicated.

"I know you're giving that bitch Clarissa a run for her money." That brought XoeY out of her reverie.

"What do you mean?" Krystina had her undivided attention.

"You didn't pick up on it? Rumor has it, she and Mr. Sumpter used to fuck; she wanted more, he didn't. Now you bring your pretty, thick ass into the office, and I know she gotta be shaking in her boots."

"Nah, I doubt it. She's the one who chose me for the position. I'm sure she wouldn't have hired me if she thought I was going to be competition."

Krystina scoffed. "Don't let that bimbo fool you; she has no pull. If you were hired, it wasn't because of her, it was because of him. Trust me." She heard what Krystina said, and the more she thought about it, the more the puzzle started to come together. Now it explained why she had been giving her a hard time, especially since she had been embarrassed by him as he defended her.

Chapter Ten

Kaz

“I need you to clear my schedule for the day. I’ll be out of the office.” Kaz was on a call with Clarissa.

“U-Uh, okay. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. Just do as I’ve asked, Clarissa.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right on that. Will there be anything else?”

“Xoey will also be out of the office today, so whatever she was intended to get done today, you can handle it.”

Clarissa began stammering but was cut off by Kaz. “That’ll be all.” He hung up and gathered his phone and wallet before he headed out.

“Come with me,” he instructed as he walked past Xoey’s desk. Kaz didn’t bother to stop his stroll as he headed for the elevator. The doors slid open, and there was already someone on the elevator. He heard heels clacking hurriedly behind him, so he proceeded to step on, Xoey stepping behind him moments later. The red light circling the button signified they were all going to the same place, so he busied himself with his phone, taking care of last-minute arrangements.

After the short ride to the lobby, he walked out the front doors, searching for their ride. Xoey did her best to keep up with him, but his long legs made it easy for him to clear space

in record time. He located the blacked-out SUV, and the driver rushed out and came around to open the door for them. Kaz waved his hand to allow XoeY to enter first, then he followed. Once the door was secure, the driver ran back around to the driver's seat.

“Good morning, Mr. Sumpter and Ms. Pepperman. I'm Ahmad, and I'll be your driver for the day. Please let me know if you need anything adjusted like the AC or the radio.” Kaz nodded then pushed the button to roll the window up that separated the front from the back.

“Where are we going? Are you kidnapping me?”

“Fine time for you to ask that now that you're in the truck,” Kaz said, tucking his phone in the inner pocket of his blazer. “Just sit back; you're in good hands.” He leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes, hoping that was the end of the conversation. The night before had been a sleepless one, so he wanted to rest his eyes for just a moment.

He felt something poking his side, which caused him to wake up with a face of annoyance. “We're here... wherever here is,” XoeY said, looking out the window. Wiping his hand down his face, he couldn't believe he had slept the entire way; he must have really needed that shuteye.

The driver opened the door, and he stepped out and watched as Ahmad assisted XoeY out of the vehicle. He tipped him, then turned to XoeY. “Come on,” he said, headed toward his private jet.

Kaz and XoeY stepped into the opulent interior of the private jet. The cabin exuded a sense of exclusivity, with plush leather seating arranged in a spacious, elegant layout. The rich, warm tones of the wood accents, along with the soft, ambient lighting, created an atmosphere of sophistication.

The large windows were framed by heavy, sumptuous curtains, and they offered stunning views of the tarmac. The seating area was complemented by a sleek, polished mahogany table set with crystal glassware and a bottle of champagne resting in an ice bucket.

The cabin was equipped with all the modern amenities, from a state-of-the-art entertainment system to a well-appointed galley for in-flight dining. Everything, from the softness of the leather to the hushed hum of the engines, spoke of an unparalleled level of luxury, as did anything he purchased. Kaz and XoeY settled into their plush seats, and he didn't miss the look of shock and awe on her face.

"Now I really need to know where we're going," she said, buckling her seat belt. "Is this yours? Oh my God."

He was used to this reaction when people stepped onto his private jet. It was decked out, top-of-the-line, and exuded luxury.

"Yes, it's mine. And we're going to make sure you have everything you need for this ball. Don't ask any more questions. Sit back and enjoy the ride." He winked, then put his headphones on that were already waiting for him when they stepped on.

* * *

Kaz and XoeY had been in Milan for the last three hours, working with Isabella DeLuca, the woman who designed his suit every year for the ball and for any big events he attended. Kaz had selected a suit and had it tailored to his liking; he was just waiting for XoeY, who was being incredibly difficult.

"I'm not going to let you do this. This is way too much. I'm sure I can find something online or in-store and call it a day. Do you see these prices?"

"You're worried about prices when we flew here on my private jet. Be for real right now, Bama. Money ain't an issue for me, so it's not one for you when I'm telling you to pick something so we can get out of here."

She huffed and stormed back over to the rack of dresses Isabella had selected for her. They didn't have time to have one custom made or else he would have opted for that instead.

“I can’t zip this one up by myself,” she called from in the dressing suite. Looking around, he saw Isabella was nowhere around, so he stood and ambled across the polished floor. Without knocking, he opened the door, and she gasped, rushing to cover her chest. “Can’t you knock?” She screeched.

“I could, but what for? You know it’s me.”

Scoffing, she turned away from him so he could zip up the dress. His left hand went to her waist, resting there, while his right tugged on the zipper. Kaz couldn’t deny that she had been blessed with a body women were paying for these days. The fullness of her chest coupled with the roundness of her ass had his full attention. He stepped back, eyeing her from head to toe.

“Damn.” It had come out throaty and unintentionally, but it caused her to blush. “You like it?”

Xoey looked in the mirror, then stepped out of the dressing suite and onto the main floor where there was a larger mirror and better lighting. He watched as she took in her appearance, and he did the same. The dress fit her like a glove, clinging to the contours of her frame like a second skin.

“I do think I like it.” She smiled. “But it’s still way too expensive. Maybe I should—”

“Maybe you should stop insulting me before you piss me off,” he snapped.

“Your natural state of being is pissed off, sir. That has nothing to do with me.” She turned and headed back to the dressing area.

After trying on a couple more dresses, Xoey ended up going with the first one she tried that they both loved. Truthfully, to him, everything she tried on looked good. Kaz paid for their items, including their shoes and accessories, then they stopped at a restaurant to grab a bite to eat.

“Thank you. Although this is all way too much, I appreciate you taking care of the bill. I hope you know I can’t repay—”

“Every time you speak, I wanna yoke you up, you know that?” He shook his head and drank from the glass of water. “I see you have yo’ own idea of who you think I am, but if I’m doing something for you, it’s ’cause I want to and not ’cause I’m expecting something in return. Understood?” She nodded, and he went back to eating the delicious ossobuco.

“Well, since I’ve got you all wrong, tell me who Mr. Sumpter is.”

“Kazimir,” he stated.

“Huh?”

“My first name. Kazimir.”

“Oh... I like that. Does it mean anything?” He shrugged, wiping his mouth. “Okay, so I know your first name. Tell me more. I’m interested.”

“Why?”

“Because I know there has to be more to you than this tough guy role you like showing the world.”

“You mean like there’s more to you than the timid, reserved role you like showing the world?” His brow rose in question. He watched as she chewed her food, her hand covering her mouth, when she began to speak.

“What makes you think it’s a role?” She swallowed. “I could be timid and reserved.”

“You could be, but you aren’t. I’ve seen the fire in ya.”

“And I’ve seen the nice—I mean, the *kindness* in you.” Kaz smirked at the correction. *She learns quickly*, he noted mentally.

“Why you so focused on me being kind?”

“Because I think you’re a pleasant individual otherwise, underneath all that... anger.”

Kaz leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on the table, his fingers steepled in front of him. His brow was furrowed, and his gaze was fixed on her eyes that moved about, taking in his appearance, he assumed.

His expression was a mosaic of conflicting emotions, with his eyes portraying a synthesis of vulnerability and hesitation. The faint crease in his forehead hinted at the weight of the thoughts running through his mind. The depths of his internal debate were etched in the tension of his posture and the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes as he pondered whether to open up to Xoe, laying bare a side of himself he had long kept concealed.

“We need to be getting back to the jet, so if you wanna finish that, we can get it to go.” Now wasn’t the time for him to bare his soul; he didn’t think that time would ever come.

Chapter Eleven

Xoey

Xoey reclined in the oversized, clawfoot bathtub, the warm water enveloping her body like a liquid cocoon. Lavender-scented bubbles swirled around her, their fragrant aroma filling the bathroom and creating an ambiance of relaxation and tranquility. She closed her eyes, allowing the soothing sensation to wash over her, washing away the hecticness of the day.

The events of the past few days had been nothing short of a whirlwind. An impromptu invitation from Kaz to join him on a trip to Milan had taken her by surprise. She'd barely had time to wrap her mind around leaving work at the start of her shift before she was whisked away on a plane to the fashion capital of the world. The private jet had been luxurious, the in-flight service impeccable, but nothing had prepared her for the splendors of Milan.

As she submerged herself deeper into the bath, the memories of their time in Milan began to surface. Kaz had introduced her to Isabella DeLuca, a renowned Milanese fashion designer known for her avant-garde creations. She'd been able to receive a one-of-a-kind dress. Xoey had been awestruck by the creativity and innovation on display in the store. The dresses, each a masterpiece of art, were unlike anything she had ever come across before.

The dress she chose was made of silk and lace, with intricate embroidery that sparkled like stardust. It was jade green, a shade that complemented her eyes perfectly. The moment she slipped into it, she felt transformed. As if that hadn't been enough, they shared dinner at a restaurant that had the best food she'd probably ever had in her life.

As she opened her eyes, the bathwater had cooled, and she realized it was time to get out. With a sigh of contentment, she stepped out of the tub and wrapped herself in a plush, white robe. The scent of lavender still lingered in the air. Her playlist played in the background, and she sang along to the R&B tune.

Stretched out across her bed, XoeY heard her phone ringing. Answering, she was met with silence on the other end. It was the same number that had called before, so when she said, "Hello?" again and didn't get a response, she hung up. She wasn't sure what was up with these calls, but she didn't dwell on it for much longer. Instead, she moisturized her skin, slipped into pajamas, and got under the covers. Turning the TV on, she found *As Told By Ginger* and got comfortable as she watched her favorite cartoon.

* * *

The soft embrace of sleep held XoeY tightly when a knock on her door jolted her awake. She blinked groggily as she struggled to make sense of her surroundings. The knock came again, more insistent this time. She threw off her tangled bedsheets and stumbled toward the door, her mind muddled by interrupted dreams.

Opening the door, XoeY was met with the sight of Ahmad, the driver who had taken her and Kaz to the private jet when they embarked on their journey to Milan. He stood there, dressed in a crisp suit, his expression stoic yet somehow tinged with an air of urgency.

"Ms. Pepperman," he said in his composed, accented English. "Mr. Sumpter has sent me to retrieve you. We must

leave immediately.”

Xoey’s confusion deepened. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was too early in the morning. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice laden with sleep.

Ahmad hesitated for a moment before replying. “Mr. Sumpter said it’s urgent. He has messaged you.”

Still drowsy, she left the door to retrieve her phone, leaving Ahmad standing there. Xoey fumbled for her phone on the bedside table. She found a message from Kaz, sent in the dead of night. *This man*. Her eyes rolled at his gall.

Now, the pieces of the puzzle started to come together. She knew Kaz well enough to understand that when he said something was urgent, it was a matter not to be taken lightly. Going back to the door, she said, “Let me put myself together. I’ll be out shortly.”

With a quick nod, Ahmad backed away and headed down the hallway. She closed the door and sprang into action, hastily brushing her teeth and throwing on a comfortable yet presentable outfit. The message didn’t mention where she was going, so she hoped the ensemble she’d put together was decent enough.

The minutes seemed to stretch as she tried to gather her wits. When she emerged from her room, she looked around, making sure she had everything she needed. Ahmad stood by the elevator, waiting as she locked up her apartment. He greeted her with a polite nod and a smile that tried to reassure her.

The drive to their destination was swift, but the streets appeared hauntingly quiet. Xoey sat in the back seat, her thoughts racing. What could possibly be so urgent that Kaz would have her woken up and whisked away to God only knew where?

The car came to a stop in front of a grand hotel that Xoey admired. She looked at Ahmad, who remained unfazed and courteous, as though this were a regular occurrence.

“Mr. Sumpter has arranged a room for you here,” he explained as he opened the car door. “Stop by the front desk, and they’ll explain further.”

Xoey nodded hesitantly, feeling a mixture of excitement and trepidation. She entered the opulent hotel, and everything about it exuded luxury and comfort. A uniformed bellman guided her to a room on the top floor after she left the front desk, and Xoey marveled at the stunning view of the city through the window. It felt surreal, as though she had been transported into a dream, much like the one she’d been pulled from.

Inside the room, soft lighting illuminated a cozy sitting area, and a king-sized bed beckoned her to relax. Xoey was left alone momentarily, her thoughts consumed by questions and wonder.

The door to the suite opened, and there he was. Kaz wore a cryptic smile. “How much of a hassle were you for my man Ahmad?”

“I wasn’t a hassle at all. Although, seeing as how I was rushed out of my house with little explanation, it would have been warranted.” Xoey’s face was a portrait of sass and attitude as she locked eyes with Kaz. Her eyebrows arched with a hint of challenge, and her eyes held a twinkle of mischief that made it clear she was ready to engage in their usual back and forth. It was a look that conveyed both confidence and a dash of humor, a silent invitation for a banter with the man before her.

“I sent you a message.” He shrugged indifferently.

“Yeah, in the middle of the night, when most people are asleep. Even then, it didn’t say anything but to be ready because Ahmad was coming to get me.”

“That was all you needed to know. Now stop asking questions.” She sucked her teeth and took a seat on the chaise. To her right, there was a small table with an array of delectable pastries and a bottle of champagne. Xoey took no time indulging in the pastries, a moan floating from her lips once it melted on her tongue.

“Help yourself to whatever you want. The massage therapist will be here around one, then your lil glam squad will be here at four to help you get ready for tonight. I’ll be nearby if you need something.”

“Massage therapist? Glam squad? I—” He stared at her, halting her commentary.

“Bama, what I say about the questions. You heard what I said and you smart, remember? So that means you understand what both things are. I don’t wanna hear nothing else. I’ll be back when it’s time to head out.” With that, he walked toward the door, his gaze lingering on her as she sat, her lips slightly parted.

Xoey continued to enjoy the pastries and popped open the champagne. She was on her second flute of champagne when there was a knock on the door. Going over to answer it, she was met by an unfamiliar face.

“Hello, Madam. My name is Oswald; I’ll be taking care of your massage today. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I am. Please, come in,” she said, stepping out of the way.

“While I set up, you can remove as much of your clothing as you feel comfortable with. I’ll just be a second.” Doing as she was told, she went into the bathroom and removed her clothing, putting on one of the complimentary robes. When she came back out, Oswald was almost done setting up.

After the blissful massage, Xoey felt utterly rejuvenated and relaxed. Every ounce of tension seemed to have melted away, leaving her in a state of tranquil contentment. Her muscles, once coiled tight with stress, now felt brand new. Oswald had turned off the lights and only allowed a slither of sunlight to peek through the curtains. He even had his own custom playlist of soothing music that sounded like waterfalls. As she lay on the table, her mind drifted to Kaz. She didn’t want to read too much into his gestures, but was it every day he booked a hotel room, glam squad, and massage for a woman?

Chapter Twelve

K^{az}

Kaz and XoeY arrived at the beautiful venue where the Billionaire Ball was being held. It was a majestic mansion nestled in the heart of Columbus. As they stepped out of their chauffeured SUV, they were immediately greeted by the breathtaking sight of the grand entrance. A red carpet led them up a grand stone staircase, flanked by towering, centuries-old oak trees adorned with twinkling fairy lights. The mansion itself was a sight to behold, with its grand neoclassical design, boasting impressive columns and intricately designed balconies.

As they ascended the stairs, the rich notes of a string quartet's music wafted through the air, and chandeliers glittered in the grand foyer, casting a warm, golden glow on the revelers below. The scene was nothing short of enchanting, with elegantly attired guests, each dressed in their most extravagant gowns and tuxedos, mingling and sipping champagne.

He watched as XoeY looked on in awe, her eyes wide with wonder. "This is beyond anything I could have imagined," she whispered to Kaz as they made their way through the lavish crowd.

His thoughts regarding her in the dress she wore were similar. As Kaz's eyes fell upon XoeY in her elegant, jade-

green dress, his thoughts swirled with appreciation. The color was a mesmerizing complement to her complexion, bringing out the warmth in her skin. It was as though the dress had been tailor-made for her, designed to emphasize her natural beauty.

He couldn't help but admire the way the fabric clung to her figure, accentuating her curves in a way that was both alluring and tasteful. The dress seemed to move with her and it held his full attention.

They were soon greeted by a group of attendees, their faces aglow with excitement. One of the women, elegantly attired in a floor-length, shimmering gown, stepped forward. "Kazimir, darling, you're here! And you've brought a lovely guest, I see."

Kaz introduced XoeY to the group, and the woman extended her hand with a warm smile. "I'm Victoria Harrington," she said. "A pleasure to meet you, XoeY. You're in for quite the night."

XoeY returned the greeting with a genuine smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Harrington. This place is incredible!"

"Please, call me Victoria." The conversation flowed effortlessly as they exchanged pleasantries.

When they had a moment to themselves, Kaz said, "Turn off that fake ass voice. I wanna hear the real you." He pulled away from her ear and she looked up at him. Kaz loved her country twang, more than he cared to admit, and tonight, he wanted her to be herself.

After enjoying a few moments without having to engage in conversation with others, Kaz found himself engaged in a conversation with a fellow billionaire and a known competitor in the business world, Robert Connolly. The conversation was civil until Robert's gaze shifted toward XoeY, who stood off to the side, speaking to a woman who had complimented her dress.

"Kaz, you always did have an eye for the finer things in life," Robert remarked with a suggestive tone, his eyes lingering a moment too long on XoeY.

Kaz's jaw clenched slightly as he fought to maintain his composure. He replied, "Indeed, Robert."

Xoey, sensing the tension, excused herself from the conversation she was having and approached the two men. "Mind if I cut in?" she asked with a friendly tone, taking Kaz's hand into hers and rubbing the pad of her thumb over the veins that stuck out on top.

Robert produced a cheesy grin. "Of course, you can. You are a sight for sore eyes in this crowd."

Xoey responded with grace, her expression pleasant but with a hint of cool reserve. "Thank you. It's quite the gathering."

Kaz's demeanor was taut, yet controlled, masking a seething volcano of anger. His jaw was clenched, and his typically warm eyes had turned steelier as he struggled to maintain his composure. The tension in his shoulders was palpable, his frame poised like a coiled spring, ready to unleash a torrent of protective fury.

Beneath his calm exterior, he felt a fierce need to shield Xoey from Robert's inappropriate advances. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone invading her space or making her uncomfortable. The urge to pummel Robert for his lingering looks and suggestive comments was a primal instinct, restrained only by the decorum of the event.

Kaz's every fiber yearned to confront Robert. His tightened fist, though hidden in his pocket mirrored his suppressed emotions, a testament to the inner battle he was waging. Xoey tapping his hand was his alert that he was squeezing her hand too hard. He looked at her, an apology in his eyes.

"Well, it was nice meeting you. We'll see you around." Kaz appreciated Xoey taking the initiative and speaking up because he was seconds away from allowing his intrusive thoughts to win.

Robert seemed to take the hint and turned his attention to a group of influential business associates who had arrived at the

party. With Robert's advances safely redirected, the atmosphere of the party regained its jovial spirit, and Xoey and Kaz continued to mingle with other guests, leaving the tension behind.

As the evening continued, they moved deeper into the mansion, exploring its luxurious rooms, each more extravagant than the last. One room resembled a museum, with priceless paintings adorning the walls and sculptures of stunning beauty. Another was transformed into a dance floor, where guests danced off-beat to the music.

Kaz stood on the sideline as he watched Xoey, who was having a conversation with another guest, a successful entrepreneur from Hong Kong, who was passionate about philanthropy. That was when Kaz joined the conversation because he was big on giving back to those in need. There was a lot of talk about billionaires not needing all the money they had, but he was one who made good use of his money. He used his resources for the greater good.

As the night reached its peak, Kaz noticed Xoey's social battery seemed to be depleted. She was also showing signs of being tipsy with the way she swayed, and her words came out slurred. They both had consumed a few glasses of champagne, along with a couple of cocktails. "We can get out of here if you're ready to go."

"No, we don't have to. I don't want to end your night early."

Not bothering to respond, without thinking, he grabbed her hand and walked toward the large French doors they had come in earlier. He dug in his pocket to retrieve his phone so he could call Ahmad to come get them.

"We really don't have to leave. I know this is an important event for you. You didn't even get to say bye."

"Fuck them people." He stepped off the curb, his grip still on her hand as Ahmad pulled forward.

"Stop being mean," she fussed as she stepped up into the SUV. Her ample bottom was in his face, and he was tempted

to smack it, but he restrained himself and got in after her.

Kaz's eyes were low from the alcohol and exhaustion. He had been running on just a few hours of sleep and was ready to crash. The ride back to the hotel was quiet. When Ahmad opened the door, they got out and he walked XoeY up to her room.

"I need to piss," he announced, but XoeY didn't respond. When he finished relieving himself and washing his hands, he exited the bathroom and saw XoeY stretched out in the bed in nothing but her panty and bra. Kaz stopped in his tracks, taking in the view.

"Kazimir," she called out to him. His name falling from her lips was like a boost of serotonin.

"What's up?"

"Come here." He moved toward the bed, not taking his eyes off her physique.

"What's up?" he questioned again. XoeY pulled the end of his tie and yanked him toward her. Her eyes were low; she was definitely drunk.

"Kiss me." His brows crinkled and he moved back.

"You're drunk. Take ya ass to sleep, Bama." He pried her fingers from his tie and went to head for the door.

"I didn't peg you as the scary type," she taunted. "You scared of pussy, Kazimir?" she drawled with a giggle. The word pussy didn't even sound right coming from her.

"Man, gon' on. I ain't scared of shit, but I'm not 'bout to take it there with you when you like this."

"But you would?" she questioned. "Take it there, I mean." She sat up and he leaned against the door, looking at her. "I might be tipsy, but I'm perfectly aware of what I'm saying and doing. Test me." Kaz chuckled when she stood up and had to hold the bed to steady herself.

"Sit ya drunk ass down, man. Sleep that liquor off."

"Answer me. Would you?"

“Would I what?” Kaz knew exactly what she was asking, but he wanted her to say it.

“Would you fuck me, Kazimir? Would you take care of this pussy?” Kaz couldn’t lie, his dick started to harden with those words, so he knew it was time to go before things went too far.

“Lay down and get some sleep, man.” He went to turn around to walk out the door, but XoeY had made it over to him.

“Answer my question and I will.” Her eyes were hazy as she looked up at him, and when he felt her hand grabbing his crotch through his slacks, he grabbed her wrist.

“Chill, man. Get ya ass in the bed and go to sleep before you do some shit you’ll regret.”

“Will I regret it, or will you?” Her head cocked to the side. “All this bravado and you scared of a little—”

His massive hand had found its way to her throat, shutting her up. Her eyes grew as she waited for what was next. He walked her over to the bed, turned her around so that her back was facing him, and bent her over, his hand on the back of her neck.

“This what you wanted? Hm?” Kaz grabbed the thin material of her panties and ripped them, leaving an imprint on her butt in the process. His hand migrated to her cheeks, which he smacked, hard. XoeY reached behind her, trying to grab his dick but he slapped her hand away. “Keep ya fucking hands to yourself.”

Stepping back, he removed his blazer and continued stripping the clothing he had on from his body. “Bend over and grab them ankles,” he ordered, watching her do as she was told while he got naked. XoeY reached down, moving achingly slow, her pretty, pink pussy puckering as she went lower. Kaz swore he heard a pop like an air bubble had burst.

XoeY rocked from side to side, her ass creating a tidal wave. Kaz stepped behind her, his flaccid member growing harder by the second. He stroked it after licking his hand, then

when it was fully erect, he slapped it against the slickness of her pussy. Xoe y moaned and shook her ass harder.

“This what you wanted?” he asked, slipping the tip in. He slid just the tip in and out, teasing her until she was begging him to give it all to her.

“You sure you can handle that? This lil pussy feels a lil tight, like you ain’t been fucked in a minute. Or ain’t been fucked good.”

“I can handle it. Fuck me, Kazimir. Fuck me now, please,” she begged.

“Don’t you take ya hands off ya ankles. You hear me?”

“I underst—”

Her words got caught in her throat as Kaz slid into her gushiness, her pussy holding him in a death grip.

“Ah, Kazimir!” He felt the moment her body tensed, and she went to let go of her ankles.

“What I tell you?” Kaz pushed her back and pulsed in her kitty.

“Oh my God. What the fu—”

“Watch ya mouth.” He had to focus on something else because her pussy fit him like a glove, like it was made specifically for his dick. His strokes were slow and deep, then he increased his speed. Gripping her bra strap where it clasped together, it came undone, her titties spilling out. They slapped against her face, and Kaz enjoyed the view of her size F breasts, information he’d gotten from looking at the tag in her bra.

“This pussy so fucking wet, Bama. Shit,” he cursed.

With every thrust, he envisioned the tip of his dick kissing her cervix. The subtle whimpers grew into barbaric cries for Kaz to let up, but he didn’t. He was living up to his name as a bully, and her pussy was the victim.

“Shit!” Xoe y yelled, her legs trembling. Kaz pulled out, turning her around and shoving her to her knees. Without

giving her a moment to adjust to the new position, he squeezed her cheeks and shoved his dick, which was coated with her cum, into her mouth. She gagged immediately as he hit her throat. That only motivated him more.

“Didn’t I tell you to watch that pretty ass mouth of yours? Now look at you, a mouth full of dick. Make good use of that mouth, Bama.”

Xoey worked her jaws on his shaft as Kaz fucked her mouth. His hand was wedged in her locs, and he thrust his hips into her face. Spit spilled from the sides of her mouth, and she slurped and swallowed, catching the pre-cum that had oozed from the tip.

“Uhhhhh.” The grunt that ejected from his body sounded like a war cry. His toes curled and he heard them crack. He didn’t slow his strokes as he felt himself on the verge of releasing. “Where you want it? Where you want it?” he rushed to ask, his voice somehow deeper. Xoey pointed to her throat, signaling she wanted him to nut down her throat, which he did.

Kaz fell back into the chair, trying to catch his breath. He looked at Xoey, and she smirked. She looked proud, and it was at that moment, he knew he was in trouble.

Chapter Thirteen

Xoey

The last of the warm liquid swam down her throat and reminded her of her time with Kaz. Since their encounter, she'd been having flashbacks. The day after, when she made it back to her apartment, she had to soak in a hot bath to nurse her vagina back to its original state. Kaz had terrorized her vagina like no one had ever done, and it took a full three days for her to recover and be able to walk right again.

Now, she was at work, and she couldn't stop replaying the things he did to her body in her mind. It had been a minute since she'd had sex, but she had never had sex like *that* before. He was so dominant, so raunchy, and she loved every moment.

Over the last three days, she hadn't seen him. She figured he was in the office, but they hadn't crossed paths. It was probably for the best because now that she'd gotten a hit of him, she was a fiend, and she yearned to feel him deep inside her again. Not only that, Xoey craved to be in his presence. When he wasn't being mean, it was comfortable being in his space, and she enjoyed talking to him, even if it sometimes felt like pulling teeth.

It was lunchtime, so she headed downstairs to have lunch with Krystina.

"Hey, girl, hey," she called once Xoey made it to the café.

“Hey. How’s your day been going?” Taking a seat, she took out the sandwich she had prepared at home.

“It’s been busy as hell today. I wish they would leave me alone.” She sipped from the can of Coke she had popped open. “What about you?”

“Today hasn’t been too bad. I’m ready to go home, though. My bed is calling me.”

“I hear that. Have you seen Mr. Fine-Ass today?”

“Nope. I actually haven’t seen him all week.”

“Really? I know he’s been here because I’ve seen him pulling in.” XoeY shrugged. She figured he had been there, too, but she hadn’t seen him. He didn’t come out of his office, and she had no reason to go to his office, so their paths hadn’t crossed. XoeY hadn’t even seen him going to the break room and grabbing a coffee or energy drink.

“It’s probably for the best. I don’t want to deal with his attitude. He’s meaner than a wet panther when he wants to be.”

“Say what?” Krystina laughed loudly, drawing attention to their table.

“What?”

“Meaner than a wet panther? Who the hell says that, XoeY?”

“Plenty of people. You’ve never heard that saying?”

“Not until seconds ago when you said it, girl. They must only say that in the sticks where you’re from.”

The two continued their banter while they ate, then it was time to go back and finish up her shift. When she stepped off the elevator, she saw the man who had been missing in action. Unintentionally, a smile formed on her lips.

“Come to my office.” His tone made it hard to read his mood, but she hurried to put her things down and then went to his office. Although the door was cracked, she still knocked and waited for him to respond. He didn’t, so she pushed the

door open enough for her to get a glimpse of his face, and when she did, she saw a deep frown.

“Who licked the red off your candy?” she asked, and a look of confusion marred his handsome features.

“I’m not even gon’ ask what that means. Close the door and have a seat,” he said plainly.

“I haven’t seen you the last few days.”

“Good. I haven’t wanted to be seen.” He was being short.

“Why is that? Everything okay?” Kaz looked at her like he was disgusted by her presence. “What’s the problem, Kazimir?”

“Mr. Sumpter.”

She frowned and laughed with a huff. “Oh, so we’re back to this.”

“Back to what, exactly?” He leaned back in his seat.

“This. You and your asshole ways.”

“I thought you didn’t cuss.”

“No, what I said is I liked to limit my cursing, but certain situations require it.”

“And right now is one of those occasions?” She nodded. “Why is that, Bama?”

“Ms. Pepperman,” she rebutted, crossing her legs and folding her arms across her chest. In the shirt she had on today, her cleavage was more noticeable now than it had been, and she didn’t miss the way his eyes dropped to it. She wondered if he was imagining the way they bounced as he fucked her silly from the back. Her clit thumped, and she squeezed her legs tighter discreetly. Now was not the time to be reminiscing on what would obviously be a one-time thing.

“Cute.”

“Is for children and puppies and I’m neither. Now, why was I summoned in here?”

“You’ve been here a little over thirty days now, so it’s time for a performance review. You still have sixty days in your probation, but I like to do a review monthly for the first three months.”

“Okay, cool. Let’s do it.” XoeY was confident in the work she had done thus far, so she wasn’t expecting anything less than a glowing review.

He began. “Your performance over the past month has been underwhelming, to say the least.”

XoeY’s confidence wavered as she tried to maintain her composure. She had been working her butt off to complete the tasks she was assigned; now he was saying her performance was underwhelming? It didn’t make sense to her.

“Your output has fallen short of expectations. You need to improve your productivity and accuracy. We can’t afford to have anyone on this team who doesn’t meet our standards.”

XoeY felt the sting of his words and the unfairness of his assessment. She had been working tirelessly, taking on extra tasks, and striving to meet the demands of the job. But her efforts seemed to have gone unnoticed or, worse, unappreciated.

Kaz’s gaze bore into her. “Your attention to detail is lacking, and it’s affecting the team’s overall performance. We need to see a significant improvement moving forward.”

The meeting continued with Kaz pointing out every flaw and perceived shortcoming, making XoeY bubble with anger. His critique was ruthless, and in her opinion, completely off base.

“I expect to see immediate and substantial improvements. We can’t tolerate subpar performance here.”

He set the paper down that he’d been looking at, and she watched his every movement. “Do I get to say something, or am I just supposed to nod and say yes, sir?” she remarked satirically.

“I’d tread lightly with the attitude.”

“You haven’t seen attitude yet, trust me.” Uncrossing her legs, she planted her feet flat on the ground. “In all that you mentioned, you’ve failed to mention the times I’ve come in early and stayed late, including staying late to help you with your pitch, which, by the way, is the reason you got the deal, if we’re being honest. You claim my performance has been *underwhelming*, but let’s keep it real; if I were really performing *that* badly, I would have been in this office long before now. If you recall, it didn’t take long for you to reprimand me for my tardiness on my second day. And when you *thought* I almost cost you money, it didn’t take long for me to find myself right in here again. Yet, suddenly, my performance is not meeting your expectations. Are we sure we’re talking about my work performance, Mr. Sumpter?” She eyed him but his expression remained stone. “The volume of cum I swallowed would suggest that performance wasn’t underwhelming either, so I’m not sure what the issue is, but it isn’t me. If you’re looking for a reason to fire me, you don’t need one; just be a man and say it.”

“If I wanted to fire you, you’d—”

“Okay, so since you don’t want to fire me, what’s with the bogus review? You and I both know nothing about the work I’ve done here has been subpar. Are you unable to remain professional because you had a feel of this pussy?” she whispered in case someone was listening.

“Remember what happened last time you tried to lil boy me?” He smirked. Her smirk matched his.

“I remember vividly. Do you?” Her legs spreading and closing as they crossed drew his attention downward. “Is that what the problem is? You want some more and don’t know how to act so this is your way of acting out to get some attention?”

Xoey sat across from Kaz, her demeanor radiating confidence and self-assuredness. Her posture was impeccable, back straight and shoulders squared. She met Kaz’s gaze with unwavering poise. Her lips held a composed smile.

“See, that’s where you wrong. Pussy is pussy. It was an *okay* fuck, I’ll give you that, but that was all it was. Nothing I won’t come across again with another broad who’s willing to open up for me,” he expressed cockily. That was a blow to Xoey’s confidence and ego, but she wouldn’t dare let it show. “So while you might wanna believe you did something, Bama, you ain’t did nothing I ain’t seen before. Your performance, as I stated, was subpar... underwhelming. Do better or find yourself somewhere else to display your lackluster skill set.” Her heart was in her stomach as she watched the computer screen come to life. “You can leave.”

Pursing her lips, she stood and smoothed the dress she had on out. Head held high, she went to walk out the door. Clarissa trotted away from the door, but she knew she had been listening. Once she was positioned behind her desk, she mentally coached herself not to cry. Xoey refused to give him the satisfaction.

“How quickly those tables turn,” Clarissa said as she cackled and walked away from her desk.

You would know, bitch.

Chapter Fourteen

K^{az}

Kaz reclined in the plush leather seat of his private jet, glancing out of the window at the receding city lights of Bangkok. The powerful engines hummed smoothly, carrying him across the vast expanse of the night sky. His last-minute business deal had been a success, yet he couldn't escape the nagging thoughts that had crept into his mind.

As the plane cruised at a steady altitude, he turned his attention away from the sparkling Thai capital and back to the interior of the jet. The sleek, modern design of the cabin was a testament to his success, a symbol of the wealth he had amassed over the years. But all that was far from his mind at the moment.

The leather-bound notebook on the mahogany table in front of him was filled with the confidential details of the deal he had just sealed. He had every reason to bask in the glory of yet another victory, but there was something else that gnawed at him, an invisible thorn lodged deep within his conscience.

His mind kept circling back to Xoey. The very mention of her name caused his jaw to clasp, yet it also evoked another feeling he couldn't quite label—a cocktail of anger, guilt, and longing. It had been their last argument, the one that had driven her away, that still echoed in his ears. He had hurled

words like daggers, each one calculated to wound, to protect his ego, his invincibility.

“You can leave.” That was what he had said to her, but it wasn't what he wanted. Truly, he wanted XoeY in his presence more than he cared to admit.

Now, alone on his private jet, he couldn't help but reflect on the recklessness of those words. The arrogance, the nonchalance, had cost him the one person who had ever challenged him, who had seen through the facade and dared to confront him with his own vulnerability. He clenched his fists, cursing himself for his blind pride.

Kaz knew that his wealth and power had created a bubble around him, but he had always taken pride in that cage, believing it was impenetrable. Yet XoeY had seen through the bars, and it had terrified him. She had done something nobody had been able to do in a long time—made him feel—and in a fit of anger, he had lashed out. The hollowness he felt was like an unhealed wound, a constant throb that consumed him.

His hand absentmindedly flipped open the notebook, revealing the critical numbers and figures that had secured his latest client. He had made deals with some of the biggest corporations in the world, but none of them had the ability to bring him the peace he so desperately craved at this moment. What he wouldn't give for a rewind button, a chance to take back those words.

The jet continued its silent voyage across the night sky, but the storm within Kaz was far from calm. He thought about reaching out to her, apologizing, but his pride wouldn't allow it. The very thought of having to admit he was wrong grated against the armor he had built around his emotions.

A stewardess approached him with a tray of champagne glasses. He accepted one with a stiff nod, then tossed the flute back like he was taking a shot.

Kaz's internal struggle was a battle of ego versus heart. He longed to embody the ideal of having it all, an unyielding fortress of self-assurance. As the distance between him and XoeY grew, he couldn't ignore the fact that the fortress had

already been infiltrated, and its flaws were becoming visible. The more he clung to his pride, the more he realized it was a lonely place to be.

Sleep didn't help to quiet his thoughts as he saw XoeY in his dream state. Rubbing his hand across his locs, Kaz exhaled and adjusted in his seat. Looking at the time, hours had passed. As the jet descended toward Ohio, the city lights below transformed the landscape into a vibrant tapestry of glowing colors. Even as Kaz's mind was overwhelmed by thoughts of XoeY, a tiny flame of optimism burned within him, urging him to rebuild what he had destroyed. It would be a daunting task, and it would require him to do something he hadn't done in a long time—admit his vulnerability and confront the consequences of his own arrogance.

* * *

Even though Kaz didn't land back in the States until the wee hours of the morning, he was at the office, bright and early. It was only him and XoeY in the vicinity, but he found himself locked in his office, avoiding going to talk to her.

Before Kaz knew it, he'd been stuck behind his desk so long, Clarissa had arrived and was now knocking at his door. When she entered, he glanced at the clock, mentally cursing himself for not doing what he'd intended to do.

“What is it?” he snapped, already annoyed by his own actions, but Clarissa would be his punching bag.

“Good morning, sir. Congratulations on securing the new deal; I got the email with the stats.” She beamed, waiting for a response that never came. Nervously, she cleared her throat and scrolled on her iPad, prepared to give him the rundown for his day.

When she had completed going over his agenda for the day, she stood, waiting to see if he had any further instructions for her. He didn't. Honestly, Kaz had barely been listening to a word she said the entire time, her voice turning into one similar to Charlie Brown's.

“You can go,” he said dismissively, tapping the screen on his phone. When the door shut, he dropped the phone on the desk in frustration.

For the remainder of the day, Kaz found it difficult to concentrate on anything but the woman who had somehow managed to get to him. XoeY had him off his game, and that was why he needed to stay away from her. At that moment, he decided it was a good thing he hadn’t bothered saying anything to her because they needed to leave things as they were. Not speaking unless it had to do with business was the best option for both of them, he tried to convince himself.

Returning to the task he had started earlier, Kaz lost himself in his computer screen. He didn’t come up for air until there was a knock on the door. Even then, he only looked up long enough to tell the person to come in. Not even when he heard the voice that heightened his senses did he look up, though his natural response was to do so. Kaz fought against it, willing himself to stay focused on the images in front of him.

XoeY’s heels clicked softly on the polished marble floor as she moved closer to the Cherrywood desk, clutching a folder containing the important legal documents for the new client he had secured. She had resolved to remain professional, though the tension in the room was palpable.

Kaz, still engrossed in his computer screen, continued typing as if she weren’t there. He was a master at concealing his emotions, and he was determined to do so now.

“Mr. Sumpter,” XoeY began, her voice even. “Clarissa has asked that I bring the documents for the new client.”

He glanced up briefly, his expression unreadable. “Leave them on the table,” he said curtly, returning his attention to the screen. The tone of his voice was cold.

XoeY did as instructed, placing the folder on the polished table beside his desk. She bit her lip, which Kaz saw from his peripheral, and he knew she wanted to say something. He was tempted to challenge her to do so, enjoying her feistiness and

the way her accent became more pronounced when she was angry.

Clearing her throat, she attempted to break the silence. “Mr. Sumpter, Clarissa has asked that you sign these as soon as possible so she can send them back and finalize everything.”

Kaz’s eyes flickered with irritation as he looked up again. “I’ll get to it when I do,” he said with thinly veiled impatience, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the desk.

Xoey tightened her fists. Kaz saw the turmoil on her face, and he wanted to laugh. He knew he was getting under her skin, and it was taking everything in her not to lash out, but he hoped she would.

“Fine,” she replied, her voice steady.

Kaz did not hide his indifference.

Turning on her heel, Xoey headed for the office door, her heels making more noise now that her steps were harder. Just as she reached for the handle, she pivoted and looked at the side of his face.

“You know, Mr. Sumpter, it wouldn’t kill you to be a little less self-absorbed,” she snapped.

Kaz’s eyes snapped up to meet hers, his mask momentarily slipping. For a brief, intense moment, their gazes locked, and the tension between them reached its zenith.

Xoey turned and yanked open the door, stepping out into the corridor with a resounding slam that reverberated in the office. Kaz clenched his jaw, his eyes still fixed on the door. He leaned back in his chair, masking his true emotions, and returned to his favorite distraction—making money.

Chapter Fifteen

Xoey

The bar's dimly lit ambiance provided a sanctuary of solace for Xoey after a grueling day at work. She sat perched on a barstool, nursing a half-empty glass of bourbon. The amber liquid swirled gently as she absentmindedly rotated the glass, her frustration and annoyance palpable in the way her brows furrowed.

Xoey had come to the bar with Krystina, seeking reprieve after another day of dealing with Kaz. He had been nothing short of insufferable, and Xoey felt like she was caught in a never-ending cycle of his condescension and arrogance.

Krystina wanted to know what was going on, but Xoey didn't want to tell her she had slept with her boss, only to be made a fool of after the fact. She was saved by the bell when Krystina left early with a new fling, leaving Xoey to battle her emotions alone. As she sat there, swirling the drink around, she found herself in the company of the flirtatious bartender, Zip.

"Long day?" Zip inquired, casting an empathetic glance at Xoey. He placed another glass of bourbon down just in time, as Xoey tossed the last of what was in her glass back, the liquid burning her chest in the process. She prayed it would singe the remnants of her heart so she wouldn't have to feel anything ever again.

Xoey sighed, her exasperation evident. “You have no idea. My boss has been unbearable lately. It’s like he’s made it his life mission to make mine miserable.”

Zip offered a knowing nod, his eyes filled with a depth of understanding that came from years of listening to people’s troubles. “Some people are just like that, beautiful. They take pleasure in making others feel small. But remember, you can’t let ’em win.”

Xoey took a contemplative sip of her bourbon, appreciating the advice Zip offered. “Easier said than done,” she replied, a hint of bitterness in her voice. “It’s hard not to let it get to me.” She had tried not taking it personally, had tried to make herself believe the words he said—it was just a fuck. But it was never just a fuck with her. Xoey didn’t have meaningless sex. She didn’t give her body to just anyone like Kaz had insinuated. Opening her legs was almost equivalent to opening her heart because her heart and pussy were connected.

“It may be easier said than done, but it’s still possible. You know what you need to do?”

“Hm?” she mumbled, her lips pressed against the glass.

“You need to put your foot down. Sounds to me your boss is running all over you, talking to you any kind of way. You have to set boundaries and let him know you won’t be disrespected. You have to stand up for yourself or it’ll keep happening. That’s how you handle a bully. Show them you can fight back, and they’ll leave you alone.”

“I’ve tried that. At this point, I’m afraid if I say the wrong thing, he’ll fire me, and I need this job.”

“The same way you got this job, you can find another one. You don’t have to settle for disrespect in exchange for a check. Remember that. This isn’t your only option. Hell, you can come work here. I hear the bartender’s really cool.” He smirked, and it caused her to smile for the first time since she’d stepped into the building. She appreciated Zip’s advice and effort to brighten her mood.

Xoey nodded, her thoughts drifting to what she needed to do moving forward. Standing up for herself was a new concept, something she had been practicing over the last couple of years but hadn't mastered. Xoey was a people pleaser who avoided confrontation as much as possible, but she realized how harmful that had been to her in the past and was committed to making changes. This was an opportunity to put the tools she'd gained into practice.

An hour passed, and the once half-empty glass of bourbon was now nothing more than a trace of amber residue. Xoey's frustration and annoyance still simmered beneath the surface, but they were now mingled with a sense of determination.

Xoey finally rose from the barstool, her posture straighter and her eyes more resolute. She turned to Zip, a grateful smile on her lips. "Thank you, Zip. You've given me a lot to think about, and I appreciate it more than you know."

The bartender returned her smile, his eyes warm and encouraging. "Does that mean you'll go on that date with me?"

"Sure, just make sure you bring your wife." She winked.

As she headed out of the doors, Xoey pulled her jacket closed. The temperature had dropped slightly, and she was cold. Thanks to her anemia, it didn't take much for her to feel like she was freezing. Waiting for traffic to pass so she could cross the street, she tapped her foot against the pavement. Stepping off the curb, she stopped abruptly when a vehicle pulled in front of her, and the door opened.

"Get in," the deep baritone instructed. Immediately, she recognized the voice. Scoffing, she went to walk around the back of the SUV so she could go to her car, but he called her name. "Please," he said. That paused her stride. She must have been hearing things.

Backtracking, Xoey looked at him and laughed. "Say that again." Her arms were folded across her chest as she smirked.

Smcht.

“Man, get in the car, Bama.”

“Oh, I’m Bama again? Convenient.”

“Get ya ass in the car, man. You holding up traffic.” Just as he said that, horns began to blare.

“No, *you’re* holding up traffic. You can move al—”

She froze when he yanked her up and carried her to the car. XoeY kicked and screamed and people just stood by, watching. If she were really in danger, she’d be on her own.

Huffing, she adjusted her clothing and reached for the door handle to open it.

“Child lock... you know, since you wanna act like a child.”

“Me? *I’m* acting like a child? No, I think that’s you. You can’t just kidnap me and make me talk to you because you’re ready to talk now.”

“Look, I ain’t got the energy nor am I in the mood to argue with you, Bama. I wanted to rap with you real quick.”

“You have two minutes.” She folded her arms to show her frustration.

“I need at least five.” Her eyes turned into slits, and he smirked and threw his hands up in surrender.

“Aight, aight. You got it.”

“Your time has already started.” XoeY looked at her watch.

“I obviously ain’t good at this shit, man, but I wanted to apologize. I handled you wrong, and I shouldn’t have.”

“Is that all?” she quipped, looking at him. XoeY observed Kaz, her gaze unwavering as he struggled to find the right words. She had pegged him as someone who was good at veiling their emotions, but now, he faltered in his attempt to convey whatever he wanted to say to her. Frustration still simmered within her, a testament to the pain his words had caused, but she appreciated the effort he was making. The apology, though imperfect, tugged at the edges of her resolve,

hinting that maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for them to move forward. But she wouldn't give in that easy.

"Feelings and all that being vulnerable shit ain't me, but I feel like I owed you that apology. What I said was foul."

"Did you mean it?" She had been dying to know.

He paused, then said, "Nah. I didn't."

"So why did you say it, then?"

"Honestly? 'Cause I was hoping it would push you away for good."

"Is that what you want? For me to go away for good?" She dropped her arms and turned in his direction slightly. Her eyes searched his before he looked away, the intensity between them growing.

"What I want don't matter."

"It doesn't matter to who?"

"To nobody."

"You don't get to speak for me. If I'm asking, it matters."

He looked back at her. "Nah, it's not what I want." There was a brief pause. "But it's what I need."

"Why do you need it?"

"'Cause, Bama." He said it in a rush and louder than he'd been speaking, which startled her. "I ain't a feelings kinda nigga. I ain't the nigga for you, either. I don't do this romantic shit. I don't do relationships. I don't let nobody get close to me, so I need to keep you at a distance to protect me, but most of all, to protect you. I would ruin you."

"What if I'm down for the risk? You don't get to decide for me, Kazimir." She moved closer to him, and if the car door wasn't there, she was sure he would have moved away. "I can't explain the pull I feel toward you; I know you feel it, too. I have my reservations as well, but I'm also open. Open to trying, open to taking a risk, open to seeing what might come of whatever this stronghold is we seem to have on one another."

Kaz shook his head, then leaned against the headrest.

“It sounds good, but you don’t mean that. How you so willing to risk it all for somebody you don’t know?”

“I can’t make it make sense to you because it doesn’t make sense to me, Kazimir. What I know is what I feel, and what I feel is deeply connected to you. You hurt my feelings when you said the things you said, and if I’m being honest, I feel dumb as hell for even being interested in you with the way you’ve treated me, but maybe that’s why God put us in one another’s path.”

“Yeah? Why is that?”

“So I can tame a bully and you can teach me how to ground my emotions among other things. You’ve already had me doing things I wouldn’t do.”

“Like what?” His brow rose in curiosity.

“For one, I don’t sleep with just anyone. I actually haven’t had sex in years.”

“No wonder that pussy was biting like that,” he interjected, and XoeY slapped his arm playfully.

“Stop being mannish.” She rolled her eyes. “But also, I’ve never been assertive; I’ve always been more on the passive side. Yet, here I am, putting it all out there. Again. I see how you take charge and take initiative when it comes to something you want, and I guess it’s rubbing off on me.”

“So you want a nigga, huh?”

Rolling her eyes again, she replied, “I didn’t say all that.”

“I want ya country ass, too.” XoeY’s insides melted at his confession. He leaned over to kiss her, but she held her hand up.

“No, sir. I might like you, but you’re going to have to work for this. You got a sample for free, but you gotta earn this position, baby.”

Kaz nodded and rested his hand on her thigh. The gesture sent a wave of electricity soaring through her body. She wasn’t

sure what she was getting herself into or if this was a good idea, but she couldn't deny what she felt.

I just hope I don't regret this in the end.

Chapter Sixteen

Kaz

Kazimir sat by the floor-to-ceiling window of his luxurious office, gazing out at the glittering skyline of Cleveland. He clenched his jaw, his normally resigned expression marred by frustration and anger.

For days, he had been sending Xoey expensive gifts, trying to make amends for the way he had handled, or mishandled her. It was not his nature to make such advances, to express remorse in that way. But Xoey had forced his hand, making it clear that he needed to try harder to keep her in his life. Kaz was not a man who easily admitted his mistakes, but Xoey had a way of unraveling his carefully constructed facade.

Today, as he stood in the brightly lit space, his anger gnawed at him. Money wasn't a thing, so it wasn't about how much he had spent; it was the principle. Each one had been carefully selected by him, something else he didn't do. Kaz rarely even shopped for himself, let alone for someone else, but he wanted to handpick the items for her. A pair of diamond earrings, a handcrafted, leather-bound journal since he'd seen her writing in one a few times, and a weeklong getaway to a luxurious resort—Kaz had spared no expense in trying to win her favor. Yet, there was no response from Xoey, no words of thanks or acknowledgment of his efforts. The silence was deafening.

His frustration mounted with every unanswered gift, and he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that she didn't appreciate his gestures. It was a strange and unsettling sensation for a man who had always been in control, who had never felt the need to seek anyone's approval.

Kaz closed his eyes briefly, trying to quell the surge of anger. "I can't go out like this, man. Fuck this," he muttered to himself. The very idea that XoeY had him acting out of character, that she had the power to provoke such emotions, was infuriating. He turned away from the window and stalked toward the chair.

The anger smoldered within him, and he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being played for a fool. Shifting his focus to the work that was waiting for him, Kaz lost himself in the presentation he was putting together. There was a knock on the door, and when he looked up, he saw XoeY through the spotless glass.

"Come in," he called, swiveling the chair so that he was facing her. His tongue swiped across his teeth as he glared at her, waiting for her to speak.

He had been waiting for this moment, expecting XoeY to come into his office to finally address the gifts he had been sending her.

When XoeY strode in, her confidence evident, she began delving into work-related matters, discussing reports, deadlines, and upcoming projects. Kaz's irritation surged, his jaw tightening, as he couldn't believe she was sidestepping the topic that had been bothering him. She continued to talk, her voice a steady stream of business jargon.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He interrupted her, his voice laced with frustration. "You dead ass right now?" he grilled, causing her brow to arch.

"What do you mean?" She looked perplexed, and he didn't know if she was really confused or if she was playing in his face. "What's on your mind, Mr. Sumpter?"

He smirked at her calling him that.

“So you ain’t got the gifts I’ve been sending you?” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk.

Xoey blinked, her features a combination of disbelief and exasperation. “Oh, those gifts?” She scoffed. “Yeah, I got them. They were nice, Kazimir, but let’s be real. You’re a billionaire. Spending money isn’t a big deal for you. It’s not what I need.”

Kaz felt a rush of anger, his frustration reaching its peak. “What you mean, it’s not what you need? I put thought into those gifts. I wanted to show you I cared.”

Xoey took a step closer, her eyes flashing with grit. “What I need is your vulnerability, your communication, your time, your reassurance. You’re so used to throwing money at problems, but I don’t want your money. I want you to let me in, to share your thoughts, your fears, your dreams. That’s what matters to me.”

Kaz leaned back in his leather chair, the weight of her words sinking in. He had never been one to open up, to share his innermost thoughts and insecurities. His life had been built on impenetrable walls of control and solitude to keep the world at bay. But here was Xoey, demanding that he dismantle those defenses, revealing a vulnerability that was foreign and uncomfortable.

In the quiet of the office, Xoey’s gaze bore into him, staunch, challenging. *She is right*, he thought. She was asking for something far more difficult than picking out gifts and swiping his card. She was asking for pieces of himself that he had offered no one, pieces he wasn’t even sure he could uncover.

After a long pause, Kaz finally spoke, his voice hesitant. “I-I ain’t used to this. Opening up, sharing my feelings, it’s not something I do.”

Xoey nodded, a hint of empathy softening her expression. “I know, but if you want this to work, if you want us to have an actual connection, it’s something you’ll have to work on.”

The vulnerability she was asking for weighed heavily on Kaz's shoulders. He had spent a lifetime guarding his heart, shielding it from pain, but XoeY had already breached his defenses in a way he hadn't anticipated. The idea of letting someone in, of sharing his fears and insecurities, was a daunting prospect.

As XoeY turned to leave, she paused at the door and looked back at him. "I appreciate the gifts, I really do. But I want you, not your money. I want to know the man behind the billionaire status, the one who's willing to take a chance on something real."

With that, she walked out of his office, leaving Kaz alone to grapple with the realization that he was facing a transformation he had never anticipated. XoeY had demanded more than he had ever been willing to give, but she had also sparked a desire within him to change, to break free from the ice that had long encased his heart. It was a formidable journey, but one he was now willing to undertake.

* * *

"This is nice," XoeY complimented as she sat across from Kaz, reviewing the extensive menu.

"Yeah. Woulda been better if you had let me fly us out to Italy so we could get some authentic Italian food."

She shook her head, looking up from the trifold. "This is authentic; the chef and owner are both Italian. I'm sure it'll be just as good without having to take that long flight."

Kaz didn't bother to respond. Instead, he continued to sift through the emails he'd received since they'd been at the restaurant.

Kaz and XoeY sat at a cozy corner table in the dimly lit Italian restaurant, bathed in the soft glow of candlelight. The scent of garlic and fresh herbs wafted through the air, and the ambiance was just perfect for a romantic evening.

Estefania, the cheerful waitress with long, dark hair and a bright smile, approached their table. “Buona sera,” she greeted them warmly. “Are you ready to order?”

Kaz and XoeY exchanged glances, ensuring they were both ready. They placed their orders, Kaz opting for a classic lasagna while XoeY chose a plate of creamy fettuccine Alfredo. Estefania took their menus and left them to their conversation.

As the evening progressed, Kaz took in XoeY’s beauty. Tonight, she looked gorgeous as she always did. Her cheeks, plump and red, rose every time she laughed at something he said, and he was happy to bring that smile to her face. It was infectious, causing him to smile more than he had in forever.

When Estefania returned with their meals, she carefully set Kaz’s plate of lasagna in front of XoeY, and the fettuccine Alfredo in front of him. The mix-up went unnoticed by the two diners at first, as they were too engrossed in their conversation to pay attention to the food.

“Wait a minute,” Kaz said, his brow furrowing in confusion. “This isn’t my fettuccine Alfredo.”

XoeY glanced down at her plate, realizing the lasagna. “Oh, they must have mixed up our orders,” she said with a smile, ready to dismiss the slight error.

Kaz, however, was not so forgiving. His frustration showed as he raised his hand to flag Estefania down. When she returned, he stated, “This ain’t what I ordered. And I need some more water since you ain’t bothered to refill this empty glass.”

Estefania blushed with embarrassment, apologizing profusely. “I’m so sorry, sir. Let me fix that for you right away.”

XoeY tried to ease the situation. “It’s okay; mistakes happen. We can share, it’s no big deal.”

Kaz’s eyes shot daggers at her, his irritation mounting. “It’s an issue for me. I ordered what I ordered, and I want my

shit done right.” He turned his scowl in the waitress’s direction.

Estefania turned to dart away to rectify the mistake, but not before XoeY said something. XoeY whispered an apology to Estefania as she left, hoping to smooth things over.

Kaz was incredulous, his face contorted with frustration. “What you apologizing to her for? She the one fucked up.” He huffed.

XoeY sighed, frustration coating her tone as she said, “Kaz, it’s just food. It’s not worth getting so upset about. We can enjoy the meal, and they’ll fix it. I don’t understand why all of this is necessary. You didn’t have to talk to her like that.”

But Kaz was unrelenting. He raised his voice. “It ain’t about the food; it’s about the principle. She got a job to do, and it should be done correctly. Now what if I was allergic and ate this?”

“But you’re not, so again, I don’t get why this is being blown out of proportion. I’d also appreciate it if you lower your voice when speaking to me. I’m not yelling at you, so I expect the same respect. If that’s too big of a task for you, I can leave, and you can continue to make a butt of yourself solo.” She sipped from the glass of white wine she had barely touched.

Nobody talked to Kaz like that, and he didn’t know how to take it. His anger was already bubbling over, so he didn’t stop it; he let it continue to spew like lava from an active volcano.

Their argument continued to escalate, drawing the attention of nearby diners. XoeY, annoyed, pushed her chair back and said, “I won’t participate in your tantrum,” before making her way outside to request an Uber to her apartment.

Kaz followed her, his voice raised in frustration as they stood on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. Though XoeY spoke, it was hard to hear her over the bass in Kaz’s tone.

Passersby couldn’t help but glance at the heated exchange, but Kaz didn’t seem to care. XoeY, on the other hand,

continued to walk away from him, her arms crossed over her chest.

“I thought we don’t run from our problems. Ain’t that what you said? Or that shit only applies to me so you can get yo’ way. Huh, Bama?” He continued to poke at her.

Stopping her stride, she glared at him. Her expression was tight at first, but then Kaz saw something else appear, something that, to him, looked like disappointment.

“It applies to both of us. The difference is, I’m not running from our problem. I’m more than happy to have a civilized conversation with you, but you don’t want that, and I refuse to allow you to pull me into a war that has nothing to do with me. A war that has nothing to do with that poor woman in that restaurant either. I don’t know what the issue is, but you can’t keep taking your anger out on people who don’t deserve it. There are better ways to get your point across and get what you need than to be mean. That might have worked in the past, but we’re supposed to be changing, evolving into better versions of ourselves; not resorting to the toxic habits that don’t get us anywhere.” Kaz listened, trying to stifle the anger that still bubbled inside.

Before he could speak, Estefania came out, looking both ways. Xoey walked in her direction, and Kaz took that opportunity to ensure his driver would be pulling up shortly. When she walked back over to him, she had a bag with both of their meals.

“Go pay for our meals and apologize to her,” she said sternly. Kaz was reluctant to move; he didn’t take orders from anyone. At that moment, he had a choice to make. Either he was going to choose his old ways, or he was going to give in and try it her way. Involuntarily, his feet began to move toward the door. It wasn’t long before he came out, tucking the receipt in his pocket. He was right on time because the black SUV had pulled alongside the curb, and Ahmad had come around to open the door for Xoey.

The ride back to Xoey’s apartment was a quiet one as they both sat, consumed by their thoughts. All Kaz could think

about was how willing he was to change to please Xoey. He hadn't been willing to do that for anyone; either they took him as he was, or they could leave him where he was.

After a quiet ride to Xoey's apartment, the atmosphere had grown strained. She had disappeared into her bathroom and reemerged in comfortable lounge clothes, barely saying a word to Kaz. He watched her as she moved about the room, tidying up with an unspoken tension in the air. Finally, he couldn't take the silence any longer.

"So you gon' give me the silent treatment all night, Bama? That's what we on?"

Xoey hesitated for a moment before she finally turned to face him. Her eyes displayed a blend of frustration and sadness. "Kaz, you should leave. I need some time to myself."

He was taken aback. "Leave? Nah, I ain't doing that. You said you ain't want me running, so I ain't. I'm here, and I'm gon' be here until we fix this."

Xoey shook her head, her resolve firm. "I appreciate that, but right now, I need space. I need to think."

Kaz felt a lump in his throat, realizing he may have gone too far. "Hear me out," he implored, his voice even. "I know I fucked up. Again. You right; I coulda handled that situation differently."

"Did you even apologize to the woman, Kaz?"

Smcht. "Man... you apologized for both of us. I left her ass a tip she didn't deserve, that should be good enough." She shook her head.

"This is exactly what I mean. You think throwing your money around solves problems, but it doesn't. Money doesn't change the fact that you acted like an asshole tonight for no reason at all. I knew you could be mean, but tonight, you were downright nasty, and I was disappointed and embarrassed."

"So I embarrass you?" He was triggered.

"When you act like that, yes, because it also reflects on me. The same way anything I do when I'm with you reflects

on you.”

“I wouldn’t be embarrassed by you, though.”

“Because I wouldn’t give you anything to be embarrassed about.” She paused. “I’m not embarrassed by you, the person. I’m embarrassed by the way you chose to act because it was uncalled for,” she explained. Kaz allowed her words to simmer. “I know you can be better than that.” Her voice cracked, and it looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Look, I ain’t perfect, and I know I got my shortcomings. But I promise you, I’m trying, more than I ever have. I’m trying to be better for you.”

She sighed and walked over to the bed, sitting down. “Kaz, you can be so frustrating sometimes. But I can see that you’re trying, and that means a lot.”

Kaz’s shoulders slumped as he kneeled in front of her. He took her hands in his and pressed them against his chest. “I apologize for pushing you away. I’ on know what it means to have somebody close to you, but I know I ain’t tryna be without what we got going on. I’m really, really feeling you.”

Xoey ran her fingers through his locs, a soothing gesture as she looked into his eyes. “Kaz, I’m not giving up on you. But you have to understand, you can’t let your frustration control you.”

Kaz laid his head in her lap. He closed his eyes and let out a long, deep breath. “I’m working on it. Just give me some time to get it right.”

Xoey continued to caress his locs, a small smile playing on her lips. “I will, Kaz. I’m willing to try too. Just remember, we’re in this together. We’ll figure it out.”

With those words, the tension between them began to dissipate, replaced by a shared understanding. Kaz’s vulnerability had brought them closer, and her reassurance was something he didn’t know he needed.

Chapter Seventeen

Xoey

Xoey navigated through the morning traffic with music playing in the background. The sun had barely emerged, creating a serene ambiance in the city. As she neared the office building, her thoughts were already consumed by the impending workload.

But as she parked her car and made her way to her desk, her eyes fell on a small, elegantly wrapped gift box that rested there. It was wrapped in sparkly paper with a satin ribbon and a handwritten card peeking out from beneath the bow. She shook her head, knowing it was Kaz who had left yet another gift for her at her desk.

This man just won't learn.

Just as she reached out to pick it up, the office door swung open, and Clarissa stormed in, her brisk stride and screwed-up face evident the moment she entered the room. Xoey quickly withdrew her hand, deciding to deal with the gift later.

Clarissa didn't waste any time barking out orders in her usual authoritative manner, as if she were a dictator and Xoey, merely a minion under her rule. Xoey listened intently, jotting down notes as she tried to keep up with the barrage of demands.

Minutes turned into what felt like hours as Clarissa continued to scrutinize every aspect of the upcoming project. Xoeys mind was split in two; one half focused on her boss's directives, the other still lingering on the gift sitting on her desk.

Clarissa turned her attention to Xoeys. "Xoeys, I need you to go through these reports and summarize them for me by noon. The client meeting has been rescheduled, and we need to be well-prepared."

Xoeys nodded. "Of course. I'll have it ready."

With a short nod, Clarissa left Xoeys desk, leaving her to her tasks. Xoeys sighed, relieved to have a moment of respite, but anxious to open the gift that called out to her. As much as she chastised him for throwing gifts at her, she loved receiving them, especially when it was evident he had put thought into it. Xoeys just didn't want him to think buying gifts was a means of conflict resolution.

As she carefully untied the satin ribbon and opened the card, a soft smile spread across her face. The handwritten note read:

Saw this piece and thought of you for two reasons.

Two squirts of a piss

The way you wet my dick up with that super soaker

Thank a nigga with a kiss when you see me

Xoeys shook her head, but the smile she wore was wide enough to split her face in two. The necklace was beautiful, and it had charms that hung in a way that made it look like water droplets. It sparkled under the lights in the office, and Xoeys wasted no time putting it on.

Removing the gift wrap and the box from her desk, she got to work on the tasks she had been given for the day, touching the necklace every so often. Xoeys couldn't wait to see Kaz; this time, she would be thanking him accordingly.

Lunch came, and she was headed downstairs to eat with Krystina as she often did. As she waited for the elevator, her

name was called. Looking to her right, she saw Kaz, and instantly, her lips turned upward into a smile. He waved for her to come to him just as the doors of the elevator slid open. Instead of getting on, she strutted over to the handsome man who had her feeling giddy.

Closing the door behind her, she walked over to the office chair and took a seat.

“You owe me something, don’t you?” XoeY used her pointer finger to tap her chin as if she were in deep thought. “It looks nice on you. You like it?” he asked as he walked behind her. He stood behind the chair, and her breath hitched. His breath against the shell of her ear caused her heart rate to increase. XoeY let out a low moan when he kissed her neck softly. “You smell good.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. Her eyes watched as his finger toyed with the charms on the necklace, then moved to under her chin, which he juttled upward. XoeY looked up into his eyes, her body temperature shooting up at the feel of his lips pressed against hers. She groaned into his mouth, opening up so he could slide his tongue in. Their tongues wrestled for dominance, but she forfeited, needing to pull back. She wiped the lip gloss from the rim of his lips and adjusted in her seat. Suddenly, she felt drunk with lust.

“You didn’t answer me,” he said, moving around the desk. “I don’t like repeating myself, Bama.”

“Well, you didn’t give me much of an opportunity to answer you. But yes, I love it. Thank you. What’s the occasion?”

“None. I saw it, thought you would like it, so I got it.”

“How much did it cost?” From the diamonds alone, she knew it must have cost a pretty penny.

“You ain’t gotta worry about the price of nothing long as I’m around. Just enjoy it.” She rolled her eyes. “What you having for lunch?”

“I was going to get me something from the café.”

“Nah, you eating with me today. What you craving?” Her eyes roamed his body. “Besides this dick.”

She laughed and said, “I could go for some Mexican food.”

“Aight, bet. I can have the jet ready in about thirty.”

Her eyes bulged. “What? No. Why do we need a jet, Kazimir?”

“How else we gon’ get to Mexico?”

“Oh my God, we are *not* going to Mexico just for food. Are you crazy?”

“Nah. Just rich.” He shrugged as if what he was saying was normal. XoeY came from humble beginnings, and since she’d been an adult, she’d worked hard for everything she had. Kazimir, on the other hand, had spent most of his adult life wealthy, she’d learned, although he wasn’t a stranger to the struggle.

“FlavorFiesta Taqueria will suffice. They have some bomb cilantro lime rice and black bean dip.”

“If that’s what you want, aight. Mexico is still on the table, though.”

“Raincheck,” she stated.

After the order was placed, XoeY turned on her playlist and listened while she watched Kaz work. When he was in his element, he was even more handsome to her. She smiled when he caught her ogling him, and he winked, causing her to blush.

The food arrived and they dug in, neither of them saying much outside of complimenting the food.

* * *

XoeY and Kaz sat across from each other in her apartment, their voices growing more impassioned with each passing moment.

“Kaz, you can’t just dismiss the idea that childhood trauma has a lasting effect on someone,” Xoeey argued, her voice laced with frustration. “It shapes your beliefs, your coping mechanisms, and your emotional well-being. Literally everything.”

Kaz leaned back in his chair. “People wanna use that shit as an excuse, that’s all. Ya past ain’t gotta define you. If a muhfucka really wants to, they can get past that shit. It’s a choice at the end of the day; niggas just ain’t choosing to do better.”

Xoeey’s frustration bubbled to the surface as she met Kaz’s unwavering gaze. “You’re not wrong. I agree, some people use their trauma as an excuse to be a messed-up individual. They use it as a reason to not be held accountable. But then other people do want to change but it’s not that simple. Trauma leaves scars, deep emotional wounds that can’t be wished away. It influences your perceptions, your relationships, and your self-esteem. You can’t deny that.”

“All I’m saying is folks gotta stop seeing the world through the lens of victimhood. We all go through shit. It’s our choice on how we choose to respond to it.”

“I’m not talking about victimhood; I’m talking about understanding. When you recognize the impact of trauma, it can lead to healing and growth. It’s not about dwelling on the past; it’s about acknowledging its influence.”

Kaz’s eyes narrowed. “Acknowledging, yeah. Dwelling, nah. Let that shit go.”

Xoeey’s voice softened. “Kaz, I’m not saying we can’t overcome our past, but we need to acknowledge the wounds before we can heal them. It’s about compassion, both for ourselves and for others.”

“I get what you saying, Bama. I do. But if I had let the shit people said and did to me hold me back, I wouldn’t be the nigga I am today. You know how many people told me I wouldn’t be shit? Now look at me.”

“Which is what I’ve been saying this whole time, Kazimir! Your past affects who you are now, whether good or bad. Your past is riddled with people who doubted and discouraged you and you took that and used it as motivation. On the other hand, some people allow that to be the reason they don’t pursue the things they want.”

“They use that shit as an excuse.”

“I’m not arguing that.” She paused. “We’re both saying the same thing in different ways. Our past influences us in one way or another. And I agree, we shouldn’t use that as an excuse to not be better. Can you agree to that?” Kaz nodded, tugging on his beard. “Tell me about your childhood.” She noticed his jaw flex.

Xoey reached across the table, her hand gently resting on Kaz’s. As he got ready to speak, her phone rang, interrupting their moment. She silenced the call, but seconds later, it was ringing again. She silenced it again.

“You not gon’ get that?” She heard the accusation in his tone.

“No, it’s not important.”

“How you know if you ain’t answer? They keep calling so it must be important.”

“It’s no—” The phone rang again, and Kaz snatched the phone from her hand when she went to silence it.

“Who this?” he asked. Pulling the phone from his ear, he put it on speakerphone and asked again, “Aye, who this?” Still, he was met with silence, then the call disconnected. “What’s up with that, man?”

“I told you it wasn’t important.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know, Kazimir. As you can see, the number wasn’t saved, and they didn’t say anything.”

Kaz tossed the phone and went to stand, but she stopped him. “No, we’re not doing this. We talk about things when

there's an issue. You don't get to run away from problems anymore. Talk to me. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, we good. I need to get up outta here and handle some shit."

"Kazimir." She looked at him sternly. "If you walk out that door, consider this thing we're doing done. I don't like leaving things unresolved. We're adults, and we can communicate and resolve our issues. If I can't count on you to be here and work through the kinks at this stage, we might as well end before we even get started. I told you, you had to work for me, and I meant that. I'm not dishonoring my boundaries for you or anyone else. So right now, you need to decide what you want to do."

Xoey was on pins and needles as she watched the turmoil on Kaz's face. He looked as if he were seriously contemplating his next move. She just hoped it would be in her direction and not him walking out the door.

Minutes ticked into what felt like hours, and she released her breath when he reclaimed his position on the sofa next to her and pulled her into his lap.

"Good choice." She smiled, and he nudged her away playfully. "Now talk to me."

"Man, it ain't nothing. I was tripping."

"Okay, but why? What triggered you?" She looked at him, caressing the side of his face. "Tell me what you're comfortable sharing."

"That's the thing; I ain't comfortable doing this at all. I'on talk about feelings and shit, Bama."

"Are you willing to learn?"

"I wasn't until yo' ass came along."

"You're welcome." She pecked his lips, and he deepened the kiss. Pulling back, she stopped before things escalated. Xoey had made a promise to herself that sex was off the table until he had put in some work to show he was serious about her. She didn't need a replay of what happened the first time.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed.

“What you ’bout to do, Bama?”

“Just trust me and close your eyes.” He closed his eyes, and she gently grabbed his hand. “Now just speak. Whatever comes to mind, say it. Don’t worry about how it sounds right now, just speak.”

“Ya pussy must be a heat conductor the way you got my leg burning up right now.” She shoved him and he laughed.

“Stop deflecting and be serious, Kazimir.”

“Aight, aight.” He stopped to gather himself. “Separating myself from people is easy. It’s what I do.”

“Why? You don’t have anyone you’re close to?”

“Nah. I’on need nobody but me.”

“Tell me why you think that.”

“People ain’t reliable.”

“Who let you down?” His eyes opened, and she put her hand over them, silently telling him to close them again. “Just answer, don’t think.”

“Everybody.”

“More specifically?”

“My mom and pops.”

“What did they do?”

“Nothing. They didn’t do a damn thing.” She heard the anger in his tone, and she continued to gently rub him.

“Keep going.”

“How you have a baby and leave them in the dumpster? Bitch couldn’t even take me to a hospital or fire station. Left me in a dirty ass dumpster in freezing weather.” XoeY embraced him, and although he tried to resist, she didn’t let up.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“It’s cool.”

“It’s not. And it’s okay to feel however you feel about it.”

“I just don’t understand how a mother could just abandon their flesh and blood like that.” XoeY didn’t say anything; she just continued to listen as he opened up to her.

Chapter Eighteen

Kaz

“I gotta stop letting you influence me. They really don’t need a whole week off.” Kaz fussed as he lay next to Xoey.

“I told you I was going to tame the bully.” She kissed his cheek. “Now stop complaining and let’s enjoy ourselves. No more talking about work until we get back home.”

The last three weeks had been hectic at Sumpter Solutions, and though Kaz didn’t want to admit it, his team had been working hard and deserved time off. He wasn’t missing any money by giving them the week off; he just wanted to give Xoey a hard time since it was her idea.

Kaz and Xoey arrived at the luxurious resort in Mexico the night before. The sprawling property was nestled between the lush greenery of the jungle and the pristine white sands of the Caribbean coast.

A grand, open-air lobby greeted them, adorned with magnificent chandeliers and handcrafted Mexican furnishings. A gentle breeze rustled through the open space, carrying with it the sweet scent of tropical flowers.

The resort’s architecture was a perfect fusion of modern elegance and traditional Mexican design. Vibrant splashes of color adorned the walls, and hand-painted tiles added a touch of local artistry to the surroundings.

As they strolled through the resort's meticulously landscaped grounds, they discovered a world of luxury amenities. Pristine pools glistened under the Mexican sun, offering an oasis for those seeking respite from the heat. The resort's spa was a sanctuary of relaxation and rejuvenation. Casitas hidden within the tropical foliage offered couples massages and treatments using herbs and oils. The soothing sound of cascading water from an intricate stone fountain created a sense of serenity.

He looked out over the pristine beach, the turquoise waters of the Caribbean stretching to the horizon. The private cabanas on the sand invited relaxation and were equipped with personal butlers ready to attend to their every need.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Kaz and Xoey found themselves at one of the resort's gourmet restaurants. Candlelight flickered on linen-covered tables, and the menu featured a fusion of Mexican and international cuisine prepared by world-class chefs. A gentle mariachi band played romantic melodies.

Kaz looked across the table at Xoey, his gaze penetrating. "You look good as hell," he complimented.

Blushing, she said, "Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

"This a dope spot." Kaz took in the extravagant space.

"It's breathtaking. Thank you for bringing me."

"It ain't nothing."

"It's everything," she corrected. "Everything you do means something to me."

"I do it 'cause you mean something to me." He saw her eyes become glossy. "I know you not 'bout to cry, Bama."

"I'm not, but that was really sweet. You're making progress. I'm proud." She beamed.

"So that means a nigga can get some pussy?" he leaned forward and asked.

"Is that the only reason you're doing it?"

“Nah. But I do want some more of that good gushy.”

“We’ll see.”

“Real shit, though, you make it easy to open up. I done tried to pull away, but something ’bout you keeps drawing me back in to you.”

“I feel it, too, Kazimir,” she admitted, her voice soft but resolute. “It’s like an invisible force that’s brought us together time and time again.”

Kaz reached out and gently took her hand in his, his thumb tracing circles on her palm. “I’ve fucked up. I’ve let my pride and stubbornness get in the way of what I truly want.”

Xoey gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s not about what’s happened in the past; it’s about where we go from here.”

Kaz nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. Their conversation hung in the air, the unspoken question lingering between them.

Kaz took a deep breath, his gaze steadfast. “I know you said I had to earn you, and I’m willing to do that, but I ain’t tryna leave here without you being mine. Officially. So, what’s up? You tryna be my ol’ lady?”

“Yes, I’ll be your ol’ lady, but remember what I told you. This requires work. We don’t get to run when things get hard. If you aren’t willing to stay and fight—” Kaz was up and out of his seat, sucking the words out of her mouth as he kissed her roughly. When he heard her moan against his lips, he felt himself begin to stiffen.

“Get your purse,” he said against her lips. He tossed a couple of bills on the table and grabbed her hand, heading out of the restaurant that was on the property.

It didn’t take long for them to make it back to their spacious suite. They tore one another’s clothes off as they entered the room, Kaz kicking the door shut as he pulled off his shirt. When his shirt and pants were off, he picked Xoey up and carried her over to the king-sized bed that sat in the center of the room. He looked down at her, taking in her beauty. In between her legs, he dove in headfirst, kissing, licking, and

slurping between her slippery folds. Kaz feasted on her pussy, her cries of pleasure bouncing off the walls. XoeY thrust her hips into his face, and he gripped her waist to hold her still, his thick lips wrapped around her swollen clit.

Two fingers dipped inside her canal, and she tightened around him. He curved the tips of his fingers upward, and her body quaked.

“Kazimir, please.” She whimpered.

“Please, what?” he asked into her pussy, continuing his assault.

“You... uh... oh my God.” He gripped her thick thighs tighter as they began to quiver. “I’m about to c—”

That was his cue. He halted his motion and got up, dropping his boxers. His dick sprang to life, and he gripped it while looking at XoeY’s beautiful body.

“Why did you do that?” she whined.

“Shut up.” Kaz walked over to the bed, pulling her closer to the edge. He spread her legs and placed his mushroom head at her entrance. He held her legs out and up, his hands wrapped around her ankles as he stroked inside her. He went deep until he hit the bottom and picked up his pace with every stroke.

“You missed that dick, didn’t you?” She nodded. “I said, you missed this dick, didn’t you?” He spoke through gritted teeth, fighting the desire to cum already. XoeY’s pussy was so tight, wet, and warm and he needed to focus on something else or he would bust soon.

“Y-Yes. I missed it. I missed it so much.” Kaz’s hands moved from her ankles to her calves to the backs of her thighs. When he reached her ass, he gripped her cheeks and hoisted her up so that she was at the same level as his pelvis. He buried his dick deep in her walls, making contact with her spot. He knew he had hit the jackpot when she began to curse and scream like somebody was killing her.

“I’m about to cum, baby. I’m about to cum.”

“Hold it for me,” he told her.

“I-I can’t. I can’t.” She shook her head from side to side.

“Hold that shit.” He stopped mid-stroke.

“No, don’t stop.”

“You gon’ hold that nut until I tell you?”

“Y-Yes. Just. Keep. Going.”

Kaz repositioned his hands so that they were on the plushness of her hips. He held on tight and beat her pussy up. Xoeys body bounced around like she was a rag doll. Kaz felt her pussy gripping his dick and he knew it wouldn’t be long before he erupted.

“Ah, fuck,” he cursed. “This some good ass pussy.”

“I thought it was subpar,” she choked out. He laughed and let her body lay flat on the bed. He used her heels and pushed her legs back toward her head. His palms laid flat on her soles, and he dug in her pussy like he was doing pushups.

“Oh, my damn! You’re so deep. Shit!” she yelped. “You fucking this pussy, baby.”

“You taking this dick like a good girl,” he complimented. Kaz continued pummeling her walls until he felt himself about to nut. He pulled out and told her, “Come ride this dick. Earn that nut.” They changed positions and she got into the reverse cowgirl position. Kaz watched as her ass rippled as it made contact with his pelvis.

“You like that?” she questioned. Kaz was too busy grunting to answer. On the tips of her toes, she rode his dick like a pro. Xoeys sat all the way down on his shaft, making it disappear.

“Goddamn.” His toes curled and cracked, and a knot formed in the base of his stomach. “Ah, fuck.” Taking charge, he gripped her waist, steadied himself on his heels, and thrust into her quickly. He pumped into her, both of them making unrecognizable sounds.

“Baby, I’m about to cum!”

“Let it go. You earned that, baby girl.” On cue, they released at the same time. They fell flat against the bed, spent.

“Damn, that was good,” she said.

“I didn’t say you were done,” he told her. Kaz watched as her face went from surprised to determined, and he knew he had met his match.

Chapter Nineteen

Xoey

When Xoey returned to the office, she was shocked to see that her area had been cleared out. Looking around, she didn't see her things anywhere and was confused.

“What is going on here?” she said aloud.

“You've been moved,” she heard from behind her.

Turning around, she asked, “What? Moved? Moved where?”

Clarissa didn't even bother to respond; she simply walked away. When Xoey didn't follow right away, Clarissa said over her shoulder, “Well are you coming?”

Falling in stride, she was confused when they stopped in front of a door that was beside Kaz's office. Clarissa opened the door and waved for Xoey to enter. When she did, her mouth fell open.

“This is mine?” She looked at the space, taking it all in.

The office was spacious, with high ceilings and tall windows that bathed the room in natural light, offering a view of the city skyline. The walls were adorned with tasteful artwork, and rich mahogany bookshelves lined one wall.

A grand desk of dark wood, polished to a high sheen, took center stage. It was large and was adorned with a sleek

computer and a single, fresh flower in a crystal vase. The comfortable leather chair behind the desk beckoned her to take a seat.

To one side, there was a sitting area with plush armchairs and a low coffee table. The room's carpet was a deep, royal blue, offering a luxurious contrast to the dark wood furniture.

Xoey walked further into the office, her fingers lightly trailing over the mahogany bookshelves. Her own nameplate, engraved with "*Xoey Pepperman, Chief Marketing Officer*" adorned her desk. The magnitude of the title struck her, seeing as she had no idea she would be given a new position.

A gilded-framed mirror above a decorative fireplace showcased her reflection, and she couldn't help but smile.

As she continued to explore her new office, she noticed a side door that led to a private bathroom. It was a small but elegant space, complete with marble countertops. As she took a final, sweeping look around her new office, Xoey didn't miss the sour look on Clarissa's face. Recalling the snide remarks she'd made when she believed Xoey and Kaz were still at odds, she took pleasure in seeing her bothered by this new revelation.

Just wait until she finds out we're together.

The couple hadn't revealed that they were dating. It wasn't a secret, since they figured most people assumed something was going on anyway, but they weren't in a rush to tell the office.

"Do you need anything?" Xoey didn't hide her shock at the question.

"Huh?"

"I'll be assisting you from now on." The sheer disgust in her tone made Xoey chuckle.

"How those tables turn," Xoey stated with a smirk. Clarissa huffed and rushed out the door, not bothering to shut it. Taking a seat behind her desk, she basked in the moment, taking it all in.

She got acclimated to her new space and began going over the tasks that had been laid out for her in an email sent by Kaz. Since the pitch she'd worked on had gone smoothly, she was now responsible for taking on some of the projects and overseeing others. It was a big responsibility, but she was ready for the challenge.

* * *

The light from the setting sun filtered into Xoe's cozy kitchen as she stood before the stove, the apron tied securely around her waist. She was about to cook dinner for Kaz, and it was the first time she would be sharing a homemade meal with him.

Her excitement was tinged with apprehension. What if the meal didn't meet his expectations? She was well aware of his discerning palate and the standard of culinary excellence he was accustomed to.

She wanted to impress him, to make a statement that spoke of her care and affection. The recipe she had chosen was a complex, savory chicken marsala, a dish she had prepared numerous times, but today, it felt different.

Taking a deep breath, she carefully set out all the ingredients on the countertop – plump, organic chicken breasts, shallots, garlic, cremini mushrooms, and a bottle of rich marsala wine. The room filled with the earthy aroma of fresh thyme and rosemary that she had gotten from the local farmer's market.

Xoe's hands moved with a sense of urgency as she started to peel and chop the shallots and garlic, the rhythmic clinking of the knife against the wooden cutting board competing with the song playing in the background.

She heated a heavy skillet on the stove, adding a splotch of butter and a drizzle of olive oil. The sizzling sound as the fats melted was music to her ears. The chicken breasts, seasoned generously with a blend of spices, were laid into the pan with care to create a golden-brown sear.

The first sign of nervousness showed when she nearly knocked over the marsala wine while trying to uncork it. She tried to steady her hands as she measured out the liquid, spilling a few droplets onto the counter in the process. As she poured the marsala into the skillet, the aroma of the simmering wine mixed with the savory scent of chicken and herbs.

The sauce began to thicken, and Xoe's gaze remained fixed on the pan, her thoughts consumed with the expectancy of how this dinner might unfold.

Turning her attention to the side dish, she placed a pot of water on a separate burner to boil, where she would later cook the linguine that would accompany the marsala. As she stirred the pasta into the pot, her nerves threatened to overshadow her excitement.

Her phone pinged and she wiped her hands before picking it up; it was a message from Kazimir, saying he was on his way.

Thirty minutes later, she plated the chicken marsala and linguine with precision. There was a banging on the door, and she knew it was Kazimir. The tantalizing aroma wafted through her kitchen as she went to grab the door, removing her apron.

"Damn," was his greeting. "You look good, Bama." He embraced her, gripping her butt in the process. She moaned as she leaned up to kiss his lips.

"Thank you. You look and smell good." She turned around with his hand in hers. "Have a seat, the food will be out in a second."

She set the table carefully, placing a pair of elegant wine glasses at each setting and lighting a few candles. Going back to the kitchen, she grabbed his plate and a bottle of wine and made a final trip to the kitchen to grab her plate.

"This looks good. Let me find out you can do ya thing in the kitchen."

"I hope you like it." She filled both of their glasses with wine then took a sip. "How was your day? I didn't see you

today.”

“It was a good day. I had some productive meetings and made progress on a few projects. How you liking ya new office?” He took another bite.

“About that. You didn’t have to do all of that. You know Clarissa was madder than a wet hen.” She chuckled, taking another sip of wine.

“Madder than... you know what, never mind.” He shook his head with a laugh. “And I didn’t do nothing out of the way. You work hard for the company, and I know you have the potential to go as far as you want with this, if this is what you want, long term. Is this what you want?” She thought about it for a moment.

“Honestly, I haven’t put much thought into that. I know that when I came here, it was about finding a job so I could take care of myself. But I have to admit, I do love working for Sumpter Solutions. Still, I don’t necessarily know if this is something I want long-term or not.”

“What you passionate about? What makes that pussy thump besides me?” He showcased his panty-dropping smile.

Shaking her head, she took a minute to think about what he was asking. “Helping people has always been my thing. I think I want to do something with that.” She stopped for a minute, dropping her fork in the process. “If I tell you this, don’t judge me, okay?”

“Aight,” he responded.

“Since I was younger, I’ve always felt drawn to older people, and I don’t really know why. But I want to be like a companion for senior citizens who don’t really have anybody. I know what it feels like to be lonely, but to be old and lonely, knowing you’ll most likely be dying soon and having no one around, has to be depressing. I wanna be able to bring a little joy to their lives, you know?”

“Good shit, Bama. I think that’s a dope idea. You should make it happen.”

“Nah, I can’t right now. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“I see you got a computer over there and a phone, so you can access the internet, right?”

“Don’t be smart.” She rolled her eyes.

“Nah, you stop playing dumb. Look that shit up and see what it takes and make that shit happen.” Xoey pondered the idea, and she was excited at the thought. Making a mental note to look into it later, she finished eating as they enjoyed conversation and laughter.

After dinner, they settled on the couch and prepared to watch a movie. As they got ready to press play, there was a knock on the door.

“Who is that?” she asked, looking at the door.

“You expecting somebody else?” Kaz asked, standing and heading to the door.

“No. You’re literally the only person who has ever been here.”

He opened the door and she heard, “Oh, uh, is Xoey here?” The voice belonged to a man, but it was unfamiliar. She stood and headed over to the front door.

“Who you?” Kaz questioned. Xoey squeezed in front of Kaz, trying to see who was at her door, looking for her. When she looked up at the person before her, her jaw dropped, and she began to tremble. “Aye, you good? Who is this?”

Silence floated between them before the unexpected visitor said, “I’m Ramik, her son.”

Chapter Twenty

K^{az}

Kaz's heart pounded in his chest as he stood in the doorway, watching the scene before him unfold. His mind reeled with a frenzy of emotions, a whirlwind of confusion, anger, and frustration. He had just learned a shocking revelation—Xoey had a son, and she had kept this secret from him.

Xoey and the man who had just appeared in her apartment, Ramik, stood a few feet apart, their eyes locked in an uncomfortable silence. Kaz could sense the tension between them.

“Son? Did this lil nigga just say he was yo’ son?” His words were laced with disbelief and anger.

Xoey turned her gaze toward him, her expression a mixture of surprise, frustration, and guilt. It was a look that only intensified Kaz's confusion.

“I can explain, but not right now, Kazimir. Just let me handle this. Please.”

Kaz's mind raced, trying to process the shocking revelation. Xoey had a son? Why had she never mentioned this before? And what had brought her son to her doorstep today?

Ramik shifted uncomfortably, clearly aware of the tension in the room. “Look, I'm not trying to cause any drama. I just wanted to get in contact with you.”

“It’s fine. You’re fine. Please, come in.”

“I’m out, man. You got me fucked up,” Kaz stated angrily.

“Kazimir, please. What did we talk about? No running from our problems.”

“What did we talk about? We talked about being fucking honest. We talked about being vulnerable and shit. I opened up to you about shit I don’t talk to nobody about, and you couldn’t even tell me you had a kid? Fuck outta here.” He shrugged her hand off him and went for the door. Kaz didn’t miss the desperate plea in her eyes, as if silently begging him to understand.

“Kazimir, please, this is unexpected. I’ll explain everything, but I need some time to talk to Ramik first.”

Kaz’s anger flared at her request for time and her withholding of such a significant part of her life. He couldn’t contain his frustration any longer. “Explain everything? You been keeping this from me. How long were you planning to hide the fact that you have a son?”

Xoey’s face paled, her eyes filled with regret. “Baby, it’s not what you think. I didn’t plan this, and I never meant to keep it from you. I was going to tell you in due time.”

He allowed her to move them away from Ramik. The tension between them felt suffocating. His confusion had evolved into a boiling anger that threatened to consume him. “Xoey, what the hell is going on? How could you not tell me about this?” He kept asking questions she wasn’t answering, and it was pissing him off.

Xoey sank onto the couch, her shoulders slumped, tears welling up in her eyes. “This is so complicated. I didn’t know how to bring it up. I didn’t know how you’d react.”

Kaz paced the room, his anger simmering. “How I’d react? You the main one always screaming, trust me, trust me, but clearly yo’ ass don’t practice what the fuck you preach. You should have trusted me enough to tell me something this important. I don’t get how you could hide yo’ kid like that.”

She looked up at him, her voice pleading. “Please, just let me explain. Ramik is my son, but I gave him up for adoption when I was young. It was a complicated situation, but I did what I had to do.”

“So you abandoned yo’ own flesh and blood and let somebody else handle the responsibilities?” He let out a humorless laugh. “You sat there and listened to me tell you about how I was abandoned, and you did the same shit. You ain’t shit, man. I can’t believe I love someone who would abandon their kid.” Kaz was so heated, he hadn’t even realized he’d confessed his love to her.

Kaz stopped his pacing, his anger momentarily giving way to a flood of other emotions. Confusion and hurt pooled in his core.

“I get that you’re upset, but you don’t get to talk to me crazy. If that’s what we’re on now, then we can table this. If we can’t speak to one another respectfully, we don’t need to speak at all. I was wrong for not telling you, and I apologize for it. I love you, and I don’t want to jeopardize our relationship. Please, just let me explain, and I’ll tell you everything. But first, allow me the opportunity to talk to my son first.”

Kaz exhaled, his nostrils flared. His anger was still present but tempered by the sincerity in her voice. He took a seat opposite her, his confusion and frustration evident in his stare. “Go talk to the nigga, but when you done, you better have a damn good explanation.”

“Thank you for allowing me to do this. I love you,” she told him, and his heart skipped a beat.

“Go handle ya business, Bama.” They both walked to the door; him to leave, and her to go retrieve her son.

When she opened the door, Rakim was gone. He watched as she looked up and down the hallway but saw nothing. The disappointment on her face was almost enough for him to push his anger aside and comfort her, but Kazimir was stubborn, and he could hold a grudge. Deep down, he still felt some type of way that she had up and abandoned her child, someone she

had carried and brought into this world. From his own experience, he knew what that felt like, so part of him empathized with the man who had shown up and ruined their night.

Tears filled her eyes, and he swiped them away as they fell. “He’ll be back,” he told her.

“How do you know?” she said in a cracked voice.

“He didn’t come here for nothing. He’ll be back.” Kaz kissed her forehead and said, “Go back in the house. I’ll hit you later.” He leaned down and pecked her lips as she pouted.

“You still mad at me?” she whined.

“Yeah. But I ain’t going nowhere. We good,” he reassured. “Get in the house, man. Out here with your legs and shit out.” He watched as she walked into the apartment and blew him a kiss.

“I love you,” she told him.

“I love you, too,” he replied, walking away when she shut the door.

Instead of heading home when he got in the car, he decided he would take a ride just to clear his head. The news he’d just learned had messed him up. It wasn’t that she had a son; he really didn’t care about that fact. What bothered him was that she hadn’t mentioned it, and the fact that she had abandoned him added salt to an already infected wound.

As Kaz drove, he couldn’t help but reflect on his own childhood, on the gaping hole left in his heart by his mother’s abandonment. The echoes of his own past were now reverberating in a new and unexpected way.

He had been a child when his mother had left him, and he’d grown up with a profound sense of abandonment. The pain had always been there, lurking in the shadows of his subconscious, even as he built a successful life and a veneer of self-sufficiency. Now, as he confronted the fact that Xoey, the woman he loved, had also walked away from her child, the emotions from his own childhood came rushing back with overwhelming force.

In the solitude of his thoughts, he traced the scars of his abandonment. He remembered the lonely nights he'd spent wondering why his mother had left, the longing for her love, the feeling of emptiness that he'd carried for years. It was a wound that had never truly healed, only been buried beneath layers of resilience and self-reliance.

And now, learning about Xoe's own abandonment of her child had opened up Pandora's box of emotions within him. He was torn between anger and empathy, between the pain of his own past and the love he felt for Xoe. Could he truly judge her for something he himself had experienced? Or would he be condemned to repeat the cycle of abandonment?

Kaz's internal battle raged on, a whirlwind of emotions tearing through the depths of his being. He wanted to understand Xoe, to be compassionate, to offer her the love and support he had craved as a child. But a part of him couldn't ignore the wounds that had never truly healed. The anger and resentment he had carried for years, the feeling of being unwanted, all seemed to resurface with a vengeance.

As he reflected on his own past, he realized now more than ever what Xoe meant when she said childhood trauma affected people well into adulthood. He now had a better understanding of human relationships and the depths of pain that people carry. He knew he couldn't judge Xoe solely based on her past actions, just as he couldn't be judged by the pain he'd endured.

The realization that both he and Xoe were products of their experiences, their past traumas, and their attempts to cope with the wounds they had carried, softened the edges of his anger. He began to see that while their pasts had left them with scars, it was the love they had found in each other that had the potential to heal those wounds.

Kaz realized that he was not alone in his internal battle. He and Xoe had each been carrying the weight of their pasts, and their shared journey had brought those hidden emotions to the surface. United by their love, they were two imperfect beings, and he yearned for their affection to serve as a map, helping them navigate the complexities of their shared history,

transforming their wounds into pathways of understanding, empathy, and restoration.

Chapter Twenty-One

Xoey

It had been a long three days, and Xoey had been coasting on autopilot. She had been in her feelings ever since Rakim had shown up at her door. So many questions floated through her mind. How did he find her? What was he thinking? Did he want to build a relationship with her, or had he come to make her relive the most difficult decision she'd ever made? Questions with no answers caused her to lose nights of sleep and the bags under her eyes were a testament to that.

As if that wasn't enough, she was worried about her relationship with Kazimir. He said he wasn't going anywhere but she wasn't so sure. Maybe this would all be too much for him. Maybe he'd look at her and see the woman who abandoned him. She had no intentions of doing that; hell, she didn't want to abandon her own son. But it was what needed to be done.

Xoey sat at her desk, her shoulders slumped, as the weight of another long workday pressed down on her. She'd been dealing with one challenge after another, and all she wanted was a moment of respite. But, as if sensing her vulnerability, Clarissa approached her with her usual air of condescension.

Clarissa leaned over Xoey's desk, her tone laced with a biting edge. "Xoey, I understand that I'm supposed to be reporting to you now, but I can't do my job unless you do

yours. I still haven't gotten the updated memos you said I needed to send out." She huffed.

Xoey let out a weary sigh, her patience wearing thin. She'd grown accustomed to Clarissa's sharp criticism, but today was different. She simply didn't have the energy to engage in their usual power struggle.

Without her usual sharp retort, Xoey nodded in acknowledgment. "Sending them now," was all she'd said. She was sure she'd sent them earlier, but maybe they had gotten stuck in the outbox. "Done."

Clarissa, taken aback by Xoey's lack of resistance, paused for a moment. She had expected an angry comeback or an argument, but instead, Xoey seemed defeated.

After a brief silence, Clarissa's demeanor softened, and she took a step back. Her voice held a surprising note of empathy. "Xoey, is everything okay? You seem... different today."

Xoey looked up, her tired eyes meeting Clarissa's. The concern in her coworker's voice caught her off guard. She hadn't expected compassion from Clarissa, of all people.

"I've just had a tough day," Xoey admitted, her tone weary but honest. "I'm not in the mood for our usual back and forth."

Clarissa nodded, her expression more understanding than Xoey had ever seen it. "I get it. We all have those days. If you need someone to talk to or help with anything, I might be able to help."

Xoey blinked in surprise. This was a side of Clarissa she had never seen before. While their interactions had typically been marked by conflict, today had brought an unexpected moment of compassion from her coworker.

"Thank you, Ms. Hawthorne," Xoey replied, her guard slowly coming down.

"Clarissa is fine."

Nodding in acceptance, Xoey said, "I appreciate it, Clarissa."

Their exchange, though brief, marked a significant shift in their relationship. Clarissa, who had always been quick to criticize and berate, had shown a glimpse of empathy and understanding. Xoey couldn't help but feel a sense of relief.

Xoey's day had been a relentless marathon of meetings, negotiations, and paperwork. As she shut down her computer and gathered her belongings, she couldn't help but feel the weight of exhaustion settle over her. The sun had dipped below the horizon as she made her way to the elevator.

The office building was nearly empty by the time she descended to the ground floor. She slipped into her coat, bracing herself for the cold evening outside. The city streets were busy with people heading home.

Xoey's commute was a ritual of escape. The drive offered her relief from the demands of her professional life, and she relished the moments of solitude as she watched the scenery rush by.

As she pulled into her designated parking space, Xoey gathered her things, preparing to take the trek to her apartment. Each step felt like her legs weighed two tons each. When she approached her door, there was a piece of paper sticking from the bottom. Her curiosity was piqued as she looked around to see if any of the other doors had a letter attached. They didn't. Bending down, she grabbed the letter, unlocked the door, and went inside, securing the lock behind her. Setting her things down, she went to her bedroom where she began stripping. Needing a shower, she went to take care of her hygiene and slipped into loungewear before stretching across the bed.

The note was a simple piece of paper, and inside was a phone number—one that was familiar—and a name. Ramik. She quickly sat up and rushed out to the living room to grab her phone. Dialing the number, she noticed it was the same number that had been calling but not saying anything. She waited nervously for him to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Ramik. It's your—it's Xoey. I got your note.”

He cleared his throat, and she heard movement. “Oh, hey. Yeah, I came by but you weren’t there.”

“I worked late; sorry about that. How are you?” She walked back to her bedroom and took a seat on the bed, crossing her legs.

“I’m good. What about you?”

“Yeah, me too. I’m good.” She was anything but, but she wouldn’t let him know that. An awkward silence filled the line before she said, “I’m sorry about the other day. It was just a shock.”

“No, I should apologize. I shouldn’t have just popped up like that.”

“I’m glad you did, though. It was really good seeing you.”

“Yeah. Same here.” He cleared his throat again. “I’d like to meet up and talk, if that’s cool.”

“Of course. Just let me know where and when, and I’ll be there.”

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow works, sure.” She was excited. “Does seven p.m. work for you?”

“Yeah, that’s fine with me.”

“Okay, well, come by my place at seven. I’ll cook. Do you have any allergies? A favorite dish?”

“No allergies, and I love a good plate of beef tips and rice, maybe some cornbread on the side.” She smiled.

“I can do that for you.”

“Cool. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you will. Have a good night, Ramik.”

“You too.” The call ended, and she looked at the note again. XoeY was happy that she hadn’t fully lost contact with him like she was worried she had. Locking his number in, she hoped this would be the start of a new beginning for them.

* * *

Xoey and Ramik sat across from each other, quietly eating their meals.

Xoey knew Ramik had questions, questions that had probably been locked away for years. He stared at Xoey, his eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and longing.

“Is the food okay?”

“It’s really good. Probably the best beef tips I’ve ever had,” he raved.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” She smiled and went back to eating.

She took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. “Ramik, I know you probably have a lot of questions, and I want you to know that you can ask me anything, and I’ll be honest with you, okay?” He nodded.

“Why’d you leave? Why’d you give me up?” She knew the question would come, but still, she wasn’t prepared for the weight of it.

“It’s a long and complicated story. I was young, and I didn’t have the support or resources to provide for a child. I wanted the best for you, and I thought that giving you up for adoption would give you a better life. Did you... have a good life?”

“I had a decent life, but what I didn’t have was my mother or father.” He set the fork down, wiped his mouth, and tossed the napkin onto the plate. “You know, I thought about this day for years. When I turned eighteen, I found out that you had left your information so that if I ever wanted to contact you, I’d be able to. Being into computers, it really didn’t take me long to find you here after having no luck back home.

“For years, I questioned why you didn’t love me or why you couldn’t love me. I questioned why you didn’t want me. What was it about me that was so messed up that early on that you just said, nah, I don’t want him.”

Tears welled in Xoeys eyes as she reached across the table, taking Ramiks hand in her own. He flinched, but he didnt remove his hand from her grasp. “Ramik, I loved you more than anything. I still love you. Ive held you in my heart all these years.”

“Is that why you kept me a secret from the man that was here?”

She sighed. “I didnt keep you a secret; it just... it wasnt that easy to tell him.” He stared at her but didnt say anything. “Deciding to give you up was the most difficult decision of my life. But I was struggling, and I didnt want you to struggle with me. I thought that a family who could provide stability and love would be the best thing for you.”

Xoeys heart ached, and she squeezed his hand gently. “Ramik, please know that it wasnt because I didnt want you. It was because I loved you that I made that choice.”

Ramik nodded, tears glistening in his eyes. He ran his hand down his face and sniffled. She saw the fight to keep the tears at bay.

Their conversation ceased as they both dealt with their emotions, and the room fell into a contemplative silence. Xoeys couldnt help but wonder more about Ramiks life growing up, the experiences and challenges he had faced without her.

After a moment, she spoke, her voice gentle and inquisitive. “What was life like for you growing up? If you dont mind my asking.”

He looked up and cleared his throat. “I was adopted by a couple. Theyve always been supportive and loving. I had a good childhood. But there was always that curiosity about you, about where I came from. I knew early on my parents werent my parents. Even they told me they werent my biological parents. Knowing that made me feel like something was always missing. Although I had everything I could ever need or want, I was still missing something. That something was a connection to someone who shared the same blood as me.”

Xoey was grateful to hear that he had been cared for, but she understood feeling like you didn't belong. "I'm so glad you were well taken care of, Ramik. You deserve all the love and happiness in the world."

As they continued to talk, a sense of connection and understanding began to bridge the years of separation. The wounds of their past were now being tended to, slowly began to heal, and even though they had missed out on years together, they had found their way back to each other.

The evening passed, and by the time Xoey was walking him out, they no longer felt like strangers. For that, Xoey was appreciative.

"You have my number, and you know where I live; don't be a stranger."

"I won't. My flight leaves tomorrow morning, but I'll be back to visit soon. I promise you that." They shared a long embrace and parted ways. Xoey's heart felt lighter. It had been nineteen years since she'd laid eyes on her baby boy, who was now a full-grown man, navigating life on his own. She had missed out on nearly two decades, but she was grateful that they had the chance to make up for lost time.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kaz

Kaz paced back and forth in his office, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. He couldn't shake the unease that had settled within him. As usual, his thoughts were on Xoey. He knew she had noticed his increasing absence, the subtle shifts in their interactions, and he couldn't bear the thought of her feeling neglected or unimportant. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with her—he adored her, and he'd meant every word when he told her he wasn't going anywhere. It was just that old habits die hard, so he had thrown himself into work to avoid dealing with the emotions that threatened to consume him.

Tonight, though, he had a chance to make things right. The pitch to a prestigious skincare brand was crucial for his company, and it was weighing on him. He knew the success of the pitch could open doors and create opportunities that would not only benefit the business but also allow him to spend more quality time with Xoey.

As he meticulously went over his presentation for the hundredth time, his thoughts kept drifting back to Xoey. He remembered the depths of her eyes, the warmth of her smile, the way her laughter filled the room, her Southern drawl, and he realized just how much he had missed her.

His phone buzzed with a text message, and he quickly checked it. It was from Xoey, a simple “I miss you” with a sad-faced emoji. The message left him with a pang of guilt. He knew he had to make amends and reassure her.

Kaz took a deep breath, his determination solidifying. He needed to give his all during the pitch, impress the potential client, and secure the deal. But afterward, he would make it a priority to rebuild what he had unintentionally let slide – his connection with Xoey.

The time had come, and he made his way to the office space where the meeting was being held. The boardroom was filled with executives from the skincare brand, Radiant Glow Essentials, their eyes expectantly fixed on Kaz as he began his presentation. His words flowed with conviction, and he skillfully articulated the potential partnership. The client representatives nodded in agreement, impressed by his expertise.

Kaz’s determination to succeed was palpable, and it resonated with the audience. Kaz concluded his business pitch to the owners of Radiant Glow Essentials with an air of confidence, hoping to seal the deal that would take their skincare brand to new heights. He knew he had their full attention and eagerly delivered the closing lines.

Kaz leaned forward, his voice steady and assured. “In closing, I want to emphasize that Radiant Glow Essentials is on the brink of a breakthrough in the skincare industry. With our carefully tailored marketing strategy, we have the power to elevate your brand, not only in terms of revenue but also in terms of recognition and loyalty.”

He met the gaze of each owner in turn, ensuring they understood the magnitude of the opportunity. “Our team is committed to bringing your vision to life and reaching your target audience in innovative ways. Together, we can make Radiant Glow Essentials a household name and an industry leader.”

A pause hung in the room, the anticipation thick. Kaz could see the wheels turning in the owners’ minds, the

potential, and the possibilities dancing before them. He knew he had presented a compelling case, and now it was up to them to make the final decision.

The room erupted into applause, and the client representatives expressed their enthusiasm for the collaboration. Kaz had succeeded, securing the deal.

Once all the representatives had been escorted out, he was next to leave. As he made his way back home, he sent XoeY a text, telling her to be ready because Ahmad would be to get her in the next twenty minutes. He had been away for too long, and he needed to reconnect with XoeY to reassure her that she was still his priority. He was eager to hold her in his arms, to tell her that he was committed to making their relationship work.

From his security cameras, he saw when she arrived, and he went to the door to greet her. She squealed when he grabbed her in a bear hug and lifted her off the ground, placing her on her feet inside the home.

“Well hello to you, too.” She smiled, grabbing his face and kissing him.

“You look good,” he complimented, as always.

“Thank you. You do too. I’ve missed you.”

He knew she had, and he kissed her bottom lip as she pouted.

“I missed you too. Real shit.” He took her hand and led her into the living room.

“Your house is beautiful, baby.”

“You want a tour?” She nodded excitedly.

Kaz led XoeY through the grand foyer of his luxurious home. As they explored the various rooms, he couldn’t help but think about what it would be like if she took up some of the space in the home.

XoeY gazed around in awe, her eyes taking in the exquisite decor and the lavish surroundings. “Baby, your home is absolutely stunning. It’s like something out of a magazine.”

“Preciate it. A lot of thought went into building and decorating this place.”

They entered the spacious living room, where floor-to-ceiling windows offered an incredible view of the manicured garden. “And this is the heart of the house,” Kaz said, gesturing around. “This is where I like to relax.”

Xoey approached one of the large, plush sofas and ran her fingers over the soft fabric. “I can’t imagine how relaxing it must be to unwind here.”

“It’s even more relaxing with you by my side.”

They continued their tour, moving through the dining room with its ornate chandelier and the gourmet kitchen, complete with top-of-the-line appliances.

Xoey marveled at the kitchen. “This kitchen is a chef’s dream. Have you ever tried your hand at cooking?”

Kaz chuckled. “I’m more of a takeout guy, to be honest. But maybe you can teach me a thing or two.”

They ascended a grand staircase that led to the second floor, and Kaz guided Xoey through a hallway adorned with artwork. “There are guest rooms, a library, and my home office this way.”

As they entered the library, Xoey’s eyes sparkled with appreciation. “I could get lost in here for hours.”

Kaz’s home office was a space of sleek, modern design, complete with a massive desk and a wall of windows that overlooked the estate. “And this is where I handle business matters.”

Xoey moved closer, her fingers tracing the polished surface of the desk.

Their tour eventually led to the primary suite, a grand sanctuary adorned with luxurious decor. Xoey’s eyes widened as she took in the king-sized bed, the elaborate linens, and the marble en-suite bathroom.

“This is gorgeous,” Xoey remarked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a bedroom this impressive.”

Their tour concluded in the backyard, a sprawling oasis with a swimming pool, a meticulously landscaped garden, and a terrace. Kaz led Xoey to a gazebo overlooking a serene pond, where a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of nearby trees.

He took her hand, his eyes locking onto hers. “Come on, I got one more thing to show you.”

“What is it?”

“Haven’t you learned not to ask questions; just follow along.” He led her around a corner, and when he stopped, she looked up, and her mouth dropped.

Kaz had spared no expense in creating an enchanting and romantic dinner setup for Xoey. He wanted this evening to be an unforgettable experience, a reflection of his deep affection for her. The scene was set on a secluded terrace overlooking a lush garden. The golden hues of twilight bathed the setting, creating an atmosphere of warmth and serenity.

A canopy of fairy lights overhead cast a soft, ethereal glow on the arrangement. A long, elegantly set table for two was adorned with pristine white linens and shimmering crystal dinnerware. In the center, a bouquet of fresh roses, deep red and vibrant pink, added a touch of passion to the tableau.

Kaz had chosen a selection of Xoey’s favorite dishes, carefully curated to ensure a delightful culinary journey. The scent of rosemary and garlic infused the air, wafting from a roast chicken at the center of the table. The plates were adorned with colorful sides and fresh, seasonal vegetables.

A bottle of fine wine, their shared favorite, stood ready for pouring. Kaz had selected a smooth R&B playlist that played softly in the background, setting a soothing, romantic ambiance.

The two seats at the table were draped with cashmere throws, inviting warmth and coziness. As a final touch, a pair of candles, their flames dancing in glass lanterns, adorned each side of the table, creating an intimate and romantic glow.

Kaz had thought of every detail, from the carefully folded cloth napkins to the gentle strains of music in the air. He

wanted this evening to be a celebration of their connection, a demonstration of the affection that had grown between them. It was a setting designed to make Xoeey feel cherished and loved, a place where they could share a memorable and romantic dinner, the first of many in their promising future together.

He walked her to her seat and pulled out her chair.

“Okay, Mr. Sumpter. I see you pulling out your gentleman card tonight,” she clowned.

“Chill and enjoy it.” He took his seat.

“Seriously, this is really nice. Thank you for the effort you put in and the attention to detail. It really means a lot to me.”

“Ain’t no thang, baby girl. Anything I can do to keep that smile on ya face.”

“Stop it. You’re making me blush.” They continued to go back and forth, passing out compliments and sharing sweet nothings, while they fixed their plates and began to eat. “Oh my gosh, this is so good. Compliments to the chef.”

There was another moment of silence as the two enjoyed their food.

“I did all this ’cause, well, one, you deserve it. But also, I wanted to reassure you that I ain’t going nowhere. I know I pulled back a lil the last few days, and that’s my fault. I’m still learning how to do this shit, so be patient wit’ a nigga. Finding out you had a son fucked me up. Not because you have one but because you never mentioned it to me. Not only that, but you left the lil nigga. You know that’s a sore spot for me, so it had me feeling some kind of way. I ain’t gon’ lie, it had me looking at you differently, but I had to tell myself that you ain’t the woman who left me. You made sure he went to a safe place; you at least cared that much.”

“Baby, I know it was hard to hear that and for you to find out the way you did. I promise I was going to tell you, but... it’s hard. We’ve talked about childhood trauma, but I haven’t fully gotten into mine with you.” She took a deep breath. “When I was fifteen, my father’s best friend raped me. He was supposed to be watching me—him and his wife—while my

parents were away for some out-of-town church event. He raped me, I got pregnant, and when I tried to tell my parents what happened, they swore I had been out, having sex. As strict as they were, I was rarely out of their sight, and if I was, I was with a church member or my dad's best friend. They didn't believe me." She cried. "They shamed me and disowned me, and I was left to fend for myself. At sixteen, I had my son, and I knew I had to give him up; I had no choice. I could barely take care of myself, let alone try to raise a child. When I gave him up, it was the hardest thing I've ever done. I don't regret it because I think he turned out better than he would have had he been with me, but I wish things could be different."

Kazimir walked over to her and pulled her from the chair. He held her in his arms as she cried. "What's that nigga's name?"

"He's dead, so it doesn't matter."

"I'll bring his ass back to life just to make him suffer and kill him again." She chuckled, but he was serious. He pulled away from her so he could look into her eyes. "I'm sorry for not hearing you out. I'm sorry for making you feel worse and if I caused you to feel ashamed of your choice. I didn't know, but I should have heard you out."

"You don't owe me an apology, but I forgive you. I'm just glad I have you still, and Ramik and I are working on building a relationship. That's all I can ask."

"I love you, Bama."

"I love you, too, Bully." She pinched his cheek.

"Come on here. I'm 'bout to bully that pussy." He smacked her butt and carried her into his home bridal style where they consummated every room in his home.

The End

Afterword

From the Author:

Friend,

I hope you enjoyed reading Kazimir + Xoeys's story as much as I enjoyed penning it. This story was a little out of my element, but one thing that will always be included in the pages of the books I pen is the ability to heal, regardless of what trauma you've endured. Xoeys was exactly what Kazimir needed to tame his inner bully, and he was exactly what she needed to assert herself, ground her emotions, and not let people take advantage of her pure heart.

If you enjoyed *Taming a Billionaire Bully*, please take a minute or two and leave a 5-star rating/review. It means the world to me and helps introduce me to more readers. Word of mouth is one of the best forms of support you can give, so if you think someone else should read this, share it with them, share it on your social media platforms, and tag me!

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