

BILLIONAIRE
bosses
book one

Baby

BUMP

MILEY MAINE

BABY BUMP

MILEY MAINE

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Epilogue

Excerpt: Bodyguard

Special Invite from Miley.

BLURB

My hot secretary used me to push her ex away.

It backfired.

But let me back up a little...

She asked me to be her fake fiancé.

Me... the most powerful man in the city.

I should've said no.

I shouldn't have cared about what *she* wanted.

But her sweet curves didn't let me be that indifferent.

Making her ex jealous was one thing.

Showing her off to my own family was another.

My snooty folks hated her.

And that brought us closer.

It made this fake arrangement a little more real.

Very real.

And it also made working with her awkward.

Very awkward.

But the worst part was when she disappeared, and then showed up with a *baby bump*.

I was about to be a father.

**And I was determined to make my former fake fiancée...
my wife.**

CHAPTER ONE

Quinn

When I hear the elevator door slide open, I sigh and force my spine to straighten as I lock my eyes on the computer in front of me, my fingers never pausing as I type quickly.

I hear heavy footsteps approaching me, but I don't look up until a shadow falls across my desk. Only then do I pull my eyes away from the computer screen, and I set my lips into a thin line as I look at my boss.

"Good morning," I greet him, as he was obviously expecting.

Nicholas Dubois smiles at me. It's a charming smile, one that's wide enough to show off his sparkling white teeth. It suits his boyish features and carefully styled brown hair. I know women fall over themselves to have even a moment of his attention, drawn to both his looks and his wealth.

Personally, I don't see what all the fuss is about. His most striking feature are his brilliant blue eyes framed by long, dark lashes, but his handsomeness is only a cover for what a frustrating person he is.

"Good morning, Quinn," he beams, leaning against my desk.

He leans over my work, not close enough to touch me, but enough so that I catch a whiff of his musky cologne. It's a new one, I note, annoyed that I even know such details about my boss's life.

“Is there something I can help you with, sir?” I ask stiffly, willing him to return to his office.

“You don’t want my company?” Nicholas asks in mock hurt.

I’m unimpressed.

“No,” I say bluntly. “I have a lot of work to do, as you well know since you’re the one that gave it to me. I believe *you* have work to do, as well.”

Three years ago, when I nervously stood in front of Nicholas Dubois, the richest man in Manhattan, and told him why I would be a good choice as his new secretary, I never would have dreamed of speaking to him in such a manner. Now, however, I’ve been here long enough, and have enough confidence in my importance as Nicholas’ secretary, that I have absolutely no qualms about telling him what I think.

With a sigh, Nicholas draws back, taking with him the scent that I refuse to consider enticing in any way. I return my eyes to my computer screen.

“Unfortunately, work is the bane of our existence,” he says. “We’ll part now, and I’ll look forward to the moment we see each other again.”

He breezes past me, the door snapping shut behind him. Only then do I relax, rolling my eyes at the now-closed door.

It isn’t that Nicholas is a terrible boss. In a lot of ways, he’s a really good boss. He’s attentive and he makes sure to get his own work on time, and he’s friendly. But he’s also the type that seems to think that his thick French accent, occasional use of foreign words and scorching good looks will get him any woman he desires.

It just so happens that he’s made it very clear that he desires *me* when I’m not interested in the slightest.

It’s the way he looks at me, sometimes, with a lingering gaze, or the way he leans over my desk, getting in slightly closer than he should. Once, I fell, and he offered me a hand up, and he held on just a few moments too long.

If that wasn't enough, he sometimes waxes poetic about my apparent beauty, telling me that I'm as lovely as the roses he just so happened to have brought for the office, or that the sight of my face is like the sun shining through the clouded sky.

It would be sweet if I hadn't seen a train of woman jump in and out of his bed over the years.

"Ugh," I groan, slumping back in my chair.

He isn't even *doing* anything that I can get angry at him for. He's not actively *trying to* seduce me, and he's been very careful not to harass me in any way. But it's annoying to have to field his sometimes over-the-top antics and shoot him down all the time so he doesn't start getting any ideas. In no way do I want to encourage him.

If I'm lucky, another woman will come along and attract his attention, and things will soon go back to normal.

Self-consciously, I pat down my short, strawberry blonde hair. Sometimes, though, I can't help but wonder why he suddenly chose *me*. I'm not as good looking as most of the women he usually has hanging off his arm. I'm slight and short, I have freckles, and I have to wear glasses. My hair never stays flat, and I'd never been able to pull off one of those tiny cocktail dresses his dates are so fond of wearing.

I shake my head, irritated by my own musings. Does it really matter? For whatever reason, Nicholas has turned his attention on me, and now a portion of my daily thoughts have to go into trying to figure out how to turn it *away* again. It's frustrating, especially since it doesn't matter how cold I am to him, his interest just doesn't seem to go away.

Suddenly, Nicholas' door opens and I shoot up straight. Thankfully, Nicholas has a determined expression on his face, telling me that he's firmly in "boss mode".

"Quinn, do you have the project outcomes report for next year?" he asks.

"I don't," I say, thinking quickly. "I'll email Jonathan and have him send it up."

“Thanks,” Nicholas says.

He’s gone as quickly as he appeared. I smile wryly. *That’s* the side of Nicholas that made me want to work for him, the side that’s focused and prepared to work, the side that built a franchise of fashion outlets all over America until he could call himself one of the richest men in the country.

I shake my head and open up a blank email so I can send a message to Jonathan Fairway, the head of our financial department. One thing I can say is that working for Nicholas certainly keeps me on my toes.

* * *

Unfortunately, if I hoped to get away that afternoon before Nicholas could say anything else, I was sorely disappointed. As I gather my belongings to leave for the day, pleased that the weekend begins tomorrow, Nicholas appears in his doorway. I sigh; these days, the man hates letting me go without, in his words, “a proper farewell”.

“I will see you on Monday, sir,” I say with a nod, gathering up a few files to take home.

“Or...” I glance at him. There’s that charming smile again, telling me what’s coming before the words even leave his mouth. “You could join me for a drink to talk about work?”

I know him well enough to know that work is the furthest thing from his mind. I frown. This is the most overt gesture that he’s made yet, and it irks me to know that he thinks he’s clever by hiding his proposition behind work. I turn and face him squarely.

“Nicholas,” I say, a hard edge of steel in my voice. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think that it’s appropriate for us to be meeting outside work. If there is anything regarding our current projects that you want to discuss, I will be happy to do so during work hours.” He looks visibly surprised at being called out, and I feel some satisfaction from that. “Have a good weekend, sir.”

I turn away, glancing back only once as I reach the elevator. He's still staring at me, looking somewhat confused, as though he can't fathom being turned down. The image is funny, but I manage to hold my smile until the elevator doors close and I'm finally alone.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I glance at it. It's a message from my best friend, who I'm about to meet. It's been so long since we've had a chance to catch up that we seized the first moment we could find to meet at a charming little café that we used to frequent while we were at college.

'Held up in traffic, be there soon!'

I smile and send a message back.

'No worries, running late too :D'

Christy Larsen and I have been friends since we were in high school. During those years, neither of us was very popular; I always had my nose in a book, and Christy was an artist that had a reputation for being a little strange. We found each other in our senior year, and we've been fast friends ever since, despite – or perhaps in spite of – the scorn of our peers.

Now look at us; I'm a secretary to the richest man in Manhattan, and Christy got her dream job drawing children's cartoons. We're both twenty-nine, and we're still best friends. I'm glad that I have her in my life.

It doesn't take me that long to get to Aroma Bakery, the charming little bakery and café that Christy and I love coming to. The woman at the register looks up as I enter, and she beams at me before going back to packing rolls in boxes as I find a seat at a table by the window.

About five minutes later, Christy whirls in, looking a little disheveled. Her shoulder-length black hair is windswept, and her shirt is rumpled with a large spot of ink on the right sleeve. As she comes toward me, she tugs her clothes back into place and brushes her hair back with a wide grin.

"Quinn!" she says as I stand, wrapping her arms around me. "It's good to see you!"

“You, too,” I say as I hug her back. “Sorry I’ve been so busy lately.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been super busy, too,” Christy says, pulling back. “Luckily, we just finished a project, so I have a few moments to breathe before the next one starts!”

“Same,” I laugh. “Nicholas opened a new chair store in Miami three weeks ago, and it’s been a nightmare trying to get everything set up. I swear the managers were calling every day with some new problem. Even Nicholas was getting frustrated.”

“I can imagine,” Christy says. We sit down and she leans forward with a teasing smile. “Anything new with Nicholas? Is he still flirting with you?”

“He asked me out for drinks today to ‘talk about work,’” I say, deadpan.

“Ooh, that’s a new one,” Christy says, sounding impressed. “It sounds like he’s stepping up his game.”

I shoot her a glare. Christy, who regularly claims that Nicholas is “courting” me, seems to find the entire situation utterly hilarious. It’s frustrating, but I also know that she’d be at my side if Nicholas ever crosses a line.

“I wish he’d stop,” I grumble.

Christy’s smile falls and she sits back.

“Is it really making you that uncomfortable?” she asks seriously. “Because if it is, you need to talk to him about it.”

I think about this for a moment. Nicholas’s attentions are annoying, but they’re nothing that I can’t swat away if need be. And he really has been careful about what he says and does, even if only because he doesn’t want me to accuse him of harassment. It’s just frustrating, because I know what his turn-over rate with women is like, and I have no desire to be part of that parade. And, though I don’t want to admit it to myself, because it’s sometimes very hard to keep myself from getting caught in his gaze.

“No, not really, it’s more annoying than anything,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I’m sure someone else will catch his eye eventually.”

“Yeah,” Christy laughs. “He’ll get the hint soon, don’t worry. He’s probably just been taken in by your pretty face.”

Self-consciously, I straighten my glasses. I don’t consider myself to be very good looking, which is why it’s so strange that Nicholas has set his eyes on me. Either way, I’m ready for him to look elsewhere.

“Well, he can stop soon,” I sigh. “Especially since...”

I think of the messages that I’m ignoring on my phone, the ones from an ex-boyfriend that I have no desire to ever talk to again. Then I shake the thought away. Between Nicholas and those messages, my life is honestly just becoming one never-ending headache.

Maybe Christy is right. Maybe I do need to talk to Nicholas and resolve at least *one* headache in my life.

“Well, for now, let’s not think of any of that,” Christy says with a firm nod. “Tonight, it’s just you and me Quinn, like the old days. Let’s go wild!”

I can’t help but laugh, knowing that “going wild” was Christy’s way of saying that she wants to hit the movies and then retreat to my apartment to destroy each other in Scrabble. I smile.

Even when everything else is bad, at least I have Christy by my side.

CHAPTER TWO

Nicholas

As Quinn Butler leaves, her head held high and her shoulders straight, I can't help but wonder what I'm doing wrong.

Quinn has been my secretary for three years now, and she's one of the best that I've ever had. Her no-nonsense attitude, coupled with her work ethic, has kept me on track more times than I can count. Some months ago, I would never have dreamed of looking her way; I had more than enough women throwing themselves at me to risk pursuing a relationship with one of my employees.

Lately, though...

I look at her desk. It's as meticulously tidy as always. I try to remember the first moment that I looked at her and realized she was beautiful. She had been sitting here, I recall, and she had brushed her hair behind her ear in distraction, knocking her glasses slightly askew as she tapped a pen on her chin.

When I tell the story to my friends, outwardly confident in my ability to sway any woman into my bed, I exaggerate the details slightly, about how she leaned forward, showing a hint of intoxicating cleavage, peering at me seductively with hazel eyes through the strands of her short blonde hair.

But none of that is true. I simply walked out of my office one day, looked at her, and realized that she was beautiful. More than that... I wanted her.

I still want her.

She's different from all the women who fall at my feet, begging for a moment of my attention as soon as they discover how rich I am. She's smart and her tongue is as cutting as her mind. On top of that, she keeps saying no.

I huff out a laugh and lean against my open office door. I should have given up long ago. Quinn has made it incredibly clear that she has absolutely no interest in me beyond our work relationship. I should just cut my losses; my friend has been hinting that he knows some girls who are dying to meet me. Why should I bother chasing a woman that doesn't want me when I can easily find some who do?

Except I can't quite bring myself to give up.

I can't explain it, even to myself. Quinn's constant rejections are intriguing; she doesn't care about my money or how famous I am, and sometimes acts like she's repulsed by the thought of a relationship with me. Yet I can't stop trying to find that one thing that will finally sweep her off her feet. I need to know what it is about me that she finds so appalling, and what I need to change in order to attract her.

Because attract her I will, one way or the other. Unlike other women, she isn't taken in by my good looks, my foreign accent, or my money. Somehow, that just made her even more attractive, and I needed to know more.

I glance at my watch. It's getting late. The cleaners will be up here soon to prepare for the next day. For a moment, I wonder what to do now; I really had hoped that I could lure Quinn on a date under the pretense of work, but she had seen straight through me.

Ah well, I guess I just need to be smarter. I'm a billionaire who built the empire of Yuza from the ground up, making it one of the most popular chain fashion outlets in the world. If I'm smart enough to make my fortunes in America after leaving my home in France many years ago, then I'm certainly smart enough to figure out how to interest one damn woman.

I smile wryly to myself. Not that I'm doing great on that front so far.

I head downstairs and meet my driver, who is patiently waiting for me to get in the sleek black car parked out the front. He gives me a short nod in greeting.

“Where to, sir?” he asks.

“Just home, Alan,” I say with a sigh; I don’t feel like going out anymore.

I can almost feel the driver’s intrigue; because I’ve been so busy futilely pursuing Quinn, I haven’t spent as much time in Manhattan’s clubs, preferring instead to going home after work instead. I know Alan, who has been my driver for two years, is wondering about this change, but I’m not interested in enlightening him right now. I don’t need anyone knowing that I, Nicholas Dubois, am having trouble with a woman.

The drive from the office isn’t long, and I watch the scenery pass by, irritated both at my own pining and the way my mind is scrambling to think of more plans. Most of my thoughts, these days, seem to revolve around Quinn Butler. Getting her to fall for me in some way has almost become an obsession, and it drives me crazy to have no idea what to do next, or how to prevent any more missteps.

I’ve always known what to do next. When I came to live in America, with nothing but a few foreign degrees, an almost empty bank account, and huge dreams, I kept moving forward no matter what happened, refusing to look back or worry about where I was going. Surging forward with confidence has always been my trademark.

The car pulls down my long driveway, slowing to a stop in front of the mansion that sprawls before me. I step out of the car, slamming the door a little harder than necessary in sudden irritation. What is it about Quinn that makes me feel helpless and unsure?

“Is everything alright?” Alan asks, raising an eyebrow as he rolls down his window.

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “Just a long day.”

He almost looks like he wants to ask. But, at the last second, he remembers his place as my employee, and he draws back

with a nod. The gesture makes me feel oddly lonely.

“I will see you tomorrow, sir,” Alan says.

Then he’s gone, leaving me alone. By this point, the cleaning staff would already be gone too. It reminds me, suddenly, why I tend to spend most of my evenings clubbing. Living in this huge house alone is just a reminder of the side effect of being rich and famous that I had never considered: it meant that I had no one to share things with.

“Bleh,” I say out loud, mostly just to hear sound in the crushing silence of the garden. “I’m getting soft.”

Not so long ago, I wouldn’t have cared who was and wasn’t here, or what sort of people I surround myself with. Quinn’s constant rejections, however, have caused me to reflect on a few aspects of my life, and I’ve found several things lacking.

She just waltzed into my life, turned everything upside down, and doesn’t even have the decency to pretend that she’s marginally interested in me. I snort. Maybe, if I can just get some sign of attraction or admiration from her, everything will go back to normal,

Or maybe, a sly voice in the back of my mind whispers, one that’s become far more vocal lately, I’ll find something I didn’t realize I was looking for.

* * *

Suddenly unaccountably tired, I have dinner and go to bed early, wanting to escape the way my mind goes around in circles without reprieve. In sleep, however, there is no mercy, something I should have remembered before so eagerly escaping into unconsciousness... after all, Quinn has featured in many of my dreams over the past few months.

She’s standing there as the world slowly forms around her. She isn’t wearing the business clothes I just saw her in today. Instead, she’s wearing a soft emerald gown that folds around her body, highlighting her curves. Above us, glittering lights

sway, making shadows lazily dance around her, and the sight is so beautiful that I can't help but stare.

She takes advantage of my speechlessness to step forward, one smooth leg ending in a tall silver heel pulling the hem of the dress enough to see the long, enticing slit in the side. My eyes run down her leg before it disappears in the dress once more, and then I jerk my eyes up to meet hers, which are soft behind her glasses.

As she gets closer, I can see the smattering of freckles that dot her cheeks, and I breathe in the familiar, floral perfume she always wears. She steps up to me, and I can feel my pants tightening just from her proximity.

“Nicholas,” she breathes, and that just that one word from her lips makes a flame start in my stomach.

“Quinn,” I reply, and my voice comes out rough. “You look beautiful.”

She smiles. It's an expression that she rarely directs at me. Even before I started pursuing her, she always looked at me with professional courtesy. I only ever saw that smile once, when she laughed at a joke one of her colleagues told her, and I've never quite forgotten the soft mirth that lit her face at the time.

“Thank you,” she says. “Care to dance?”

A tune starts up from somewhere. Quinn is holding both hands out to me, still smiling, and she pulls me forward when she takes them, her heels clicking on the tiles beneath her feet. There is no one else around us, and everything but the small square we stand in is swallowed by darkness.

Then Quinn steps forward, pressing her body against mine, her arms winding around my neck.

“I think this is a slow dance,” she murmurs into my ear, smiling as I shiver.

We begin to sway slowly. It's incredibly sensual as Quinn's body rubs gently against mine, almost teasing me. Her smooth leg rubs on my pant leg, and her fingers play with the fine hairs at the back of my neck. I can feel myself hardening in

my pants, and I know she must be able to feel it too, close as she is. I half expect her to pull away in disgust.

But, instead, she smiles in leans in, her eyes glittering. She steps in impossibly close, one of her legs slotting between mine as she pushes herself flush against my body, her eyes holding my gaze as she slowly, deliberately, rubs herself against me.

It's almost impossible to breathe. My cock twitches and fills quickly, stiffening in my pants and aching hard. God, I want this woman so badly. I need her right now.

"Then why don't you take me," she purrs, and I wonder, dazedly, if I had said that last bit aloud.

I seize her around the hips, barely noticing as the scenery whirls around us. I know what I want. Quinn is standing right in front of me at this moment, more than willing to give me everything I'm asking for. I push her back, and she falls into a plush chair that's behind her. She looks up at me, her eyes dark with want and slowly arches one leg out, making the folds of her skirt fall away.

"Well?" she asks, almost taunting me to do something.

I lean over her. Up close, her hazel eyes are even more stunning, watching my every movement, and I can feel the heat from her skin as she twitches squirms at my closeness.

"I'm going to fuck you," I promise in a low voice.

Her arms wind around my neck, pulling me in.

"I look forward to it," she breathes.

CHAPTER THREE

Nicholas

At her words, I lean in and capture her lips, which open immediately in invitation. My tongue slides into her mouth, mapping her teeth and gums and curling around hers. I can feel her fingers scrambling at my clothes, pushing my jacket back so she can fiddle with my buttons.

In response, I pull back, breaking the kiss that leaves us both panting, and push the straps of her dress down her shoulders. I feel my heat rising as I realize that there's no bra beneath, and she winks when she sees the conclusion I've come to; she isn't wearing a bra. Then she leans in close, her breath brushing against my ear.

"You should see what *else* I'm not wearing," she murmurs.

Shit. She's barely even touched me, but her words and the knowledge that she wants me is almost enough to make me burst. I draw in a deep, steadying breath, forcing my fingers to still for a second as I make myself calm. Quinn pauses, too, though she doesn't ask what's happening. She just waits quietly, her hands pressing lightly on my chest, no doubt feeling the way my heart is beating a mile a minute.

I've waited so long to make Quinn mine. I won't have this moment ruined just because I'm over eager like a horny teenager.

"I can feel how excited you are," Quinn says, smiling at me, her fingers curling gently over my heart. "I can feel what I do

to you. You want me so badly.”

“And you?” The words escape me without permission. “Do you want me?”

She’s still smiling, but the look in her eyes is unreadable.

“I know what I want,” she says mysteriously.

It doesn’t answer my question. But I’m too hard and desperate for her to care much about it right at this moment. I can find out later if she truly wants me. Right now, she clearly desires me, and I’m more than willing to desire her right back.

I kiss her again, and she presses into it eagerly, her body writhing in the chair beneath me, utterly responsive to every touch. At the very least, she definitely wants me at this moment, and I take advantage of that to slide my hands down her shoulders and around her back, feeling each bump of her spine as she arches with a groan that shoots right to my groin.

“Oh my god,” she gasps.

“You’re wearing too much,” I murmur.

I find the zipper and tug it down. The dress instantly falls away, fluttering from her body in a pile of silk and gathering around her waist. Suddenly, with a hard push from Quinn, I stumble backward, and she stands, making the dress continue falling to the floor.

My mouth goes dry as I see proof of what she had hinted at before. She was wearing nothing underneath the dress, not even a pair of panties.

She smiles at my expression and stalks toward me, her naked body lithe and graceful. She reaches out and tugs on my tie.

“Why are you just standing there?” she purrs. “I thought you wanted me?”

God, I want her more than anything. I reach for her, but she pushes my hands away, a mischievous look in her eyes as she slowly unwinds my tie. I watch the way her fingers deftly slide the material apart, tugging at the knot before it falls away with the softest hiss of silk rubbing together.

My body vibrates, wanting more, but her fingers just dance to my buttons, rolling them for a moment before popping them open agonizingly slowly. I groan from the painful wait, but I force my body to be still, wanting to know what will happen next as she carefully makes her way down my shirt, her touch leaving fiery trails on my skin as she goes. Every part of me is tense in anticipation and, when she slides her hands up to my shoulders, touching every inch of my muscled chest as she goes, I shrugged my shirt off, allowing it to fall to the floor.

“Impatient much?” she teases.

But I’ve finally had enough of this slow dance. I’ve wanted Quinn for so long, that I simply don’t want to wait anymore. I grasp her around the waist and tug her fiercely toward me until her naked body is flush against mine. She doesn’t look surprised by the movement, despite her gasp at the suddenness of it. Her eyes are dark with invitation, telling me exactly what she wants.

“Yes, I want you, now,” I growl.

“You’re still wearing too many clothes,” she says.

I push her back, toward the bed that I just noticed against the wall, its satin comforter gleaming in the soft light. Her knees hit the bed and she falls back, her legs opening as she lands so that I can step between them.

“I’ll take care of that in a moment,” I say.

I’m so hard it hurts, and it’s because of Quinn, like always. What is it about this woman that makes me lose all sense of reason and control when I think of her? Why do I want her so badly when she isn’t anything like the women I normally chase? Most of the women that parade in and out of my bed are there in the hopes of being seen with me, to raise their own star. But Quinn is bookish and interesting and smart.

She’s different. I just don’t know how or why, yet, but I need to figure it out.

Later, though. At this moment, the only thing I want to figure out is how to make her scream my name.

My cock is chafing at my pants, desperate to be free, and I palm my own erecting through the material for the moment, pressing down as though in promise. There's more to come, just wait a little longer, I'll be inside her before long.

Then her hands are batting mine away, and Quinn is pulling feverishly at my belt, almost snapping it in her haste. Her desperate movements now are at odds with the calm she displayed before when she slowly teased me almost to insanity. Now her fingers are trembling and her movements are frenzied as she rips the button off, making it drop somewhere on the floor.

"Now who's impatient?" I ask in a low voice.

She looks up at me. All I can see is hunger and need.

"I want you," she says in a low voice, and she drags the zipper down as though to punctuate her statement. "I want you so badly that I can't think of anything else. All I can imagine is the moment when you will slide into me and fuck me so deeply I'll never remember anyone else."

Oh yes... yes, *that* I can definitely do.

My pants drop to the floor and I step out of them before I push my boxers down, too. My cock springs free finally, hard and leaking as it bounces, aching and eager. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. Quinn is in front of me, wanting me just as badly as I want her.

Right?

Impossibly, I hesitate. There's a niggling sensation in my mind that tells me that something isn't quite right here. Something isn't happening the way I would expect it to, but I can't put my finger on what.

"How much do you want me, Quinn?" I ask.

She looks up. The hunger is in her eyes, still, but there's also something lurking beneath that I can't quite catch.

"Why don't you find that out on your own, Nicholas?" she says.

It doesn't make sense, because she's right in front of me, and she can just give me the answer. But I find myself nodding anyway and stepping forward, crowding into her space. I can find out the answer to that later.

"Finally," Quinn breaths, laying back.

There's no time for fussing around anymore. We're both desperate and need this more than anything.

Something in me snaps. I need Quinn. I want her. I have to have her.

I line up against her and sink in. Her body accepts me instantly, pulling me further in, her legs winding around my waist to tug me in as deep as I can go. When I'm fully seated, my eyes roll back before I pull myself back, determined to get what I want.

She's grinning at me, her eyes giving me the challenge, and I remember her saying she wanted me to make her forget anyone else she's ever done this with. I clutch her hips in a bruising grip, pull back, and slam back in.

I set a harsh pace, pistoning in and out of Quinn as my hips snap back and forth. Her hips meet each thrust, pulling me even deeper, her muscles clenching around me. There's an inferno around us, I'm sweating, and I'm not going to last very long as I drive myself in deeper, overwhelmed by the sensation of her body and the fact that it's *Quinn* beneath me right now.

And then...

* * *

I wake with a gasp and a sharp cry.

My body shakes so violently that the covers slip off, and then finally releases, waves of pleasure crashing down around me as I arch up into the hand that I dimly realize is pressing against my erection. My vision goes white momentarily, and I struggle to draw breath, trying my hardest to calm myself.

Finally, though, the feeling passes somewhat, and I crash back onto the bed, utterly exhausted. My pants are sticky and wet, as are the sheets tangled around my sweaty body, but I'm too limp and sated to care right at the moment.

My racing heart begins to calm, and I draw in a deep breath, staring up at the ceiling of my room. It's a bit disorientating to suddenly be in my bed, by myself when, moments ago, I was in a hotel room with Quinn.

No. Not Quinn. Just the dream version of her that has taken to invading my dreams at every opportunity.

I groan and close my eyes, finally grimacing at the mess around me. That was one of the most intense dreams yet. I really need to seduce this girl, even if only in the hopes that these dreams will damn well *stop*. I've never had ongoing dreams like this about someone before.

Talk about ridiculous. First, she rebuffs every attempt I've made to seduce her so far, and then she haunts my dreams and my thoughts and my life? It's *completely unfair*, and I need it to *stop* already.

That's it.

I look up at my ceiling, It's in the early hours of the morning, I'm sweating and sticky and smell of sex and my mind is still running over the incredibly vivid dream. At that moment, however, I make a solemn pact with myself.

No matter what it takes, I'm going to make Quinn fall for me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Quinn

Suspiciously, I glance at the closed office door, half expecting it to open any minute. It's normally around this time of day that Nicholas pokes his head out to ask me what I'm doing or to offer some sort of outrageous compliment. Yet there's no sign of him, and I'm left to wonder what's going on. And, oddly, feeling a little bereft.

I shook myself. Obviously I've gotten too used to shaking off Nicholas' bad pick up lines if I'm actually *expecting* it now.

I glance at the door again. Still nothing. Is this some sort of new tactic that he's trying?

He'd been odd when he came in that morning, too. I half expected him to come in with a bouquet of flowers or some flowery words of adoration, as he normally did after I rejected him. This morning, however, he had come in empty-handed, and he paused at my desk, evidently thinking something through.

Then...

"I'd like to apologize for my previous behavior," he had said. "It's come to my attention that I'm making you uncomfortable, and that was not my intention."

Taken aback, I'd simply stared at him and nodded. He nodded back, and then swept into his office. I have not seen him since.

Something is definitely going on. I narrow my eyes at the door and then start when, suddenly, it opens.

I knew it!

“You’re still here?” Nicholas asks in surprise, blinking at me. “You should take a break to get some lunch.”

Then he sweeps past me. I stare at his retreating back, stunned.

What’s going on?

* * *

The next day is much the same. He politely greets me in the morning, makes small talk about relevant work matters whenever he sees me, and then bids me farewell in the afternoon, all without a single compliment or pick up line.

Then it happens the next day.

And the next.

It should be a relief. This is what I wanted, right? No doubt that final rejection is what put him in his place and told him that he had no chance.

Yet, instead, my paranoia rises with each day that passes. He’s planning something. He *has* to be.

“I think you need to calm down,” Christy says bluntly when I voice this concern to her four days after it all started. “I thought you *didn’t* want him fawning all over you.”

“I don’t,” I protest.

And of course, I don’t. It might be a little flattering, sometimes, to be told how beautiful he seems to think I am (even if it *is* an obvious lie to get me into bed), but, overall, Nicholas’ attentions were annoying and distracting. It’s better that now I can concentrate on work.

“People don’t just *change their minds* so quickly, do they?” I ask, worrying my bottom lip. “He went from asking me on a date one night to just treating me like a colleague the next day.”

“Maybe he realized that you aren’t interested,” Christy says, rolling his eyes. “Or *maybe* he’s being a gentleman and taking

a step back to see if that helps.”

I pause.

“What?” I ask.

“Look, Nicholas has made it clear that he’s interested in you, right?” Christy asks, and I nod. “I do agree, I don’t think he’d change his mind *that* easily after trying for so many months.”

Months... has it really been three months since this all started? No wonder I’ve been thrown off balance by yet another sudden change in our dynamic.

“So?” I say, tapping my fingers on the table, wishing she would get to the point already.

“He’s been treating you like all the women that normally fall at his feet and beg for his attention, and expecting you to react the same way,” Christy points out. “Maybe he’s finally wised up and realized that being more mature about it is what will actually attract you.”

“So... he’s courting me... by pretending he isn’t?” I ask, somewhat confused.

“No,” Christy snorts. “He’s taking a step back to figure out a plan of attack. And he’s giving you some space to breathe while he does.”

Ah. Well, that does actually make a lot of sense, much as I hate to admit it. Something within me settles now that I have an answer; I know Nicholas well enough to know that he *hadn’t* given up, but I hadn’t been able to figure out his game at all.

Knowing that he’s trying to think things through so that he can try again is both annoying and, strangely, flattering. It means that his attention, unfortunately, is still on me, but also that he’s taking time to figure out a way to attract *me* specifically.

Now if only I can figure out *why* he’s going to all this trouble.

“Are you kidding me?” Christy asks incredulously when I ask this. “Honestly, I’m more surprised that he didn’t try this *before*.”

I look at her and self-consciously adjust my glasses.

“Quinn, you’re smart, driven, and you’re pretty,” Christy says gently, smiling fondly at me. “I wish you could see that about yourself.”

“Maybe, but I’m nowhere near as beautiful as those models he normally dates,” I argue. “I just don’t get it.”

Christy stares at me, her eyes searching my face before she sighs.

“You don’t have to be exactly like them; Nicholas has obviously found something in you that he likes,” she says. “Besides, maybe his interest in you is also a sign that he’s looking for a more mature relationship. I wouldn’t have said so before, but now that I know he’s actually trying to go about this smartly...”

Yes, if he’s going to go to all this trouble to attract me, then he’s definitely not just doing it for a one night stand, especially since I haven’t seen him with another woman in months.

Maybe all this *did* start because Nicholas believed he could get any woman he wanted, and pursued me relentlessly because I kept saying no. But what did that make all this now? Exactly what does Nicholas want?

What do *I* want?

I sigh and take a sip of my coffee.

“It doesn’t matter right now, anyway,” I groan. “I’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

The amusement on Christy’s face drops; she knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“He messaged you again?” she asks, her expression darkening.

“Last night,” I say glumly.

I fish out my phone and open the message. We both lean forward to read it.

‘Why the fuck are you ignoring me???’

“Charming,” Christy says dryly. “Did you reply?”

“No,” I snort. “Do I look like an idiot?”

“Well, you *did* date him in the first place,” Christy points out.

“Don’t remind me.”

I rub my hand over my eyes wearily. Last year, I dated a man named George McMaran. We met at a fashion expo; I was there for work and he had been dragged there with his three sisters, who he apparently owed a favor, much to his distaste.

When we met, he was charming and friendly, and I was more than happy to accept first a coffee date, and then dinner. Our relationship progressed from there until we were seriously dating a month later.

Of course, that’s when some red flags started to raise.

The closer I got to him, the more possessive he became. He’d become angry when I wasn’t available to go out with him because I was with my own friends, and I started canceling my plans just so that it wouldn’t be a problem.

He was manipulative, too; if I got upset at him for something, like lying to me or ignoring my messages, he was always able to turn it around so that *I* was the one in the wrong.

It took me four months until I had enough, which was four months too long. I broke up with him and moved out of the apartment we had gotten together just the month before, more than happy to sleep on Christy’s couch for a few weeks until I found another place. George begged me to reconsider, but I ignored all his messages and, eventually, he gave up... I thought.

Until last month when, randomly, he sent me a message telling me that he still loved me. I made the mistake of messaging him back to tell him that he needed to move on, feeling sorry for him. After that, he began to message me every few days, the frequency increasing until, suddenly, I’m getting a few messages a day from him, all of them telling me he wants to get back together, that he thinks I made a mistake or raging that I broke his heart and that I’m ignoring him.

“He’s persistent, I’ll give him that,” Christy says, looking far from impressed. “*He’s* another one that needs to get the hint,

already. Why do you attract all the weirdos?"

I shoot her a glare, not appreciating the glib comment.

"It's not *my* fault," I grumble. "Tell *them* to leave me alone, already."

"Do you want me to?" Christy offers. "I still have George's number; I can message him and tell him to get lost."

I fantasize about this for a moment. Christy has a caustic tongue, and she certainly wouldn't pull her punches if she messages George. Then I sigh. As satisfying as it is to imagine George on the receiving end of Christy's well-placed insults, I also know that throwing my best friend at him will likely just make things ten times worse.

"It's not like he's doing any more than messaging," I say. "No doubt he'll give up eventually. And, if it gets bad, I'll go to the police."

"I think you should go *now*," Christy mutters.

"And tell them what?" I ask. "That I'm just getting a couple of messages from an ex-boyfriend begging me to get back together? He hasn't made any threats, hasn't tried to track me down; they'd laugh me out of the building. At most, he's being annoying" I roll my eyes when Christy scowls. "Honestly, I have a bonus coming up soon; I'm thinking about using the money to get a new phone and change my number."

"That'll work," Christy admits. "But it sucks that you *have* to. Can't you just block him?"

"I could, but I don't know if *he'll* know I blocked him," I say with a shrug. "I don't want to tip him over the edge. Things are fine as they are at the moment. I'm ignoring him, the messages aren't too bad, and I have more than enough to do at work to keep my mind off what George is doing."

"Work and Nicholas," Christy says teasingly.

I roll my eyes at her again.

"Nicholas has nothing to do with anything," I declare. "He's just as annoying as George, just in a different way."

Christy laughs at me. Sometimes, I wonder if maybe she's actually rooting for Nicholas, but I can't figure out why when all I've done is complain about him.

I sigh. It's all too complicated. All I wanted to do was earn some money, do my work, and hang out with my friends. I didn't *need* all this stress about ex-boyfriends coming back into my life or bosses who seem to want a relationship with me for some reason. Frankly, I'd like it all to just go away.

"Just let me know if George keeps causing problems," Christy says. "I'll do something about it."

I give her a pathetic but grateful smile. At least, among all the insanity, I still have Christy on my side, willing to help me fight against the injustice of the world.

"Thanks," I say. "I will."

Now all I have to do is hope that it doesn't come to that.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nicholas

“**B**ut these numbers are fairly stable?”

“For now, they are, but that’s likely to change soon. Fairmont is under a tremendous amount of stress, and there have been some rumors in the community that they’re looking at cutting back on some of their more expensive products, and becoming a store aimed at low-cost products, instead, to try and cut some of the losses they’ve suffered recently.”

I frown and look over the paperwork, scanning the numbers and lines that swim before my eyes.

“What about Polyfrasier?” I ask, pointing at the name of another large designer store. “Their sales of our brand are also stable, and their company looks to be in a good place right now?”

Quinn hums and chews her bottom lip for a moment, considering this. Then she nods.

“I think it’s an apt move,” she says, leaning back. “We’re looking for a store with enough clout to promote our new products and one that has a history of making sales for us. Of them all, Polynesia is probably one of the better choices.”

“Great,” I say, gathering up the papers and sliding them back into a folder. “Thanks, Quinn. Your input, as always, is much appreciated.”

Quinn gives me a quick smile and another nod.

“Thank you, sir,” she says.

I carry the work back into my office before I gave in to the urge to say something flowery; some days ago, as I thought about *how* to make Quinn mine, I realized that she *didn't* appreciate all the ways I've been attempting to attract her. In fact, if I looked back over each of our interactions, I saw that I'd actually been making her uncomfortable.

The thought was unsettling. I apologized to her, which seemed to have surprised Quinn. Then I spent the next few days thinking about what to do next. I didn't know *how* to pick up women another way, but it was slowly becoming clearer to me that Quinn was different from all the other women I wanted in the past.

I just didn't really know what to do about it.

So, I attempted to put a little professional distance between us, to give her some space and to give me some room to think. I greeted her in the morning, and bid her farewell in the evening, but otherwise tried to stick to conversations about work. As far as I was concerned, doing so would put us in a stalemate until one of us moved either forward or backward from this point.

Except... it didn't quite work the way I expected it to.

Quinn is *interesting*. More than that, she's extraordinarily clever. Logically, I knew that. I hired her *because* she was smart, after all. But listening to her, *really listening* to her, when I speak to her about work... she's clever and insightful, and she's got her finger on the pulse of this business, quietly filing away rumors and facts so that she can use them. The rumor about Fairmont, after all, a chain of stores that specialized in designer clothes like the ones I produce, is not something that had reached my ears. But Quinn heard about it, tracked down the truth by looking at the store's current sales and debts, and presented it to me concisely while we discussed which store we could use for our current marketing.

Somehow, taking a step back to at least *try* and remain professional has backfired against me spectacularly, reminding me that Quinn isn't just a pretty face. She's smart and

motivated and knows exactly to find what she wants. She's very different from the other women I've dated in the past.

I'm not going to lie; this realization, something I *did* know, but never really considered deeply, hit me hard. And it made me wonder what I was doing. Maybe I should just give up? Quinn isn't like those women. She isn't looking for a quick romp. If I don't want to get involved more deeply with her, I need to pull back now.

I almost did. But I can't. For some reason, I can't bear the idea of walking away from this. And that's scary. At some point in the last few months, I came to want Quinn more deeply than I've ever wanted anyone.

And I *still* don't know what to do about it.

I glance at the clock. It's around lunchtime, now. A break is something I desperately need to clear my head, and, if I'm honest, I need to put some distance between Quinn and me.

"I'm going to go and get some coffee," I say, stepping out of my office as Quinn looks up. "Make sure to take a break."

"Yes, sir," she says with a faintly amused smile.

I wish there's someone I could talk seriously to about Quinn. But my friends in this country are not the sort I would sit down to have a conversation about romance unless it involved one night stands, and my family is all back in France. Trying to catch the time zones can be incredibly annoying sometimes, so we usually settle with text messages or emails. But this isn't the sort of thing that I can put into an email. How am I supposed to write down what I want to say when *I* don't even know what, exactly, is going on?

At least I'll see them soon, I remind myself. My brother just got engaged to a beautiful, well-to-do woman back in France. Well aware that I'm at a busy period in my company, my entire family has decided to take the chance to come for a holiday to America so that I can attend a celebratory gathering.

I'm of two minds about this. I'm excited to see my family, of course, since it has been almost a year since I last saw them. On the other hand, my parents are always questioning me

about when *I'll* settle down, and it's likely to get worse now that my brother has gone and gotten himself engaged.

Still, maybe they can help me figure out just what is going on in my head regarding Quinn. I'm looking forward to finding out what they think of her and the confusing tangle emotions that she's brought with her.

I step into the fresh air and breathe in deeply, appreciating the sun on my skin. It's nice to be away from the hustle and bustle of the office for a little while.

I see my car sitting nearby, Andy is reading a magazine in the front seat. But I stride away from it; I just want coffee, and there's a tiny little place right up the street that serves a magnificent brew. I see Andy glance up as I pass, see where I'm headed, and go back to his magazine with a yawn.

The coffee shop is tucked away at the corner of the street. I stumbled on it by chance a year or so ago, frustrated at a deal that didn't seem to be going anywhere and needing a walk to let off some steam. Now I frequent the store to the point that the owners look up as I enter and smile, recognizing me.

"Nicholas!" Tabitha, a stout little woman behind the counter, says, beaming. "How are you today?"

"I'm well, thank you," I say, smiling warmly at her. "What delicious specials do you have, today?"

"Well, my daughter came in today," Tabitha says, nodding to the back. "Peter has been teaching her to bake, you see. We're selling a fruit tart that she made; it's quite delicious."

"Then I'll try it," I say with a nod. I pause. "Make it two."

Quinn has a tendency to forget to take breaks to eat, even if I tell her to. I've never done anything about but now, as I order a second tart for her, I wonder why I haven't. Quinn does so much for me. The least I can do is help her keep her fed.

"Having lunch with someone?" Tabitha asks curiously, bagging the two treats.

"No," I laugh. "My secretary tends to work through lunch, so I'll bring her something."

“That’s sweet,” Tabitha says with a smile. “Do you want a coffee for her as well?”

“A latte with two sugars,” I say with a nod, remembering how she’s told me, once or twice, that she takes her coffee.

Tabitha smiles again and bustles to the coffee machine, grabbing two cups as she goes. I mill at the register as I wait, idly looking around.

Sitting on the counter is a small box, and I lean forward to peer into it curiously. There are several small bears inside, all of them wearing different uniforms. There are some dressed as doctors, some as pilots, and a few as scientists. All different professions.

“Peter and I support a charity that’s trying to do more for the homeless,” Tabitha says, seeing where I’m looking. “They’re selling those bears to try to raise some money.”

A bear catches my eye, and I extract it. It’s a bear with a suit jacket and a neat pencil skirt, a navy bow behind its ear. The tag on it says ‘teacher’, but this is exactly the sort of clothing Quinn normally wears. She has a small collection of little bears like this on her desk; she would probably appreciate the addition.

Then I pause. Is buying her a bear going a step too far? It didn’t occur to me that I could use this purchase to get on her good side, I just want to do something nice for her. But would she see it as me trying to seduce her again?

“That’s a cute one,” Tabitha says, carrying the two take away cups over carefully. “Would you like that?”

Do I? I make a split-second decision and hand the bear to Tabitha to run in through the register. Hopefully, Quinn will like it. I’ll just tell her that I appreciate how much she does for me and want her to have it for that reason. I’ll just make sure not to say “the bear made me think of you”, which, funnily enough, is the truth. She’ll *definitely* take that the wrong way.

“Here you go,” Tabitha says with a smile, handing me the bear and a tray with the two drinks and the bag of treats balanced on it. “Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I assure her. “Thank you, Tabitha.”

Quinn is probably going to be surprised that I’m doing something so nice for her, but that just means that I need to do more nice things. Quinn has been an indispensable part of my company since I hired her, and it’s just occurred to me that I’ve really been taking for granted everything she does. She definitely deserves some recognition for her efforts, even if it just means bringing her some food and a bear.

Despite worrying about her reaction to my generosity, there’s a spring in my step as I return to work, and I whistle as the elevator carries me up to the top floor, pleased with myself. I just need to remember to hold back any boorish compliments or pick up lines, to just offer her the food and bear, tell her that her help has meant a lot to me, and then part ways. Yes, that will work...

The elevator doors slide open and I pause as I step out.

There’s someone else in my office.

I don’t know who it is. The man looks vaguely familiar, as though I’ve seen him in a photograph somewhere, but I can’t place where or when. He’s leaning against Quinn’s desk, saying something to her in a low voice.

Quinn, on the other hand, doesn’t look happy. She’s on her feet, and she’s fiddling with her fingers, biting her lip. As I approach, she leans back.

“I’m sorry, I’m engaged!” she says.

Wait... what? I feel a moment of horror. Is *that* why Quinn was rejecting me? Was I hitting on an engaged woman? God, I have so many apologies to make.

Then her hand shoots out and she’s pointing at me.

“To him!”

I freeze as the man turns to look at me.

What?

CHAPTER SIX

Quinn

I look up as Nicholas leaves his office once more, tucking his phone and wallet into his jacket.

“I’m going to go and get some coffee,” he says. He looks over the work on my desk, and a faint frown crosses his face. “Make sure to take a break.”

I can’t help but smile slightly. That’s not the first time, in the last three years, that he’s said that to me, and it likely won’t be the last.

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

Then he’s gone, disappearing into the elevator. I wait and then I take a moment to breathe as Nicholas leaves the office, leaning back in my chair.

Things... haven’t been bad lately, and it’s leaving me feeling unsure and anxious, waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop before I’m ready for it. Nicholas has continued to be polite and friendly, not quite managing the formal, professionalism he was likely going for, but smartly stepping behind a line that he’s drawn suddenly between us.

Hearing, from Christy, that he’s likely just biding his time until he comes up with a better plan was interesting, and a relief (*only* because I didn’t want to be caught unawares by whatever he’s planning, I tell myself), but it still means I’m just waiting for whatever will happen next. I rub the bridge of my nose. I swear Nicholas is going to drive me around the bend before all this is over.

I half rise from my chair, intending on getting a coffee for now, when a notification on my laptop pings, and I sit down again. Nicholas may not realize it, but one of the reasons I don't always take my breaks is because there's just so much *work* to do. Everyone wants Nicholas for something, but not all those emails make it directly to him. Many questions and problems are things that I can answer, and I do in order to clear Nicholas' time for the more important issues that come with running a billion-dollar company. When I'm not doing that, I'm doing chores for Nicholas. It tends to leave very little time in the day to take more than a five-minute break, at most.

Not that I complain. The workload can be hard, sometimes, yes, but I enjoy the challenge, and I know I'm *damn* good at what I do. On top of that, I know Nicholas relies on me far more than he's willing to admit to, and there's definitely something heady about the fact that a man worth billions of dollars needs to come to *me* whenever he's got a problem that he can't solve.

Speaking of problems...

I frown as I scan the email that has just come in. Earlier, Nicholas and I spoke about marketing; we want to promote our new brand as much as possible, and choosing the stores that will get to carry the line first is always a challenge, especially since we don't want to accidentally step on anyone's toes with our choice. Thankfully, there are a few top-level, stable stores that are *always* in our court, and it's generally accepted that they'll get our products to sell first.

This email, however, is from the CEO of Fairmont, the company we had *just* dismissed as a front runner for due to their recent decline. As far as I was aware (and every bit of news that I had researched on this exact topic told me the same), Fairmont was scrambling to pick up sales and were thinking of moving away from designer clothes. It would be an apt move, considering their current debts and sales issues, and I wouldn't have been surprised to hear that they'd already made the move.

However, according to this email, something very different has happened.

‘Thank you for your patience in dealing with us during this time of great upheaval. We would like to take this moment to say that we appreciate all your support...’

“Yadda, yadda,” I murmur, scrolling down and scanning the lengthy email for anything that jumps out at me.

‘Many changes are forthcoming...’

‘Our previous CEO has decided to step down...’

‘With the creation of a new board, Fairmont is looking to take its sales and connections to far greater heights...’

I frown. Did Fairmont sell? That’s unusual because that’s something I *definitely* should have heard about before it happened. I scan down a little, and my expression clears as I read something that makes it all make sense.

‘As the former Vice CEO of the company, I know how Fairmont runs, and what it needs to regain ground. I would like to ask for your further support as I continue making changes. While I am aware that our recent problems have likely made you lose some faith in us, I would like to take this moment to assure you that we will endeavor to make up for this dark period of time.’

Not sold, taken over, then. Still, something that I think I should have been aware of, but it seems that remarkably, people managed to keep their shut closed regarding the major changes going on within Fairmont.

I frown and consider the email. This might change things a little. It really depends on how much trust we have in the company, especially now that it’s in new hands. If we allow them to be one of the first to promote our new brand, and they flop, then that will end up reflecting badly on us.

This is one of the decisions that I can’t make without Nicholas’ input. I flag the email as important and send it to Nicholas’ email. It’ll be one of the first things he reads when he returns to work, and he’ll likely come out to discuss our best course of action with me. Risk versus possible reward? It’s a question we ask ourselves every time a new possibility comes up. Nicholas, who knows all the ins and outs of the

business, is a genius at knowing the right move at the right time, which is how he has managed to achieve such success. He'll definitely know what to do in this case.

I glance at the clock. Several minutes have gone back. I should take at least a quick coffee break, even if only so I can tell Nicholas I did when he returns. He tends to give me this scolding look when I don't take breaks, and the expression is incredibly galling, especially considering how irresponsible *he* can be.

Huffing, I stand up again. At that exact moment, however, the elevator doors open. Damn, I was too late. Well, I'll just tell Nicholas that I was on my way to take my break now, and he'll have to wait for me to return. The words are already on my tongue, ready to expel the moment he says anything.

Except... it isn't Nicholas that leaves the elevator.

I freeze, all the breath whooshing out of me in my shock. I blink several times, half wondering if maybe I'm hallucinating.

But, no, George is really stepping out of the elevator, his hands in his pockets, and determined look on his face.

"George?" I ask, slumping back in my chair. "What are you doing here?"

George looks around the office, scowling at the shining degrees on the walls and the picturesque landscapes paintings, before turning to face me. He throws back his shoulders, likely in an attempt to look tough and unwavering.

"Quinn, I came to talk to you," he says. "I think we need to discuss this face to face, like adults, instead of ignoring each other over text."

I resist the urge to tell him that I was the only one doing the ignoring and that I *wish* he had been ignoring me back.

"How did you get up here?" I demand. Why the hell did reception allow him to come all the way up to the office?

George throws me a disarming smile. I hate that smile, because it's warm and bright, and it was the thing that caught

my attention in the first place.

“Easy,” he says smugly. “I told them I was your boyfriend and that I came up with coffee.”

He holds up a tray, which has two coffee cups on it as proof. God, I could just imagine it; Jacinta and Chloe, down at the front desk, would have giggled and winked before allowing him up, likely even telling him that the boss was out for good measure. So, when he came up here, George would know that I was alone.

I’m going to need to talk to Jacinta and Chloe about *not* believing everything they hear.

“I can’t believe you did that,” I huff. “This is a private office, and I’m currently at work. You’re not allowed in here. You need to leave.”

“I will,” George says, stepping forward. “Please, Quinn, just talk to me. We need to sort this out.”

“There’s nothing to sort out!” I exclaim. “I broke up with you last year! How much clearer do you want me to be?”

I can’t believe his nerve. Suddenly, I wish that I’d told Christy to message him for me. It might have made him mad, but at least he wouldn’t be still trying to get back together with me.

“I know,” George says earnestly. Fuck, he’s giving me his puppy eyes, the ones that used to make me cave in to spare his feelings. “I know, Quinn. But we made a mistake. I love you so much. I need you in my life. I know we can fix things if we just try.”

I run a frustrated hand through my hair. I wish things were simpler. When George and I first got together, it would have been nice to have some massive sign telling me that I was gaining a life long stalker the moment we broke up.

“No,” I say. “We’re not getting back together. We didn’t work. I don’t *want* to be with you anymore, George.”

Blunt, but true. I’ve tried doing this gently, to spare his feelings, but it’s time he hears it like it is. I don’t want him in my life anymore.

George's face falls. Then a flush crawls up his cheeks.

"You don't mean that," he denies. "You've just convinced yourself of that because it made it easier to get over me."

"Are you for real?" I can't stop myself from asking. "Leave, George. There are so many reasons that we won't be getting back together."

"Is there someone else?" he demands.

I open my mouth to tell him, truthfully, that there isn't. Then I pause. If he thinks I'm taken, will he back off? I know him well enough to know that just telling him I've got another boyfriend will just send him on a crusade to break us up. He needs to think that my relationship with another partner is strong. But how do I convince him of that?

I feel the two rings I wear on my fingers, a gold ring given to me by my mother many years ago, and a silver ring that Christy bought me for my birthday just last month. And a crazy idea comes to me.

"Yes," I say. I fiddle with the ring on my left middle finger, trying to carefully slide it off without him noticing. "There is someone else."

"Who?" he asks, his face falling.

I hear the elevator door opening. I manage to push the ring onto the appropriate finger on my left hand.

"I'm sorry, I'm engaged!" I say.

He's staring at me. There's movement behind him. I can see the disbelief in his eyes. But why should that be believable? We only broke up early last year. That's not *nearly* enough time to find someone else to get engaged to. Panicked, I threw my hand out, pointing to the man coming up behind George.

"To him!"

It's only after the words leave my mouth that I realize who, exactly, must have come into the office. There's only one person it could be.

Slowly, I look up and meet Nicholas' shocked eyes.

Fuck.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nicholas

I have *no* idea what is going on right now. There's an unfamiliar man in my office, there's a ring on Quinn's finger that definitely wasn't there that morning, and she's pointing to me as she claims that we're engaged.

I have no idea what to think right now.

I stare between Quinn and the man. The man, his hair disheveled as though he's run his hand through it several times, has an expression on his face that keeps cycling through grief, anger, and shock, and he's turning to look at me, too.

Quinn, on the other hand, has a look on her face that I've never seen before. She looks incredibly frustrated and there's a pleading look in her eyes. Based on what she just claimed, I know what she's asking me for.

It doesn't take a genius to think it through. I school my features into mild curiosity and stride forward under the watchful eyes of Quinn and the man. When I reach Quinn, I set the coffees and treats on her desk and wrap an arm carefully around her shoulders.

"Hello, what can I do for you?" I ask the man politely. "Is there's something you need from my fiancée and me?"

The question slips so easily off my tongue that it's thrilling. I feel Quinn's shoulders stiffen in surprise at my words, but then she offers me a pained smile.

“This is George,” she explains. “He and I... have some history if you remember.”

No, I don't remember George. But it's easy to deduce that he's an ex-boyfriend, judging by the tension in the room, and the way he's now glaring at me. The subject of exes is always something a fiancée is likely to know about, so I smile and lean in. Quinn freezes, likely wondering if I'm about to kiss her, but I wouldn't do that to her. Instead, I gently pick up her hand and press a soft kiss to the back of it before glancing at George, cementing my claim.

“I see,” I say simply.

Quinn doesn't say anything, a vivid red rising up her cheeks. I give her a moment to compose herself and turn to George.

“If there's nothing else...?” I say, nodding to the elevator.

At that, George finally breaks his silence.

“We only broke up last year!” he bursts out. “How could you be engaged so quickly?”

“I...”

Quinn falters and glances at me. I smile; Quinn is unfailingly honest, a trait in her that I like, but it means she isn't a great liar. I lean forward and smoothly take over.

“Quinn had just broken up with you when the two of us became friends outside of work,” I say with a smile. “It didn't take us long to recognize our connection. I've never felt this way about another woman, and I know that she's the one for me, so it made no sense waiting. I proposed to her last week.”

I see Quinn smile, trying to look like this isn't news to her. George is too devastated to notice anything off in her expression, though. He stumbles back, shaking his head.

“But... I thought...”

He glances at her finger, and I look down, too. Now that I see it, it's the same ring she showed me when I asked her what gifts she received for her birthday last month. It's the ring her best friend gave her. She must have moved it because it's now sitting on her left ring finger.

“I’m sorry, George,” Quinn says. Her voice is soft, but there’s a slightly harder edge behind it, and I wonder what the full story between the two of them is. “But we weren’t good for each other at all. I’m sure you’ll find somewhere better.”

George gives us a wounded look and, without a word, flees back to the elevator. We watch the lights, for a moment, as they count down the floors he descends.

Then Quinn shakes herself and steps away. I feel a bit sad to feel her go, and I stretch my arms over my head, moving back as well.

“Thank you,” Quinn says stiffly. She sighs. “He left the coffees.”

I glance at the tray George left.

“I don’t think he’ll be coming back for them,” I say.

“Probably not,” she agrees. “Want one?”

She opens them both and wrinkles her nose.

“Ugh, both black,” she says. “He *knows* I hate black coffee.”

“Then you’re in luck,” I say, nodding at the coffees I had put on the desk. “I bought you a latte and a fruit tart.” I smile when she looks at me, shocked. “I figured you wouldn’t take a break, and I wanted to do something nice for you, to thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Nicholas, what you just did for me has repaid any debt you thought you owed me ten times over,” Quinn says fervently, but she’s smiling. “Thank you for lunch, anyway, it was really kind of you.”

“I, uh...” I falter, suddenly unsure. “Well, they had these bears that they’re selling for a charity for homeless people, and...”

I present her with the bear.

“It’s a thank you,” I say quickly before she can reply. “Not anything else. Just... thanks.”

Quinn glances at me. She doesn’t look upset at all. A small smile spreads across her face.

“It’s cute,” she says. “You’ll have to show me this shop so I can see what other bears they have, for my collection.”

I grin. It’s not a date. But It’s a start, which is good.

“Anyway, thank you for your help,” Quinn says with a grimace. “I’m so sorry to put you suddenly in the middle of that. George and I... We had a rocky breakup, and he’s been trying to get back together with me for several weeks, now. Maybe now he’ll back off.”

“What happened between the two of you?” I ask curiously; I don’t normally pry but, considering I got a front row to the drama, I *would* like to know what I signed myself up for.

Quinn sighs.

“Not an awful lot, honestly,” she admits. “He was one of those emotionally manipulative types. Eventually, I had enough and left him. He was devastated and then, out of nowhere, he sent me a message a while ago telling me how much he missed me. Then he didn’t stop sending messages. I was working here when I left him, so he must have come to see if I was still here.” I scowl. “Chloe and Jacinta let him up because he told them he was my boyfriend.”

I frown.

“I’ll let reception know that he’s not to be given access to my office again,” I assure her. “I’ll give security his photo, too. I’m disappointed this happened; even if he *was* in a relationship with you, he shouldn’t have been allowed up here.”

Yes, my reception staff, especially Jacinta and Chloe, are going to get a very stern talking to. Maybe after I’ve calmed down, though; hearing Quinn confess her recent problems with George has made me furious. The girls downstairs let up a man who has been stalking my secretary; who knew what could have happened? If I saw Chloe and Jacinta right now, I might end up just firing them.

I take in a deep breath. It’s okay, nothing happened, thankfully. George left easily, Quinn is upset but otherwise unharmed, and everything is back to normal. Hopefully, that will be the last

we see of George for a good long time. And if he tries to return... well, I'll make sure my security has a few *words* with him to persuade him to stay away.

"Thanks," Quinn sighs. She turns the little bear over in her hands, her eyes scanning it. "I wish I could repay you for doing this for me. You didn't have to pretend to be my fiancée like that." She snorted. "You were such a convincing liar, though, that *I* almost believed you."

I couldn't help but laugh, too. While lying isn't the most honorable skill, it's certainly an art that I've had to perfect in the cut-throat business world.

Still, I don't want Quinn to feel like she owes me anything. I did what I did because I didn't want the situation to escalate any further. I didn't want anything in return from her.

I open my mouth to tell her this. Then I pause.

Actually...

I hesitate, not sure whether to ask. How would it affect any future relationship that I have with Quinn if I call in this favor now? It's big, just as big as her asking me to pretend to be her fiancée to get rid of her ex.

"What?" Quinn asks suspiciously, her sharp eyes picking out my sudden change in mood.

"Well... there *is* a way you could help me in return," I say slowly. I purse my lips. "But... you don't have to agree, okay?"

"I'm listening," Quinn says, crossing her arms.

"My family will be arriving from France soon, on holiday to celebrate my brother's recent engagement," I tell her. "My parents have been on my back about settling down for some time, and I know my mother well enough that she will have many eligible young women at the party to introduce me to." I glance at the ring still on her finger. "Would you be willing to pretend to be my fiancée at the party?"

It would definitely solve the problem with my family if Quinn were to agree. If I presented a fiancée, they would have to

back off, and I would get some reprieve. Maybe, if I was lucky, I would even be able to make my relationship with her official before they found out it was all fake.

I pause, startled by my own thoughts. Since when did I start thinking about wanting an official relationship with Quinn?

“That’s a big thing to ask,” Quinn says, frowning.

“I know,” I say, nodding. “It’s not just with one ex; it would be my entire family. I do understand if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t, really,” Quinn says, and my heart sinks. Then her lips twist. “But I *do* owe you one. So, I can put up with being your date for *one* night. Just one, you hear?”

I can barely believe my ears.

“You’ll do it?” I ask hopefully.

“Against my better judgment... yes,” she says.

“Thank you!” I exclaim, startingly her. “Thank you... this means a lot to me.”

“Well... you did it for me,” she says with a wry smile. “Though, I might have to get a better ring... I don’t like using Christy’s gift as a pretend engagement ring. Though *she* would find it hilarious.”

“I might have some rings at the house,” I say, thinking of the collection of jewelry I had. “I’ll see if there’s something I can find one that looks like something I would give you if I actually proposed.”

Or, I can just buy something, but I’m not going to tell her that’s a possibility. Somehow, I have a feeling she’ll protest.

“Right...” Quinn says, an expression on her face saying that she isn’t sure whether to trust my taste. “I’ll leave that to you, then. When is this party?”

“On Saturday,” I inform her. “I’ll pick you up at six. It will be at my house, where most of my family is staying while here in America.”

I see Quinn take in a deep, fortifying breath.

“Okay, sounds good,” she says. I watch as she puts the ring back on the right finger. “Now... I’ve sent you an email from Fairmont that we need to talk about.”

Back to business, then... I’d like to talk more about the party, but I recognize that Quinn doesn’t want to. So I just smile and nod.

It’s enough that she’s coming. From there, I’ll just wait and see what happens next.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Quinn

When Saturday comes around, four hours before Nicholas is due to knock on my door, I'm so nervous that I can't stop pacing.

"Why the hell did I agree to things?" I exclaim, not for the first time that day.

"Because you owed him?" Christy's voice comes from my phone on speaker, heavily amused.

I shoot the phone a glare.

"No sass," I order. "I don't even know what to wear. I don't know anything about Nicholas' family other than that they're French, but Nicholas told me the event was formal."

"Do you own any formal dresses?" Christy asks curiously.

"One," I say glumly. "But I just pulled it out; there's a rip up the seam and I don't have time to fix it."

I look mournfully at the dress. It's a lilac number with a ruffle skirt and low-cut neck. It's my go-to dress when I need to dress up, but I must have ripped it on something the last time I wore it.

"Didn't Nicholas ask you earlier in the week?" Christy asks, exasperated. "Why didn't you check the dress all week?"

"Because I've been too busy freaking out all week," I groan. "And holding myself back from telling Nicholas that I can't

go, after all. What the hell was I thinking when I agreed to meet his whole family?"

"I don't think you were," Christy says cheerfully.

I glare at the phone again.

"You are no help at all," I declare. "I should just hang up on you."

"Or, I could come around and fix your dress for you?" Christy suggests. "Better yet, I could loan you a dress."

I pause.

"Really?" I ask. "Thank you so much, Christy!"

"To what, borrowing a dress or fixing yours?" Christy teases.

"I might have to borrow one," I admit, shooting a last look at the dress. "I think I've worn the poor thing out which is why it started unraveling."

"Probably," Christy says. "Want me to take the material and make something for you out of it?"

I smile. When Christy wasn't animating cartoons, she was indulging her sewing hobby.

"Yeah, probably," I say. "But one thing at a time. What dresses do you have?"

"What color do you want?" Christy asks thoughtfully. "I have a black dress, a red dress, a purple one, and that slinky gold one."

"Well... probably not black," I say, thinking. "And I can't really pull off red. And I *definitely* can't pull off that gold thing. It looks great on *you*, but I'd never get away with it."

"Purple, then?" Christy asks with a laugh.

I think of the dress. It's a simple purple cocktail dress with a floaty skirt and thick straps. Not overly formal, but beggars can't be choosers.

"Purple," I agree.

Just then, there's a knock on my door. I blink, confused; who would be visiting early on Saturday afternoon?

“I’ll be back, there’s someone at my door,” I tell Christy.

Surprisingly, there’s a delivery man at the door. He smiles, tilting his hat back slightly when I open the door to him.

“Quinn Butler?” he asks, and I nod. “Got a special delivery for you. Can you sign here?”

“Who’s it from?” I ask blankly as I sigh.

“Dunno,” the guys says, shrugging. “Thanks!”

Then he’s off. I look at the long, flat box that he’s given me, wondering who the hell it could be from and what’s in it.

“*What is it?*” Christy asks, hearing me come back inside.

“I don’t know,” I say. “There’s no return address.”

“Well, open it and see what it is!” Christy exclaims.

I laugh and grab a pair of scissors from the kitchen. It slides easily through the tape and I carefully open the box.

The first thing I see is silky, forest green material, covered in delicate sparkles that reflect the light. I open the box the rest of the way and stare.

“It’s... a dress,” I say.

Not just any dress. It’s an absolutely beautiful dress, and even just looking at it in the box, I can tell that it costs more than my weekly wage. It’s a deep green with tiny sparkles tastefully dotted over the sheer, chiffon skirt. The underskirt is thick silk and the dress, as I pull it out, is heavier than I’m used to. I’ve never seen such fine material before.

“A dress?” Christy asks. “Ah... guess your date wants you to be well-dressed.”

“You think Nicholas sent this?” I ask, shocked.

“*Who else would?*” Christy asks rhetorically.

“Wait, there’s a note,” I say, seeing the white, folded note in the box.

I read it out loud.

‘Quinn,

‘I know you may think this is too much, but I hope you will accept it if only to continue the ruse. I hope you like the ring, too.’

“*What ring?*” Christy demands.

“Uh...”

I finally spy the small box in the corner. Nicholas had promised to find me something to wear and, knowing what type of person he is, I’m a bit worried about what he chose. Still, I only have to put up with it for tonight.

I open the box. And gasp.

“Shit...” I breathe.

It’s breathtakingly beautiful, and exactly the sort of ring I would like to wear if I really was engaged. The gold band is woven into a vine pattern, and tiny emeralds in the shape of leaves are threaded through it. On each leaf is either a ruby or a pale blue sapphire, making the whole, delicate ring seem earthy.

“Wow,” Christy says when I describe it. “You need to marry this guy for real.”

I’m so taken aback by the ring that I don’t even react to Christy’s teasing. I shake my head. It’s all so much.

How am I supposed to accept all this?

* * *

It’s only Christy yelling at me that gets me into the dress twenty minutes before Nicholas is due to arrive, still not sure if I should be wearing something so damn expensive. Now, however, I’m on my own, fidgeting with the ring he’s given me.

He’s spent so much money on me, just on the dress alone. On the one hand, it’s horrifying, because why would he waste so much money on a one-night event? On the other, it’s actually flattering that he would have gone out of his way to find a dress that he thought I would like, along with the ring.

And I do like them both. Both the dress and ring are things that I would wear without question if I bought them for myself. How does Nicholas know me so well? A week or two ago, I wouldn't have said he knew me at all! But he managed to pick out clothes and jewellery exactly to my taste.

My mind is still mulling this over when, at six o'clock on the dot, a knock sounds on my door, telling me that Nicholas is here.

I straighten my shoulders. This is it. I'll do this for Nicholas to repay my debt to him, and then we can go back to being just professional colleagues on Monday. I slide the ring onto my finger and open the door.

Nicholas is wearing a perfectly pressed three-piece suit in dark gray with a white shirt and a blue tie, a carefully folded pocket square stark white against the darkness of his suit. It looks amazing on him.

"You're beautiful," Nicholas breathes before I can say anything. Then consternation crosses his face as we're both reminded of his constant stream of compliments a few weeks ago. "In that dress."

"Thank you," I say a little self-consciously. "For the dress and the ring."

I see Nicholas' eyes dart to my hand, where the ring is resting. He smiles.

"I'm glad you like it," he says. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah, sounds good," I say.

A car is waiting for us downstairs, the driver idling on his phone until he sees us coming. Having someone drive us around makes me feel awkward and out of place, especially when I see people staring at us.

But this is Nicholas' life. I slide into the car, and he comes in after me, completely at ease.

"You said the party was at your house?" I ask Nicholas as we start to drive. "Is it big enough?"

He gives me an odd smile.

“Definitely,” he says.

It doesn't take long before I see what 'definitely' means. His house is only a ten-minute drive from my apartment, surprisingly. Before long, the car turns onto a sweeping estate, and my eyes widen as I stare at the house that's growing larger before my eyes.

It's not a house. It's a fucking mansion!

I knew Nicholas was rich. But never before have I been confronted with just how rich he is. The massive mansion with its grand architecture, wide, meticulously kept grounds, lit fountains, and fairy lights, is like something I've soon out of storybooks, or perhaps in my old books about amazing places around the world.

It's like entering another world completely.

“This is my home,” Nicholas says unnecessarily.

Yeah... I can see that.

“You live here alone?” I ask incredulously.

“Yeah,” Nicholas says with a shrug.

I suddenly see why he used to go out so much. *I'd* get out of a house that large whenever I could, as well. Pity wells up in me; it seems that there are downsides to being rich and famous, too.

“Do gardeners tend to your lawn?” I ask, eyeing the flowers that line the long driveway.

“For the most part, but I do a lot of gardening, too,” Nicholas says. He smiles softly. “I loved flowers and working on the ground as a child, even if my parents hated it. I still tend to some sections of the land, myself.”

Wow... that was a more down to earth answer than I expected. Somewhere in me, my respect for Nicholas rises a notch.

“That's pretty amazing,” I offer.

The car pulls up alongside several others, and we get out, nodding farewell to the driver. I can hear the low murmur of voices through the front door, which is wide open to admit

visitors, and there are lights on in the windows. There's also some music playing, a classical piece with a piano and violin.

"Ready?" Nicholas asks.

No, I want to say.

"Yeah," my traitorous mouth replies. "Let's do this."

It's not even fair that I'm this nervous since I'm not Nicholas' real fiancée. I spin the new ring, which feels odd on my finger, around nervously. Hopefully, I can pull this off.

There are only two people in the atrium when we step inside, and I gaze, stunned, at the huge area. *This* is just the entrance hall?

"Maman, Papa," Nicholas greets as we arrive, beaming., and I realize these people are his parents. "Je suis revenue."

It shouldn't shock me to hear Nicholas speak French. I knew he was French. I knew he grew up in France. So it's only natural that he knows the language. This is the first time I've heard him speak it, however, and the sudden, foreign words give me a jolt.

"Nous sommes heureux," his father says. He glances at me. "Qui est-ce?"

"S'il vous plaît rencontrer Quinn," Nicholas says, and I straighten on hearing my name. "Tu te souviens que je t'ai parlé d'elle?" He glances at me and, abruptly, switches languages. "Can we speak English? Quinn does not know French."

It's a nice gesture that makes me feel better until I see his parents narrow their eyes.

"I see," his mother says.

She looks me up and down and I shrink back, suddenly feeling lacking. There is clear disapproval in her gaze, though I have no idea what I've done wrong.

"Uh, it's good to meet you," I try with a weak smile.

Neither of them smiles in return or returns the sentiment. Nicholas' smile drops and he exchanges a glance with me.

What's going on?

CHAPTER NINE

Nicholas

It's clear right from the very beginning; my family does not like Quinn.

And I have no idea why.

At first, I thought they were just reticent. Maybe they were just worried about this American woman that I've gotten engaged to, a woman that I'm only introducing them to for the first time. I can understand them being upset by that, though I'm unsure why they are only taking it out on her; it would definitely be my fault if the engagement was real.

Surely, though, they would warm up to Quinn over the course of the party. She's supposed to be my fiancée. Why aren't they happier that I'm settling down with a nice woman?

It doesn't make sense, especially when, as the next two hours wear on, I notice that their reception has not improved at all.

At this point, Quinn and I have been separated. I'm not entirely sure where she's gone, and I can't blame her for wanting to get away for a moment. The rest of my family is milling around the room, completely at ease with the splendor of my home.

For a small, insane moment, I wonder what the fuck happened to me. Seven years ago, following an argument with my parents when they claimed that I would run the family business into the ground and that they would not allow me any shares in their company, I left France with only a few dollars in my pocket and the clothes on my back. It was the first time I

had ever experienced being poor after growing up in a home much like this one. It was both terrifying and liberating. I swore I would never be the type of person who flaunted money or power.

Yet, I am. I live in a mansion, women are falling over themselves to get to me, and there are very few people in my life who are there because they *aren't* attracted to my wealth and power. I've come full circle and ended up right back where I came from, just in another country.

It's crazy.

Being with Quinn the last few weeks, however, has reminded me of those days, when I had very little because I refused to rely on my family. Back when I had nothing but debts, huge dreams, and my own determination to accomplish them. Quinn reminds me of what it's like to be more down to earth and to think about others.

I wanted Quinn. She was the only woman who had ever told me 'no', and that had been both frustrating and fascinating. My courtship of her had started out because of pride; I had to find some way to make her fall for me so that I could truthfully say I could have any woman I wanted.

Somewhere along the way, though...

Quinn is kind. Genuine. Strong-willed, driven and intense. The beauty that attracted me to her in the first place was only the top layer of her deep personality, and, the further I dive beneath the surface, the more I find myself floundering in a sea of feelings for her.

More and more, lately, I've been imagining what it would be like to be in an actual relationship with Quinn. How would it feel to wake up in the morning with her in my arms? How nice would it be to kiss her and laugh with her and hold her close? How amazing would it be to come home and have her there to talk about our days and discuss plans for the future?

I don't just want Quinn for sex, anymore. There's something deeper there, something I can't quite name, but I know I want

something more from her, something more intimate and gentler.

But... that's not going to happen with my family acting like *this*.

I swirl some champagne in my glass, looking around the room. Everyone is chatting. I can see my brother in the corner, talking animatedly with my aunt and uncle, while my parents are talking to my sister by the door. They all look happy. Yet, every single one of them had subtly snubbed Quinn the moment I introduced her.

I just don't understand it.

"This is a nice place," a voice says beside me in French.

I look to the side. My cousin, Dominique, has sidled up to me with a smile. She's around the same age as me, and we spent many years of our childhood playing together, to the point where she's almost like another sister to me. She was devastated when I left, and we haven't been in contact as much since.

"I'm glad I get to see your home in America," Dominique continues, looking around. "It's nice to see that you're looking after yourself. We were all worried when you refused money when you arrived in this country, but you've definitely proved to everyone that you're business savvy."

Is that what I wanted? I wonder about this. When I left for America, I didn't do so with the intention of making a fortune equal to that of my family's wealth. I just wanted to live my own life. Instead, I unintentionally proved my parents, and the rest of my family, wrong about my ability to manage a business. It's a nice feeling but, having it pointed out to me like this, it's mildly horrifying to realize that I've ended up on the very path I tried so desperately to flee from.

"Yes," I say. I take a sip of champagne. I've nursed it all night, wanting to stay sober while I try to figure out what's going on with my family.

"It's been a nice party, too," Dominique continues, not appearing to notice my short demeanor. "It was nice of you to

host it for your brother.”

I saw an opening and swooped in.

“Thank you,” I say graciously. “But the party would be a lot nicer if I could understand the cold attitudes toward my fiancée.”

Dominique blinks, taken aback at being called out. But I’m not about to let this lie; I brought Quinn to this party, and it’s unfair that she’s had to suffer this unfounded snobbery.

“Oh,” Dominique says, but she only looks chagrined at being caught out. “Sorry, Nicholas. But, you have to admit, she’s not the sort we expected you to date.”

That’s confusing. I frown at my cousin.

“What do you mean?” I ask suspiciously.

“Well, there’s the quick engagement, for a start,” Dominique says, shrugging. “We didn’t even know you were dating this woman, and now you’re engaged? Either you were trying to show Alexandre up... or she pressured you into an engagement.”

“Why would she do that?” I ask, even more confused.

Dominique gave me an exasperated look.

“You’re worth billions of dollars,” she points out, as though that answers the question.

For a moment, I’m still confused. And then, slowly, it dawns on me what she means. When I told my family I was engaged, they assumed that she was a money-hungry attention-seeker who wanted to marry me for my wealth.

For a moment, I can’t speak.

“Quinn and I... we’ve been together for three years,” I say blankly. Technically true; she’s been my *secretary* for three years. “It just felt like now was a good time to get engaged and introduce her to the family.”

“Right,” Dominique says. She doesn’t sound convinced. “Anyway, it can’t have escaped your notice that she isn’t the *same* as the rest of us.” She sighed at my uncomprehending

look. “She’s just a common woman from a middle-class family.”

Have my family always been this snobbish? I want to say no. But I suddenly remember Dominique’s older sister, Bernadette, who eloped with a young man when I was a teenager. The family hadn’t approved of him either, and relations between Bernadette and the rest of the family are still strained, despite the fact that she and her husband are still together. The man had been a manager of a supermarket, not rich in any way.

My family was judging Quinn because of her wealth... or lack of it. I’m so horrified that I can’t find the words. I stare blankly at Dominique.

“She’s beneath you, Nicholas,” Dominique continues, not at all ashamed of the vitriol that’s escaping her mouth. “You can find someone far better suited than her.”

There is no one like Quinn. She might not be rich, but she works hard, and she’s more genuine than most of the people in my life.

I can’t believe I’m hearing this. I take a step back, suddenly disgusted.

“Nicholas?” Dominique asks.

“Quinn is my *fiancée*,” I say. My voice is cold, and Dominique’s eyes widen. “She’s the woman I chose, regardless of how wealthy she is or isn’t. If all of you want to be so petty to judge her over *money* before you even know her, then you don’t deserve to get to know her.”

I turn on my heel and stalk off. I’m furious, both at myself and my family. I should have known nothing has changed since I first left France.

I need to find Quinn and apologize to her for bringing her here.

“Hey, Nicholas!” Alexandre greets as I pass, beaming.

I don’t smile back.

“Have you seen Quinn?” I ask.

“Uh...” Alexandre blinks, confused. “Outside on the balcony, I think. Oh, by the way, congratulations on your engagement, brother.”

The ‘congratulations’ sounds unenthusiastic, and his face twists like he hates saying the words. But I don’t call him on it, especially now that I have some direction to Quinn.

“You too,” I say shortly, and stalk away.

I circle around the room, avoiding the rest of my family. They’re all drinking and laughing, completely unconcerned by their own discrimination against the woman I introduced them to. I had previously been looking forward to seeing them after such a long time, but this is just reminding me of all the reasons why I left.

The door to the balcony has been left open and, thankfully, only Quinn is there. The dress that I bought her (and I bought it in the hopes she would fit in better, so I should have realized how this would go) glimmers slightly in the moonlight, casting an ethereal glow about her.

Then I notice the champagne littered glasses around her. My heart clenches. She felt so upset that she started drinking. I close my eyes briefly. I should have known what I was bringing her into. This is entirely my fault, and I would definitely understand if she was angry with me.

But, now, my main priority was to get her out of her. It isn’t fair for her to stay here amongst people who don’t even want to acknowledge her. The best thing I can do for her right at this moment is to take her home and hope she accepts my apologies for the way the night has turned out.

“Quinn,” I say, stepping forward.

Quinn turns around. There’s a glass of champagne clutched in her hand, and her other hand is gripping the balcony railing as she sways slightly, a high red flush in her cheeks. She’s had too much to drink, but it’s the woeful look on her face that catches my attention and makes my gut clench.

I can only hope that this mistake doesn’t cost me everything.

CHAPTER TEN

Quinn

It's easy to see where this party is going. I snatch a glass of champagne off the table as Nicholas and I pass it, giving a vapid smile in return to the scowl one of his uncles gives me when I'm introduced. Nicholas seems oblivious, but it's easy to recognize the disdainful expression of snooty contempt.

I'm not the same as the people here, and they know it. I don't have money or own a company or even have expensive jewelry other than the ring Nicholas gave me. While the rest of the women are wearing pearls and rocks the size of my palm, I'm wearing costume jewelry, the gold plating obvious next to real gold. I'm a hard-working woman who has to scrape some months, just to pay the exorbitant rent on my apartment.

I stand out like a sore thumb. And they knew it just as well as I do.

I can feel them staring at me, their gazes openly evaluating me before they turn away, finding me obviously lacking. For a moment, I wonder what Nicholas has told them about me, then I shake the thought away.

It probably wouldn't matter what they heard. They seem determined to dislike me regardless.

Before I know it, I've downed three glasses of champagne, which likely hasn't endeared me to Nicholas' posh family. The more alcohol I consume, however, the less I find myself caring about what they think.

What does it even matter, anyway? I'm not *actually* engaged to Nicholas. This is just a ruse, and I only agreed to it since he helped me out with George. On Monday, things will go back to normal, and we can put this entire ridiculous affair behind us. We can return to just being a boss and his secretary, and I can forget about the blatant scorn an entire group of people has decided to send my way.

I snag another glass and turn around. But, to my surprise, I'm alone. Where did Nicholas go? For a moment, panic envelopes me; has Nicholas abandoned me in here with these wolves?

Then I see him walking ahead; he hasn't noticed that I stopped, and has carried on. I survey his expression. There's confusion on his face as he looks around the room, as though he's trying to figure something out, but I don't know what.

And, for the first time, I wonder. What does Nicholas *actually* think of me? His family has made it more than plain that they feel I'm beneath them in some way, and that I'm not good enough for their rich, successful son. What does Nicholas see every time he looks at me? Does he just see a hard-working woman struggling to make ends meet, someone he wants to seduce but not associate with?

I stamp on the thought. If that was true, there's no way Nicholas would have asked me to pretend to be his fiancée. He wouldn't risk introducing me to his family. At the very least, I know he thinks fondly of me, even if it's just as his employee.

That thought, oddly, makes me feel a little sad. I sink backward, toward the door, downing the glass in my hand and grabbing another two as I pass the table. Suddenly, I need air.

I need to sort out my thoughts.

The chilly night air, the last vestiges of winter blowing through, makes goosebumps rise on my arms as I step onto the balcony. But the cold is like a slap in the face, driving away some of the fog that the champagne has started to create around my head. I step forward and lean on the balcony, putting the two full glasses and one empty glass on the small, wooden table beside me. Then I look out over the grounds.

They're magnificent. Seeing them like this, I can see just how well Nicholas takes care of his home... or, rather, how well he pays for it to be looked after. The flowers glitter in the fairy lights, and the white stone path snakes around the garden, winding through blooming plants and circling softly glowing fountains.

All this, just for one person. I wonder how lonely I would feel if I lived in a place like this by myself. Is Nicholas lonely, sometimes? I sip at my champagne, allowing my thoughts to wander. It's nice to be alone out here for a moment, away from the judging eyes inside.

"Quinn."

I blink and turn around, dimly realizing, at some point, that I've almost finished both the glasses I brought out here. The turn makes me wobble slightly and, cursing my heels (and, finally, lamenting how much I've drunk tonight), I grip the railing harder.

Nicholas is standing there, his suit perfectly pressed, his hair styled, and his eyes as deep and fathomless as always. But, unlike normal, there's no smile on his face. Instead, his lips are pressed into a firm line.

Is he upset at me? If anything, *I'm* the one who has the right to be upset. Nicholas brought me here, where his entire family judged me and found me lacking. That certainly doesn't do anything for my self-confidence.

"Nicholas," I reply, clearing my throat. "Why did you leave the party?"

A scowl crosses Nicholas' face.

"I didn't feel like being in there anyway," he says shortly, and I'm taken aback by his tone. Then his expression softens and he gives me a sad look. "I'm so sorry, Quinn. I'm going to take you home."

All I wanted, from the moment I stepped in this place, was to leave. Somehow, however, having Nicholas offer to take me back is unexpected. I stare at him dumbly.

“But it’s your brother’s engagement party,” I point out. “In your home.”

“They can find their own way out if they want to leave,” Nicholas says, and I definitely didn’t imagine the snarl in his words. He *is* unhappy... but not at me. Surprisingly, he’s angry at his *family*. “After the way they’ve treated you tonight, they’re lucky I’m letting any of them stay here.”

My breath catches. He’s upset on my behalf? I didn’t expect that. I feel tears gathering in my eyes. I didn’t realize, until that moment, just how scared I was that Nicholas might actually share his family’s views.

“Come on,” Nicholas says, his tone gentler. “Let me take you home. I’ll make this up to you somehow, I promise.”

He already has. I smile tremulously and take the arm he’s offering me. Then he guides me back through the house. We ignore everyone who stares.

“Where are you going?” Nicholas’ mother calls out, finally daring to be the one to ask as we get to the door.

“Out,” Nicholas says shortly.

Then we’re stepping back outside, the front door closing heavily behind us. Finally, I feel like I can breathe again, and I follow docilely as Nicholas guides me to a black, driverless car. He helps me into the passenger seat and then gets behind the wheel.

“You can drive?” I ask.

The question sounds stupid as soon as I ask it, by Nicholas just grins.

“I didn’t always have a driver,” he jokes, making me giggle.

The drive back to my apartment is short, and I half expect Nicholas to drop me outside so he can return to his family, regardless of what he said before. But, instead, he pulls carefully into a visitor’s parking spot and helps me out of the car.

“I know this might be inappropriate... but do you mind if I sleep on your couch?” he asks as we step into the elevator.

I almost drop the keys I'm fumbling with, trying to find the one to unlock my door.

"What?" I gape.

"Sorry," Nicholas says, grimacing. "I just don't want to go back there. I can't believe how horrible they were to you."

"Oh."

It's because of me again. I feel an odd sense of wonder. Nicholas is angry at his family, doesn't even want to *see* them, because of the way they treated me.

"You can stay," I say before I can reconsider.

"Thanks," Nicholas says.

As the elevator stops on my floor, we travel down the hall, the silence between us suddenly awkward. I didn't expect to host Nicholas tonight, and he no doubt hadn't had any plans to sleep on my couch. Is the couch even going to be good enough for him? He likely sleeps in a bed worth thousands of dollars, and I picked up a second-hand couch for fifty dollars a few months ago...

"The couch will be fine," Nicholas says, sounding amused, and I blush as I realize that I'd been speaking aloud.

Nicholas looks around as I let him into my apartment. It's a warm and cozy space where I can curl up at the end of the day. The shelves are littered with tiny ornaments, and the kitchen equipment is mismatched. It's clean, but the overall effect is a little chaotic. I like it.

"Nice place," Nicholas says simply.

I smile at him. He's being so nice.

"I'll get you some blankets," I offer.

I head into my room and rustle up a few blankets and a spare pillow. My arms full of linen, I step back into the linen room.

I stop, my mouth suddenly going dry.

While I was gone, Nicholas has loosened his tie, unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt, and taken his jacket off. As I

watch, he undoes the buttons on his cuffs, loosening them, and then shrugs off his waistcoat, the muscles in his back and shoulders rippling. He hasn't noticed me standing there, yet, caught by the strangely alluring sight.

I'm not an idiot. I know that Nicholas is incredibly hot. That fact, however, is suddenly accentuated as I watch him slowly pulling off articles of clothing, right after he denounced his own family for my sake.

There's a searing fire in my stomach. Despite my constant rejections, I do have to admit that I've felt physically drawn to him. It was his personality that kept me away, and the fact that had I had very little desire to be another notch on his bedpost.

But, right now, none of that seems to matter. He's unbuttoning his shirt now, with a yawn, and my eyes follow his fingers as expanses of his smooth chest is revealed, his muscles firm and toned. I've forgotten how to think. The fire is spreading to my entire body now.

Then he looks up and sees me.

"Oh, thank you," he says with a small smile. "Are you sure it's okay for me to stay? I... didn't want to go back, and I didn't think you wanted to be alone tonight, either, but..."

"I don't want to be alone," I dimly hear myself confess.

I'm stepping forward. A distant corner of my mind is telling me to stop, that I don't actually want this. But I've just spent the entire evening being disregarded, and only this man in front of me made me feel important again. I don't want to feel so alone, which is one of the reasons why I allowed Nicholas to stay.

I need to feel needed and wanted. I have to feel like there's someone who wants me for me, and not for how much money I'm worth.

Nicholas steps forward as well, hands reaching for the bedding. But, when I reach him, I drop the blankets. I have just enough time to register his surprised expression before I'm grabbing his collar and dragging him into a kiss.

It's amazing. I slide my tongue over his and step in closer. His body is like standing next to an inferno, and I run my hand over the bare muscles on his chest, making him gasp.

Then, suddenly, he pulls away. His eyes are wide and my hand, which is still on his chest, can feel the way his heart is beating a million miles a minute.

"Quinn?" he asks.

I don't want to talk. I want to feel. I step forward again, Nicholas' hands are suddenly on my shoulders, pushing me back.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"I want you," I say. "Don't you want me, too, Nicholas?"

I feel the way his entire body shudders, and I feel a thrill. His desire is almost palpable. He wants me just as much as I want him right now. I drag my nails lightly down his skin, and his breath catches.

"Do you want this?" he asks, his voice breaking slightly. "Do you really want this?"

I know what he's asking. I've spent the last several months rejecting him at every opportunity. Has anything changed? I'm not sure. Things have been different between us lately, and I haven't hated his attention. But I can't care about any of that, right now. I just want to feel something strong, so I stop feeling so lonely and outcast.

"I've really appreciated how wonderful you've been lately," I purr, leaning in and breathing in the scent of his unique musk, my eyes fluttering slightly. "You've been trying. I've *noticed*."

My hand dips lower, pressing against the bump that's forming in his pants, to show him just what I've been noticing. He groans.

"It's made me want you," I continue softly. "I've wanted to feel your hands on me." I press harder. "I want to feel the way you thrust into me." His cock is filling and hardening, and his hips buck into my hand. "I want to feel you as you fuck me deeply."

“Shit,” he moans.

And then he kisses me fervently, and I know I’ve won. He’s too far gone to argue any more, especially with me offering everything he’s been after for the last several months on a silver platter. I smile against his lips. Part of me wonders if I might end up regretting this in the morning.

The rest of me doesn’t care. Right now, I just want to *feel*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nicholas

I know, deep in my gut, that this is a mistake. There's no way Quinn could have done a complete three-sixty so quickly, even with the way things have changed between us recently. I know I should stop this, and make sure we both go to bed separately. Yes, I wanted Quinn... but, now that I have her, I'm desperate to make sure she wants me for the right reasons.

Somehow, I don't think she does.

But I can't resist her. I've wanted Quinn for *so long*. Getting to know her, starting to feel more deeply for her, and understanding more about her has just made my want worse as time passed. I've ached to feel her soft skin and to know how her lips taste.

Now she's here, in my arms, and I can find all that out. More than that, *she* wants *me* in return, is claiming that she's wanted me since my attitude toward her changed, and how can I say no to that?

I can't help but kiss her deeply, feeling the way her body writhes against mine, hot and lithe. Touching her is nothing like my dreams. Under my hands, her skin is real, I can feel the heat from her body, I can smell the sweet scent of her perfume, and it's so much better than anything I could have imagined. In my dreams, everything was perfect. In reality, we're both slick with sweat, and our clothes suddenly feel heavy and cumbersome, and her glasses are digging into my

cheek as we kiss, but it's all so real. She's real, and so are these sensations, and that overwhelming sense of reality is what drags me under.

I want to push her down and finally have her body, something that I've wanted for months now. But I still my hands before I can do so. I don't want to take charge tonight, not while there's still a tiny corner of my mind that's concerned that she doesn't actually want this. I want Quinn to show me what she wants so that everything we do tonight will be because *she* is comfortable with it. There's very little I wouldn't do if she would only ask it of me, and I want to show her that.

I pull away from the kiss. We're both gasping, and my heart is fluttering quickly in my chest, making me feel dizzy and exhilarated at the same time. Quinn looks just as affected, her chest, which is pushed close to mine, heaving, and her lashes softly shadowing her dazed eyes.

I drop my hands lower, so I can touch her hips. She gasps, bucking toward me, and heat flushes through me before shooting toward my hardening cock.

"What do you want, Quinn?" I ask, my voice husky.

Her eyes open. She almost looks confused at my question as she struggles through the fog of lust threatening to consume us both.

"What?" she groans as I start rubbing circles with my thumbs on her hips.

"What do you want to do?" I murmur, leaning down to speak directly into her ear, making her shudder as my breath blew over her skin. "Where do you want me? I'm yours to do with what you want, mon amour."

She groans, though whether at the words I was too much of a coward to say in English (somehow, 'my love' feels far too intimate right now, especially since I still didn't know what I felt for this woman), or at my fingers as they dip lower down her body. Then she refocuses on me.

"I want..." She tips her head back as I press soft kisses to her neck, giving me better access. "I want to ride you."

I pause.

“I want to push you down and ride you, hard and fast, so you know how I like it,” Quinn continues. Shit, my cock is so hard now that I can barely think of anything else. “I want to feel your length as I slide up and down it.”

She’s too far gone to look embarrassed at the words she’s saying. I imagine fucking the way she’s saying, and my entire body heats up. Fuck, yes. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close.

“There’s nothing stopping you,” I tell her.

She looks up at me for a moment. And then she grins, pushing me back so suddenly that I stumble until my knees hit her bed and I fall down on top of it. I move to sit up, but Quinn hovers over me, pressing me down as she fumbles with the buckle of my belt before dragging the zipper down.

This is all suddenly rushed and frenzied, now that we know what we want. Quinn drags my pants down, and I push the skirt of her dress up, the sensation annoying her until she pulls back and drags it over her head herself. I use that opportunity to kick my pants off, not caring where they land, and, when I look back, she’s unclipping her bra and sliding her panties down.

Then we’re both bare, staring at each other. I take in her body. In my dream, she’s perfect in every way, completely flawless.

Quinn is not flawless. There’s a beauty mark on her left hip. There’s a faint, white scar on her shoulder. She has a smattering of freckles on her arms. I take in the small imperfections for a moment before I sit up and smile at her sudden nervousness under my scrutiny.

She may not be flawless, like in my dreams, but she’s still completely perfect.

“Beautiful,” I whisper, reaching up to take her glasses off so that they didn’t break.

I reach back to slide them onto the dresser. As soon as I’ve done that, Quinn swings her leg over me and straddles my waist, kissing me so fiercely that I momentarily lose track of

everything else. When she pulls back, my head is swimming and I stare up at her.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“No reason,” she says with a mischievous smile.

She raises herself up, spreading her legs. I breathe in sharply as I realize what she’s about to do, and my heart hammers while I watch her lining herself up against my cock, which is standing tall and thick, desperate for release.

When my cock first breaches her, we both groan. Her entrance is warm and tight, gripping me tightly as she sinks down slowly, trying to adjust to accommodate me. My hands are on her hips again, and I fight the urge to pull her down. This is her night, She’s in charge.

“You feel so good,” I gasp as she takes in another inch.

“So do you,” she pants.

She circles her hips down once more and then I’m seated fully in her. I can feel my cock throbbing within her body, and she pants over me as she adjusts, her eyes closed for a moment.

Then, finally, she opens them. The look in her eyes is heated and it sends a thrill straight through my body.

Then Quinn draws herself up until only the tip of my cock remains in her body. She slams herself down, and I moan and the feeling as she starts up a strong pace, my hips bucking up to meet her with each thrust. We’re both sweating, now, heat blazing around us, and I can’t breathe from all the sensations around us, her body clenching around mine as she pants and moans above me.

Slowly, our thrusts become clumsier, as we become exhausted and overwrought with sensation. My hands are on Quinn’s hips, and her fingers are digging into my shoulders as she leans forward, her breasts bouncing with each thrust. I can feel my orgasm beginning to sweep over me, but I stave it off as long as I can, wanting desperately to hold onto this moment for just a little longer.

And then Quinn cries out and shudders, her body clenching around mine so tightly that I fall over the edge myself with a shout, white and black spots darting across my vision. My body arches as waves of pleasure wash over me and the rest of the world fades away as I release it all.

Then, slowly, the world returns. Quinn is slumped over me, and my flaccid cock is still in her. We're both panting and sweaty and limp, too tired to do anything other than lay there for a moment.

Then, finally, Quinn rolls off me and to the side. She sprawls over the bed and lets out a huffing laugh.

"Shit, I'm tired," she says.

I wonder what time it is. Then I decide I don't care. I'm exhausted, too. It's been a long night and a huge roller coaster of emotions. I didn't come here expecting to sleep with Quinn, but now I have, and it's far better than anything I could have ever imagined. A yawn rises up through my throat, though, and Quinn giggles at the sound.

"Bed," I decide.

Then I pause. Is it okay for me to stay here?

Quinn decides the matter for me, shuffling up and sliding under her covers before patting the bed beside her.

"Come on, hurry up, I want to sleep," she says.

I grin and quickly get under the covers beside her. I can still feel the heat of her naked body, but my eyes are already closing.

"See you in the morning," I hear Quinn murmur.

The morning... I don't know what the morning is going to bring. But it's nothing to worry about right now. My eyes close and I relax against the pillows.

I'm definitely going to have good dreams tonight.

* * *

I hear a groan beside me, drawing me back into consciousness, and I can't remember, for a moment, why there is someone else in my bed with me. Then my eyes shoot open and I turn my head.

Quinn is there, wincing as she pulls herself into a sitting position, gathering the sheets around her. She's squinting around the room and, remembering what I did the night before, I reach over to her nightstand and grab her glasses so I can hand them over.

"Oh... thanks," Quinn says.

Her tone is awkward, and there's an embarrassed flush rising on her face.

"Um... how are you feeling?" I ask cautiously.

I'm not sure what to do next. I've never slept with a coworker before. What am I supposed to do or say in this situation? For all my experience, I suddenly feel as awkward and unsure as Quinn looks.

"My head hurts *badly*," Quinn admits, rubbing her hand over her forehead with a grimace.

I remember the champagne glasses on the balcony, and a niggling suspicion starts to form in my mind. I clear my suddenly dry throat.

"How much did you drink last night?" I ask.

"Honestly, I lost track," she admits. "I just kept grabbing champagne glasses when I passed them. Enough that I have a killer hangover."

I knew Quinn had a bit to drink last night. But horror starts to form in my gut as I realize just how drunk she had been the night before. Unlike me, who had just enough champagne to take the edge of any concerns I had about sleeping with her, she had too much and hadn't been in a state to make decisions.

"I'm..." I start.

"Apologize, and I'll slap you," Quinn threatens, startling me into silence. She rolls her eyes at my shock. "Honestly, don't do the whole macho 'oh no, I've taken advantage of you'

thing. *I* came onto *you*, remember? I might have been drunk, but I distinctly remember that *I* was the one refusing to take no for an answer.”

I can't help but snort. She isn't wrong there.

She gives me a quick smile in return. But then the awkward silence descends on us once more. Neither of us makes any move to get up, but, from how tense we both are, it's clear that neither of us wants to stay in the bed any longer, either, especially since we're completely naked beneath the sheets.

“Uh... so what now?” Quinn finally asks.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Quinn looks up at me. She looks equal parts frustrated and upset.

“You're my boss, Nicholas,” she says pertly. “I shouldn't have propositioned you last night. This has put us both in an awkward position. If you'd like me to quit, just say so.”

“Quit?” The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. “Why would you quit?”

“Because it's going to be weird,” Quinn says dryly. “Obviously, this can't happen again. But we still know it *did* happen.”

No, it wasn't obvious until just then that this wouldn't happen again. Still, it isn't a surprise when I hear Quinn say it.

“Right,” I say. “Look, let's just forget it happened? I don't feel like replacing you as my secretary. You do too good a job. So we'll just go back to work and pretend this never happened.”

Hopefully. Though, I have the feeling that the sex last night has just become fodder for my dreams.

“Forget it,” Quinn repeats. She shoots me a look. “You're okay with that?”

“Of course, if it makes you more comfortable,” I assure her.

Liar, a small voice in the back of my mind taunts me.

“Right,” Quinn says. Her shoulders slowly relax. “Okay, we can try that.” She pauses. “Can you look the other way? I should get my clothes.”

I quickly look toward the opposite wall and listen to the rustle of sheets as Quinn slides out of bed. I wait until I hear the bathroom door snap closed, and then I turn back to find the bed empty once more.

Only then do I groan and fall back against the pillows. This is a fine mess I’ve gotten myself into.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Quinn

On Monday morning, I steel myself as the elevator doors slide open. What happened on Saturday night was a complete mistake, and I *will not* think about it.

At least, that's what I try to tell myself. Unfortunately, the reality of it is very different as Nicholas steps out into the office, and my mind instantly recalls images of him lying naked beneath me while I ride him desperately, chasing my intense pleasure.

I look away quickly, focusing on my computer. Well fuck... this is obviously going to be harder than I thought it would be.

"Good morning," Nicholas says.

His French accent sends a shiver up my spine as I remember him whispering in my ear, asking me what I wanted. I shoot him a quick glance and a tight smile.

"Good morning," I say politely.

Then a coffee cup lands on my desk. I blink at it for a moment and then look up at Nicholas, at a loss. The only time Nicholas has ever brought me coffee was last week when he walked in on me arguing with George. He had claimed it was both a 'thanks' and an attempt to make sure I ate during my break, something I don't always do.

So what is *this* one for?

"You get me coffee all the time," Nicholas says with a shrug and a small smile. "I figure I can at least bring you one in the

morning sometimes.”

It’s a sweet gesture, and exactly what I *don’t* need while I’m busy trying not to think about him in anything other than a professional capacity. I give him another tight smile.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” I say.

I half expect him to hang around and make everything even more awkward. But instead, he just smiles, nods, and heads into his office without another word, leaving me with only the coffee and awkward memories of having sex with him the other night.

Shit. Maybe I should just quit, after all.

I take a deep breath. No, I can do this. It’s normal for the memories to be a little overwhelming directly after what happened. I would just do my best to put it out of my mind until the feelings and thoughts fade away a little, and then things can go back to normal.

On my desk, my phone vibrates. It’s a message from Christy. She tried, all day yesterday, to ask me how the dinner with his family went. I truthfully told her that it went terribly and Nicholas was kind enough to take me home, but I dodged all her questions after that, not sure how to tell her what happened next. Christy, perceptive as she is, easily guessed that there’s something more to the story, and she’s been bugging me ever since, trying to get me to spill the beans.

But I’m not ready to say anything, yet. Christy, in her usual fashion, will tease me the moment she hears, not realizing that it’s not something I can laugh about right now. Eventually, she’ll realize, and she’ll attempt to help me through it, but I don’t want to *talk* about it. I just want to forget it ever happened. If I tell Christy about it, it will be an acknowledgment that it *did* happen, as though voicing the story out loud will make it far more real.

I glance at the message anyway, though.

‘Up for coffee?’

I consider this. This is Christy’s attempt to get me face to face so that she can interrogate me. I’ll *definitely* end up telling her

everything if I go. Quickly, I text her back.

‘Thursday okay?’

Hopefully, by Thursday, everything will have calmed down a little. I know I’ve made Christy suspicious by putting her off, but maybe she’ll accept it when I claim it’s because of work. She knows that we’ve been incredibly busy with our new line, lately, which is sometimes why it can take weeks before we can meet up.

‘Ok, but you’re telling me what’s up on Thursday.’

I grimace at the message. I consider sending her one back to tell her that nothing’s ‘up’, but that will just lead me into a message war that I’ll have no hope of winning. I sigh and turn my phone off.

This is all just a huge, fucking mess. I can’t believe I was so stupid.

I remember what lead up to the moment. I was so upset, feeling sick to my stomach at the instant dismissal from his family, and knowing that they didn’t think I was good enough for him. Who were they to judge me because I wasn’t as wealthy as they obviously were?

But nothing could have stopped the creeping loneliness and my paranoia that Nicholas might think the same way. When he asked to stay at my place, not wanting to see his family after the way they treated me, there was no stopping me. I needed to feel just how much he wanted me, to know that I was wanted somewhere.

I close my eyes and sigh. I really did a number on both of us. I know how long Nicholas has wanted me, even though I don’t know why or what will happen next. In a way, it was cruel to do what I did, to give him what he wanted and then pretend it never happened.

Unless... maybe that’s good for him? He rarely ever stays with a girl for more than a few nights. Once, I saw him with three different women over three consecutive nights. Something sick forms in my stomach. Am I one of those women, now? A

one night stand that can just be forgotten now that Nicholas got what he wanted?

I cut my thoughts short. What's even the point of this? I *want* to forget it ever happened. So what's the problem if Nicholas does, too?

I turn to my work and try to put it all out of my mind. I have work to do, and I don't want to think about this anymore.

* * *

I escape the office on Thursday afternoon, almost dropping my files in my haste to get out of there. As the doors close, Nicholas waves at me, eyes creased slightly in concern at my behavior, but it isn't until the elevator doors close that I'm able to finally breathe again.

Nicholas, I've decided, it slowly killing me with kindness, and I have no idea what to do about it. Every morning, now, he has brought me coffee. On our breaks, he's started declaring that he wouldn't leave to get food until I do. He's been complimenting my work more.

It's all professional. There is nothing in his words or demeanor that is personal or indicates that he wants me. He's being kind and friendly.

And it's the worst thing in the world because it's making it absolutely impossible to even think about forgetting what happened between us.

Which means I'm on my way to meet Christy worked up about Nicholas and dreading going back to work tomorrow. I can only hope that the weekend will allow me some distance from the situation.

I drive to the coffee shop and, once I've parked, I sit for a moment, drawing in a deep breath. I need to just pause for a moment and let myself calm down before I do anything else. If I go in there frazzled, Christy is going to know right away that something is up.

When I feel better, I pat my hair down and enter the shop. Christy is already there, with two steaming cups of coffee, and she smiles at me as I sit down.

“Hey,” she greets warmly. “How are you?”

“I slept with Nicholas,” I blurt out.

Well. That didn’t go the way I expected it to. But seeing her here, feeling the warmth in the way she smiles at me, the words bubbled up and escaped me before I could stop them. I desperately need her counsel, I realize at that moment. I need to talk to someone about this before I go crazy.

Christy stares at me.

“What?” she gasps.

“On Saturday night,” I say, closing my eyes briefly. “He asked to sleep on the couch because he couldn’t bear to see his family. I walked in on him taking his jacket and tie off and...” I clear my throat awkwardly. “I jumped him. I was a little drunk.”

“Shit,” Christy says, stunned, as she sits back.

“Yeah, that’s about the sum of it,” I say with a weak smile. “We agreed to just forget it ever happened... but I *can’t*, and I don’t know why. *He* seems to have forgotten all about it, but that’s upsetting me for some reason, and then I think about Saturday again and it’s just... god, Christy, I’m going insane, and I have no idea what to do.”

“Whoa,” Christy says, leaning forward. “Hey, come on, it’s going to be okay, Quinn. Here.”

She holds out a napkin, and only then do I realize that I’ve shed a few tears. With a tearful smile, I take the napkin and dab at my eyes, sniffing.

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m just really overwhelmed. I can’t figure anything out. I don’t want to quit, but I’m starting to think I might have to.”

“Well, before we go to that extreme, let’s see if we can get to the bottom of this,” Christy says gently. “Do you know why

you get upset when you think Nicholas has forgotten about everything?”

I grit my teeth. I've had a few days to puzzle out that one, and come to a conclusion that I don't exactly like.

“I think...” I hesitate. “I think I might have some feelings for Nicholas, after all. And I think they've been there for a while.” I close my eyes. “Before, when he was acting so stupid, he was just ridiculously good looking, but I could ignore it. But then he started being friendly and showing an interest in me and my work, and then he helped me with George....” I sigh and open my eyes. “I think I've developed some feelings for him. And now...”

“Oh, Quinn,” Christy sighs, reaching over the table to grasp my hand in a warm hold. “Don't worry, everything is going to be okay.”

I give her a small smile. I wish I could believe that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Quinn

Two weeks after that fateful Saturday night, nothing has improved. If anything, it's just become more awkward than ever.

Nicholas is trying his best to make me feel comfortable. He still brings me coffee in the morning, and he still chats, occasionally, about inane things with me during our infrequent breaks, but, otherwise, he attempts to keep everything strictly professional. He never stands too close to me, never tries to touch me, and keeps any flowery compliments directed toward my work. He's trying really hard, and I do appreciate it.

But I also know that things can't continue on like this. Eventually, something is going to break, and I honestly don't want it to get to that point. I've enjoyed the more friendly communication with Nicholas, and I enjoy working with him.

But, maybe a little too much. It's hard to ignore the things that I'm beginning to feel for him to start with, and it's just become harder the kinder he is to me. I snort at my computer and run a hand through my hair. Who would have thought that Nicholas' strategy to be kind and respectful would actually *work*?

I look at my computer, not actually reading the words. It's another email from Fairmont. Nicholas hasn't committed to anything, yet, still unsure if it's a good move at this stage, but Fairmont is persistent. They aren't demanding an answer, but they're sending regular emails with updates on the progress

they have made with restructuring the store, attempting to regain the trust of the companies that still supply to them.

And they've done quite a lot of work in the last few weeks. Nicholas and I have talked it over, and we're both intrigued by the efforts they've been making. We know that they want out our new product because the advertisement alone will manage to skyrocket them back to success, but it's still a risky maneuver that could easily backfire.

It's clear, however, that Nicholas is considering it.

"Business is all about risk," he said to me three days ago as we read a progress email together. There was something bright and excited in his eyes. "We can't make any progress without a little risk."

From that comment alone, I know that Nicholas will decide to go with Fairmont. He's interested to see what happens and, if I'm honest, we can afford a little loss if it all goes belly up. It will be easy to pull the line from Fairmont if problems occur, and advertise it again at another store, even if some consumers lose faith because of the issues at Fairmont. And if it doesn't work out, then this billion-dollar company and its owner, also worth billions in his own right, will easily be able to meet the fall out if need be.

Still, it would be nice if it doesn't come to that. I forward Fairmont's email on to Nicholas, knowing that he'll want to see it.

Then my stomach lurches. That's been happening a little, lately, and I'm worried that I'm coming down with something due to all the stress. I grimace and take a sip of the tea that I made, hoping to settle my stomach a little.

Though, maybe getting sick wouldn't be *entirely* bad. Sure, being sick is never fun, but it would give me some time off work to get my thoughts back in order.

The office door opens, and I look up at Nicholas. He grins at me.

"Thanks for the email," he says.

Then he's gone again. My heart thumps and I curse. He needs to stop *doing* that. Being so kind and considerate is just making it far harder to forget about what happened between us and, therefore, harder to keep working here.

Though maybe it wouldn't really matter what he did, I think with a sigh. In the end, anything he did would be too much for me right now.

I definitely need a break, I decide.

I'll give it a few more days, and see what happens next. If things don't calm down, I'll put it for a bit of vacation time. Nicholas definitely won't deny me, though I certainly won't be telling him why I need it.

I sigh. I didn't really want it to come to this. Taking time off is my last, desperate move. If that doesn't work, I'll have no choice but to quit my job, despite how much I don't want to. This situation with Nicholas is affecting my work, my mental health and my professional relationship with him. It might be better to cut and run before it gets any worse.

Though... Christy is definitely not helping matters.

As if on cue, my phone vibrates with a message. I don't look at it, just scowl at my work. Christy has been trying to get me to actually think about starting a relationship with Nicholas, which is what I *don't* want. Getting into a relationship with my boss will just complicate everything unnecessarily.

Yet, Christy is convinced, now, that it will be the best thing for me. No matter how many times I tell her that I have no idea what Nicholas thinks of all this and that he appears to be doing a far better job than me at forgetting about us having sex, she seems to think that his current, respectful behavior is a clear sign that he's got deeper feelings for me.

Or, I think sarcastically, that's just Nicholas' way of trying to make me feel comfortable after I all but threw myself at him two weeks ago.

I rub my eyes. I'm tired. I've been sleeping more than usual, lately, and yet still have to drag myself out of bed in the morning, as though all my energy has been sapped overnight.

Yesterday is when the nausea started, though it's not bad enough to affect anything yet, just the occasional lurch as though my body just wants to sometimes remind me that something isn't quite right.

On top of that, a fog has settled over my mind, making it harder to think. I groan and lay my head down on the desk, closing my eyes for a moment. Yeah, I think I'm definitely coming down with something, which definitely hasn't helped me. Maybe I *should* put in for a few sick days.

My computer dings with an incoming email and I drag myself upright again. Maybe I'll consider it in a few days. Right now, there's far too much work to do.

* * *

The next morning, however, it's out of my hands. My stomach is roiling as I wake up, and I make a mad dash to the bathroom, and I only just reach the toilet before I start throwing up.

When I'm done, I sit back and flush the toilet, grimacing at the foul taste in my mouth. I pull myself to my feet and catch sight of myself in the mirror. I'm pale and shaky and overheated.

Definitely sick.

I fumble my way back to bed and slide my aching body under the covers. Then I grab my phone and dial Nicholas' mobile.

"Hello," he greets, sounding far more awake than I feel.

"Nicholas, it's Quinn," I croak through my sore throat.

"Quinn?" Nicholas asks, startled. "Is everything alright?"

"Not quite," I admit. "I started vomiting this morning. I'm too sick to come into work. Sorry, I know that puts you in a bad position right now, especially with how busy we are..."

"Don't even think about it," Nicholas says firmly, cutting me off. "We can definitely manage for a few days, alright? Don't stress about work, just focus on getting better."

Tears spring to my eyes at his kind words. Great, being sick has made me feel emotional, too. I swipe the tears away.

“Thanks, Nicholas,” I say. “I’ll be back to work in a few days, hopefully.”

“I hope so, too,” he says.

Then we hang up and I drop my phone onto the bed with a sigh. Part of me expected Nicholas to be more upset because of how much we still have to do. But, even before all this started, before he started flirting with me, Nicholas was a good boss. He’s always been kind and considerate of me and the rest of his employees, often claiming that treating us right is what helps keep his company running. We all enjoy working for Nicholas. He does his best by us, and we couldn’t ask for anything more.

Which is what will make it so hard if I ended up having to leave.

I close my eyes. I don’t want to think about that right now. I can’t stress about Nicholas and work at the moment, especially if I hope to get better. I just need to focus on feeling well again and take the unexpected boon of a few days off. Things will definitely be better after that, I’m certain of it.

Then my stomach lurches again, I rush for the bathroom once more. Hopefully, *this* part of the sickness won’t last for long. *Then* I can enjoy having a few days off.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nicholas

My first thought, when I hang up the phone and sigh, is worry about Quinn. She definitely didn't sound well over the phone.

My next thought is less altruistic. Part of me wonders if maybe Quinn is actually faking being sick in order to get some time away from me.

I can't say I blame her. The last two weeks have been rather difficult, as much as I hate to admit it. I've tried my best to give her some distance and make her feel more comfortable, but there's no denying the awkwardness that now exists between us, and I have no idea how to get rid of it.

There are probably a lot of factors involved, of course. The first is that she is my employee, and she had sex with me. Secondly, of course, is that she came onto me while she was drunk, something that she likely regrets.

But part of me has to wonder if my family has something to do with it, too. They left a few days after the party, and, other than a few curt replies to questions they asked, and an even colder farewell when they left for the airport, I haven't spoken to them since that night. I still could hardly believe how badly they treated Quinn just because *they* decided she wasn't good enough for me.

Is that night still playing on Quinn's mind, too? I'm trying my best to make her realize that I don't, and never have, seen her that way, that I would *never* treat her as lesser just because she

isn't as rich as I am. But I honestly don't know if she sees it that way. Is there a part of her that can't help but wonder?

If I was in her shoes, I would probably consider the possibility. I sigh and close my eyes. I wish I'd never taken her to that party. My own selfishness, wanting to get my family off my back and, at the same time, hoping to show Quinn that she can have a good time with me outside of work, led to this.

On top of that, I *should* have pushed her away the moment she kissed me. I *knew* she would regret sleeping with me, no matter what she claimed. But, again, I was weak and unable to do what I knew was right.

I really am a complete idiot.

I wish there was someone that I could talk to about all this. But there isn't. I have no close friends. It's pure irony that the person I'm closest to is currently the person who is actively trying to avoid me because of what happened between us.

It makes me feel a little lonely. I have no one to confide in. I sit in a realm that most people don't want to reach into. There's a barrier around me, formed by my wealth and status, that people are drawn to, but no one wants to look beyond any of that.

Quinn does. It's what draws me to her. These last two weeks, I've really thought about what it was about Quinn that made me want her in the first place. She really was different from anyone I know. There were so many things that said I *shouldn't* have even thought about her because she's my employee, but something drew me to her. Then, when she refused me, I was intrigued by her and wanted to know more about what made her tick.

But it's the way that she treats me that first caught my attention. When she first started working here, she was cautious around me, stumbling over her words and hiding the things that she wanted to say, just like every other secretary I ever had. I had resigned myself to putting up with another person who was a nervous wreck around me when, slowly, Quinn started to relax.

I still remember the first time she told me off. I'd come in hungover and not wanting to do any work. Quinn tiptoed around me all day... right until she came in just before she clocked out to discover that I'd done *nothing*. She slammed the papers she'd brought me down on the desk and coldly informed me that, if I didn't intend to do any work, I shouldn't expect her to run around after me. Then she flounced off.

After that, she started speaking her mind to me. She told me when she agreed with me, but she also told me when she didn't. She scolded me when she felt I was being foolish. She rolled her eyes when I told her of my escapades, and her dry wit slowly started emerging.

I don't know how long part of me has been interested in Quinn. The sudden strike that made me realize she was attractive, some months ago, was only the end of a long period of fascination that I couldn't quite name. Flirting with her was both a way to understand what I felt, and to see if I could make those feelings go away.

Instead, I made them stronger. Giving Quinn that engagement ring, false as it was, was so incredibly difficult. I spent hours at the store, scrutinizing each ring to find the perfect one to give her, though of course, I'll never tell her that I bought it rather than just finding it among my collection. I was both anxious and thrilled to be giving her that ring and, when she opened the door on Saturday night, in the dress I'd sent her with the ring on her finger, my heart skipped a beat.

She's beautiful and clever... and I want her. Not just for her body, but because I want to see her smile, to know that she's with me. I think I might be falling in love with her.

Months ago, that thought might have been horrifying to me. I didn't want to settle down. I just wanted to have fun and forget about my loneliness.

But thinking that I might be in love with Quinn... it feels right and makes something in my mind settle into place.

Of course, I've come to the realization far too late. Quinn's regret over our actions on that Saturday night, not to mention her attempts to avoid me over the last two weeks, tell me that

she doesn't want me in the same way. Whether it's because she doesn't feel that way about me, because of my family, or because of some other factor, I don't know. But it's hard to appreciate that the first girl I fall in love with is the *only* woman that I can't actually be with.

I run a hand down my face and glance at the clock. It's eight o'clock. I should have been up and in the shower half an hour ago, but I've been sitting here and ruminating for far too long.

I groan and drag myself out of bed, half wishing that *I* could take a sick day, as well. Regardless of whether she's actually sick or not, I do hope that Quinn is okay, and I'm more than happy to give her the time off that she needs. I don't want to lose her, but I've started to worry, over the last two weeks, that I might. And if she leaves, then that will be it. I'll lose her, both as my employee and as my only friend.

Then I truly would be alone. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to realize just how important Quinn is to me.

* * *

The day without Quinn was hard. Her replacement, sent by the temp agency I called that morning, looking for a fill-in, was not as good as Quinn. Not only was he sycophantic, but he was nowhere near as efficient. Quinn, obviously, has been spoiling me with how good at her job she is.

At the end of the day, I was more than happy when the new worker, whose name I didn't bother to remember, clocked out exactly on time, not staying back even a moment longer to finish any work. Snorting, I type a quick message to Quinn.

'Your replacement SUCKED. It made me appreciate you even more.'

I pause before I send it, though. That sort of message is likely *exactly* what Quinn has been trying so hard to get away from. If I send her this, I'm not giving her the time she needs, and I'll likely end up driving her to quit.

I groan and delete the message. I wish things would just hurry up and go back to normal. At this point, I don't even care if Quinn never returns my feelings. I just want her to stay in my life.

I pack up my things, trying to organize the haphazard papers that Quinn's replacement had given me through the day. Part of me hopes that he won't be back tomorrow, either because Quinn has returned or because the agency decides to send something else.

I'm about to leave, but I stop by Quinn's desk. It's in turmoil, and I hate seeing it that way. Huffing, I tidy it up. Forget it; if Quinn isn't back tomorrow, *I'm* calling the agency and requesting someone else. The guy was absolutely useless.

Once I've done what I could, I leave the building, yawning. Funny how going to work didn't seem as much fun without Quinn there. I missed talking to her, either about work or about anything else. I miss hearing her opinions.

Part of me wants to go to her apartment and beg her on bended knee to stay. I would do anything to make sure she doesn't quit. But I won't do that. It's not what she needs right now. She needs to make her own decisions, no matter what they are.

As I head to my car, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I see Andy look up sharply in the driver's seat, his eyes widening, and then I step aside as a fist flies from nowhere, missing me by inches.

I scramble back a few steps, dropping my briefcase, barely aware of Andy jumping out of the car, jabbering on his phone. I stare at the man that accosted me.

"George?" I ask, stunned.

The man in front of me is fuming, glaring so darkly that it makes a shiver run up my spine. This is the man who made Quinn pretend to be engaged to me.

"You liar!" he shouts, and several people turn to look. "You're both fucking liars! I'll get you both!"

Did he know that Quinn and I weren't engaged? How did he know? Unless...

Quinn didn't wear the ring on her left hand anymore, of course. We're not actually engaged, and we definitely didn't want people to talk. She wore it on her right hand, instead. The only way for George to know that is if he's been watching her.

The thought is horrifying. How long has George been following and watching Quinn? How closely has he been watching her to notice such a small detail as her ring moving?

George steps forward, his arm cocked back again. He's definitely intent on doing some harm. Belatedly wishing that I had taken some self-defense lessons, I nevertheless put up my arms to try and block him.

Then, out of nowhere, my security arrives from the building behind me. Andy must have called them, and I drop my arms in relief as George is grabbed and dragged away.

"I'll get you both!" he rages. "You liars! You fucking liars!"

"Sir, what do you want me to do with him?" asks one of my security guards, frowning heavily.

"Call the police," I say shortly. "Let them deal with him. I'm going home."

I get into the car. George is still shouting obscenities and threats.

"Thanks," I say to Andy as he gets into the car, too.

He shoots me a grin.

"No problem, sir," he says. "Home, then?"

I *should* go home. But...

George's words ring in my mind. "*I'll get you both!*"

"Not yet," I say, making a quick decision that I hope I won't regret. "There's somewhere else we need to go first."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Quinn

A little worried when I continue throwing up throughout the morning, I call the doctor and ask for an appointment. Luckily, there was a cancelation that afternoon. When the time ticks closer to two o'clock, I drag myself out of bed, grabbing the water bottle I'd been sipping all day since water seems to be the only thing I can keep down, and stumble to the first floor of the apartment, calling a taxi; I'm in no condition to drive myself there.

The taxi driver, when he arrives, looks startled when he sees me, and I wonder just how bad I look. He merely nods when I croak the address of the clinic, and I doze off on the short drive, starting awake when we arrive.

"Hope you feel better, ma'am," the driver says to me when I pay him.

"Thank you," I say, managing a small smile.

I close the door behind me and pause as the taxi takes off, swaying slightly. My stomach lurches again as bile rises in my throat, but I take in a deep breath, trying to push it back down. I'm tired of throwing up, especially since there's very little left in my stomach.

When I feel like I can move, I walk into the clinic. There are a few people waiting, some of them flicking through magazines while others were staring at their phones. A handful of people glance up as I walk in, and then, disinterested, they return to what I'm doing.

The woman at the desk, her name tag reading 'Clara', smiles as I arrive.

"I've got an appointment at two-thirty," I say.

"Thank you," she says. "Have you been here before? I just need to check some details."

I grip the edge of the counter and answer her quick questions. Then she smiles at me again.

"Dr. Agnos will be with you shortly," she says. "Please take a seat."

Gratefully, I push myself away and slump into the closest seat. I wasn't sure how long I could remain standing. I feel so *weak* all of a sudden. And I'm overheated and drained. It's ridiculous how strongly this bug has hit me.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and, curious, I look at the message. As soon as I read it, I go cold.

'You're not engaged.'

Another message comes through.

'You're a liar.'

Then several more.

'You're not wearing an engagement ring.'

'You lied to me.'

'Fucking bitch.'

'How dare you lie.'

I stare at the messages. What on earth is going on? The messages are from George. I haven't heard from him in two weeks, and I honestly hoped that I wouldn't hear from him again. But now he's sending me all these accusations.

He is right, of course. I *did* lie to him. I'm *not* engaged. And I'm not wearing the ring Nicholas gave me on the right finger anymore, not wanting questions at work. I hadn't been able to get rid of it completely, though, so I swapped it to my right hand.

How does George know about any of this?

“Quinn Butler?”

I look up, startled. A young, male doctor is at the door, looking around the room. Pushing thoughts of George from my mind, for now, I pull myself unsteadily to my feet, attracting the doctor’s attention.

“This way,” he says.

He leads me down the hallway, into a surprisingly cozy room. I sit down on the chair he gestures to me, paling at the clinical, medicinal smell that permeates the room.

“Now, what can I do for you?” Doctor Agnos asks kindly.

“I’m pretty sick,” I say. “I’ve been throwing up all morning. For about a week I’ve just been so tired and I haven’t been able to eat much.”

The doctor frowns and scoots forward.

“I’m just going to check your temperature and blood pressure,” he says.

He wraps the material around my arm and flicks a switch that momentarily pumps air into it. He hums under his breath as he looks at the numbers on the screen, and then quickly puts a thermometer in my ear, humming again at the result.

“Your temperature and blood pressure are a little high,” he said. “Just to rule it out, is there any chance you could be pregnant?”

I almost laugh. Me, pregnant? Exactly when would I have had the chance for that? I haven’t been with anyone!

Except...

Abruptly, all humor fades. A few weeks ago, I slept with Nicholas. I was quite tipsy, and he’d had a bit to drink, too. Did we use protection? I try to remember and then pale as I realize that, no, we didn’t. I didn’t even think about it.

“I... is that a possibility?” I ask through numb lips.

“Some of your symptoms make it a possibility,” Doctor Agnos says with a nod. “I would suggest you do a test to rule it out if you think there’s a chance. I could also give you a referral to a

specialist who will be able to tell you for sure and do a check-up if there is a baby. In order to rule out other things, I can also order some blood tests. How do you feel about that?"

"I..."

Am I pregnant? These symptoms only started after I slept with Nicholas, and it's been a few weeks since then.

It's possible, isn't it?

"I'll... take the blood tests," I say. My voice sounds distant like it doesn't really belong to me. "I'll do a pregnancy test, too."

"And the referral?" Doctor Agnos asks.

I shake my head.

"Can I... can I get the results back, first?" I ask. "Just to make sure."

He gives me a sympathetic smile. It's probably clear to see that this is not happy news.

"Of course," he says.

He runs off a referral for blood tests for me and slides it over to me.

"See our nurse here," he advises. "She'll take some blood and send it away. You should have the results back in a few days."

"Thank you," I say.

What am I thanking him for? Turning my entire world upside down? God, what if I *am* pregnant? What will I do then?

Suddenly, everything has just become ten times harder.

* * *

I barely remember getting blood taken. The nurse chatted away as she did her job, smiling and laughing at her own jokes, but it feels like I exist inside a bubble, right now. The outside world isn't penetrating the fog over my mind, and the

numbness only increases as I stop at the chemist and purchase a pregnancy test.

Am I pregnant? The question swirls around and around my head. Is it possible?

Unfortunately, it *is* possible. Nicholas and I had unprotected sex that fateful night, and now we might be facing the consequences of it.

What will I do if it turns out that I am pregnant? Nicholas will have to know since the baby will definitely be his. I'll have to decide what to do about the baby. My life will change entirely.

Shit. I'm not prepared for this, at all.

I take the test home. Part of me doesn't want to do it at all. If I don't do the test, then I can ignore the possibility.

Except, that won't work, will it? Eventually, if I *am* pregnant, I will have to face the facts. Fuck, why didn't I think about this weeks ago? I was so concerned about the fact that I slept with Nicholas, and what it would mean for our working relationship, that I didn't think about anything else at all.

Now I'm paying the price for those decisions.

Should I call Nicholas now? Should I tell him what might be possible? I discard the option immediately. If it turns out that I'm not pregnant, then I would have worried him for nothing.

I look at the pregnancy test box. Such an innocuous device. Yet it has the potential of completely changing my life.

I draw in a deep breath. I have to do this. I have to know. There's no point in putting it off any longer. If I know, then I can start making plans, regardless of what the outcome is.

I carry the test into the bathroom. I'm nervous. I know that I don't want it to be positive, but there's always the chance that it will be.

"Please be negative..." I murmur.

I take the test and then take it out of the room, waiting. I don't want to look at it. I don't want to see what it says. Whatever it says now might change everything.

But I have to know.

I take a deep breath and turn the test over.

The blue plus symbol beams up at me. I stare at it, willing it to change, but it doesn't. The truth is starkly in front of me.

I'm pregnant.

I drop the test. It clatters to the floor, but I barely even notice. My mind is completely numb.

I'm pregnant.

I knew it was a possibility. I knew the chance of it was very high, considering how sick I've been and because Nicholas and I recently had unprotected sex. But I really hoped that it still would be negative. Unfortunately, it's not.

I'm pregnant.

I stumble over the couch and sit heavily. What the fuck do I do now?

I need to tell Nicholas. I should pick up the phone right now and call him. He needs to be involved in this because it's his child too.

But I don't even reach for the phone. If I tell Nicholas, it becomes real. Right now, there's just a symbol on a test. If I speak the words out loud, then that will be it. There's no more denial, no more mistakes. It will be out there in the world, and I'll have to accept that this is actually happening to me.

A baby. What am I supposed to do with a baby? I live in a one-bedroom apartment. I work five days a week. My job is my entire life. I'm still single.

I would have to move. Take maternity leave. Possibly cut back my hours until the child is old enough to go to daycare. I would have to find babysitters.

Panic starts to form in my chest, a heavy lump that makes it hard to breathe. I can't have a baby! There's too much to think about! Suddenly, nine months stretch out before me, and the end of it seems far too close.

Fuck. Fuck! What do I do?

Will Nicholas know what to do? This is his child, too. But finding out his thoughts requires telling him, and I just can't do that right now.

I slump down on the pillows of the couch. I want to scream and rant and rage. This... I can't do this. I can't accept this. This shouldn't possible. I don't want to be pregnant!

What am I supposed to do?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nicholas

Andy doesn't ask why we're pulling up outside a nondescript apartment building, or why we stopped briefly for me to collect some flowers, and I don't offer the information. I'm a little nervous; there are many ways Quinn could greet me, and several of them aren't good.

Still, she's my employee, and I want to make sure that she's alright. While I still don't know if her sickness is real, she definitely *sounded* sick on the phone that morning. These flowers are just a get well gift, that's all.

No... I can't lie to myself. George's sudden attack has left me with a ball of dread in me that I can't quite shake. I need to see with my own eyes that Quinn is okay and that George hasn't been here today. I have to see that she's safe.

I only hope that my presence at her apartment won't make things suddenly worse for us both.

"I'll wait here?" Andy asks.

"Yes, please," I say with a nod.

He shrugs, unconcerned, and picks up a book that's sitting on the passenger seat, settling in to wait. I fidget with the flowers for a moment, wondering if I should just leave them in the car before I square my shoulders. I'm not a coward. I bought these flowers, and I'm going to give them to Quinn.

Halfway up in the elevator, however, some of my confidence leaves me. When it dings and the metal doors slide open at

Quinn's floor, I almost didn't get out. I *know* that she doesn't want to see me. She needs time away from me, and, if I'm honest, I also need time away from her to get over the rejection she handed me two weeks ago.

I step out into the corridor, however, and my feet carry me toward her door. It was only two weeks ago that I traveled down this corridor with Quinn, and my only worry had been what I was going to do about my rude family. Now, my problems seem so much larger.

Before I realize it, I'm standing in front of Quinn's door. I hesitate and then, before I can convince myself out of it, I rap quickly on the door.

Part of me hopes that Quinn might be out. But then I hear the sound of rustling behind the door, and I straighten, clearing my throat as I wait. Finally, the door swings open, and everything I was about to say dies in my throat.

Quinn looks ill.

She's pale and drawn, and there are heavy bags under her eyes. On top of that, she's leaning against the door, looking a little unsteady on her feet.

"Nicholas?" she asks. At least her eyes are alert, and her tone is sharp. "What are you doing here?"

"You sounded bad on the phone this morning," I say, gathering myself quickly. "I wanted to make sure you were alright." Remembering the flowers in my hands, I hold them out. "These are a get well soon present."

Quinn takes the flowers, her expression unreadable as she cradles them and surveys the different flowers that make up the bouquet. I don't know whether she's angry or pleased.

Then, finally, she cracks a small smile.

"My replacement was that bad, were they?" she asks.

My chest lightens at the joke.

"The *worst*," I say with feeling. "He had no idea what to do. He left your desk a *mess*. I cleaned up," I add on seeing her expression of horror.

“Thanks,” she says in relief. “Well, at least I know you appreciate my work ethic.”

“I’m going to appreciate it even more from now on,” I agree.

She chuckles, smiling at me.

“Want some coffee?” she offers.

I shouldn’t step in. I remember what happened last time I stepped in this apartment, after all, and I’m having a hard enough time to ignoring the memories as it is.

But Quinn invited me in. That’s not something I can turn down.

“I’d love some,” I say with a nod.

She smiles again and leads me into the apartment. It’s exactly the same as I remember it two weeks ago. Thankfully, her bedroom door is closed, so I don’t have to look through to see the bedroom that Quinn and I...

I shake the thought away. I can’t think about any of that, not right now.

“So, have you been to the doctor?” I ask.

Quinn fumbles with the kettle as she fills it, her shoulders tensing.

“What?” she asks,

“For your sickness,” I say. I frown slightly. Actually, now that I look closer, I can see that Quinn is behaving a little strangely. “You look really unwell.”

“Oh,” she says, relaxing. “I did, yeah. The doctor did some blood tests. I should get the results in a few days.” She shrugs. “It makes more sense for it to just be a stomach bug. Jackson’s kids are all really sick, so he’s probably accidentally spreading the germs.”

Jackson has two children, a seven-year-old daughter, and a three-year-old son. He’s an amazing worker, but he can sometimes be unreliable because of the things he has to do for his children as a single father. One of my board members advised me, once, to fire him. But I’ve been unable to bring

myself to do so. Even if he's occasionally unreliable, he's still one of my best employees.

"Yeah," I agree. "I've been keeping away from him."

"I stopped to talk to him for almost an hour the other day," Quinn says with a grimace.

"No wonder you're sick," I say with a grin.

I half expect her to laugh. But instead she just smiles weakly, and I frown at her. Something is definitely not right here.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Something flashes in her eyes like she's debating something. Eventually, however, she just nods her head.

"Still a bit tired," she says.

I don't buy it. *Something* is wrong, I know it. But I also know that I don't really have the right to push. Quinn is my employee, and I've already taken advantage of her hospitality enough. She doesn't need me to grill her.

"Hopefully it goes away," I say.

She smiles at me, relaxing now that she knows I'm not going to push her.

"Hopefully," she agrees.

She puts sugar and coffee powder into the two cups she's pulled out. Her hands are trembling slightly, I notice. She must have overworked herself while still sick. I pull myself out of my chair and make my way over to her.

"Let me finish that," I offer.

I reach out to take the spoon, but my hand brushes against her. Sparks rush through me, emanating from the point of contact, and I snatch my hand away.

God, I just can't get enough of this woman.

It seems I'm not the only one who felt it, either. Holding her hand close to her chest, as though she has burned it, Quinn turns her head to stare at me with wide eyes.

Our eyes meet. Sparks seem to fly between us, and I suddenly feel short of breath as I remember what happened last time I was in this apartment. I need to get myself under control. I need to leave before I do something I'll regret, and I drive Quinn away for good.

"I can't stop thinking about you," Quinn says,
My thoughts derail instantly.

What?

"Every time I see you," Quinn continues in a low voice, "I feel like I'm drowning. Every moment, you bring me back to that night, when I could feel your hands on me. Part of me wants you so badly, still, despite our agreement." She gives me a burning look. "Do you still want me, Nicholas?"

I need to say 'no'. I need to stop this madness, because I'm not prepared to be shot down the morning after again. But how can I turn this down. I can hear what Quinn isn't actually saying. She's offering herself to me at this moment. She wants me, and she knows that I still want her. She wants to touch me again, and be touched.

"Yes," I say, the word escaping me without permission.

Quinn smiles and steps forward, lightly tracing her fingers over my shirt. Her touch is feather-like, but it still makes something deep within me shudder.

"Good," she breathes.

Then she reaches up and kisses me. My hands settle on her waist and, that's it, I'm gone. The taste of her lips brings me right back to two weeks ago, when I felt Quinn in my arms for the first time ever. Her lips are sweet and a little dry, but her tongue curls around my instantly pushes any thoughts of imperfections from my mind.

"So beautiful," I gasp as we draw away, needing to breathe. "Is this what you want, Quinn? Do you really want this?"

She looks up at me. Her face is clear.

"Yes," she says.

I still can't tell if she's telling the truth or not. At the most, I know she's sober this time, and she's making her decisions with a clearer head.

Right now, for whatever reason, she wants me. And I'm not going to turn that away.

I kiss her again, fiercely this time. She's stepping willingly into my arms, and part of me wants to just hold her tightly and never let her go.

She's mine, for now and always. Mine to love and care for. Mine to help with anything she might need.

Mine.

Our tongues tangle, and I grip Quinn's hips tightly, pulling her close toward me. My cock is stirring, hardening uncomfortably within my pants, and I'm certain that she can feel my growing interest in what's happening between us. She groans deeply, a sound that shoots straight through my body, and wriggles against me, making my gasp as she rubs against my crotch seductively.

We pull away. Quinn is panting and her face is flushed, her pupils blown wide with lust. The sight of her like that is arousing. I can see the affect I'm having on her, and I can't help but want to see what other expressions I can draw out of her. I want to see the look on her face, once more, during the throes of passion.

"Fuck, Nicholas," she groans, reaching up to wind her arms around my neck.

I dip my head down to kiss her jaw, and she angles her neck back to give me better access. I can feel her fluttering pulse, and I kiss it too before making my way down her neck, nipping and licking and kissing as I go. Her skin is salty with sweat already, and she's trembling against me, her body arching toward me as she writhes at my ministrations.

Then, suddenly, her hand dips lower. I feel it trailing down my clothed chest, but I don't pay it any attention until she presses it against the lump in my pants. I pause, my mouth on her

collarbone, my entire body tense as I wait for her to make the next move.

Then she starts to rub, lightly at first and then harder. I moan against her skin, accidentally biting a little harder than I meant to, and she groans, too.

“Fuck, keep doing that, feels so good,” I breathe.

I bite down again and suck on her skin, licking it afterwards to soothe it before doing it again, determined to leave a mark. I can't believe Quinn is having this much of an affect on me already; I feel ready to burst at any moment, and I'm still clothed. I've barely touched her, and I've yet to feel our bare skin pressed together.

But everything about her, from her smell to her body to the touch of her skin, is alluring. She's standing in front of me, and I want her so badly. I want to feel her body wrapped around mine. And then I want to wake up in the morning, look at her sleeping face, and know that she's mine.

She's not. I know she isn't. I'm still not entirely sure what's happening between us right now, especially right after we agreed to pretend that nothing happened last time, but I know there are still important conversations in our future about what is going to happen next between us.

Right now, though, none of that matters. Quinn is here, she's in my arms and, for this moment at least, she *is* mine. I tighten my arms around her.

I'll take what I can get right now and worry about the future later.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Quinn

Too much has happened today. Nicholas, George, the baby... it's all too overwhelming, and it's hard to think.

Then there's the baby to think about, too. Fuck, a baby. What do I do about that? I'm not ready to be a mother. No, I'm not ready to be a *single* mother.

Part of me knows that that's why I'm kissing Nicholas in my kitchen right now. I need to know that *something* is real. Maybe sleeping with Nicholas doesn't make the most sense, but I need to feel something. And Nicholas' body, firm and eager for my touch, is as real as anything that I could be touching right now.

I want to forget about everything that's happened today. And Nicholas is in front of me, offering me the perfect way to do so. Even if it's stupid and I will definitely regret my actions after, I can't help but push closer to Nicholas, seeking more of his touch to drive away all the memories.

"Feels so good," Nicholas groans as I rub my hand up and down his cock, his hips bucking toward me. "More, keep going... fuck!"

He bucks violently as I suddenly squeeze him through his pants, panting. Suddenly, it's not enough. I need to feel his skin against mine.

"Clothes, off," I say, barely cognizant enough to speak in full sentences.

I fumble with his buttons. One of them pops off, the thread breaking, but I don't care enough to watch where it goes. If he wants, I'll fix it later. It's far more important, now, to see and feel the expanse of smooth chest underneath the shirt as I finish unbuttoning it and push it back, allowing it to fall to the floor.

My fingers trace each dip and ridge of his muscles, fascinated by how firm they are. Did I notice this last time? I'm not sure. I slip my hand lower, and he twitches as the pads of my fingers skate over his sides.

At any other time, I might have had a field day with the knowledge that he's obviously ticklish. But playtime is over. I'm not interested in having fun. All I want is the hot, eager body in front of me.

Then Nicholas's hands are on me, pushing up my t-shirt. The material stretches as he tugs it up over my head, mussing my hair, and throws it to the side.

His hands cup my breasts, playing with the lace of my bra and kneading the free skin. The feeling of it is nice as he massages them lightly. His fingers slip under the material of my bra, and I can feel him touching my nipples, even that light contact is enough to tease them to hardness. I groan deeply at the feeling.

"I'm going to take your bra off," Nicholas says. "So I can *play* with these some more."

Oh, yes, that sounds like a good idea. I feel Nicholas' arms go around me as he fumbles with the clasp. When it opens, I drop the bra to the floor, and his hands are on me in an instant, pinching and kneading. His hands are soft and his touch is firm. He flicks my nipples lightly, teasing them, and an electric spark runs through my stomach before spreading outward to the rest of my body.

All too soon, though, it's over. I feel Nicholas walking us backward, and I stumble with him, not wanting to lose him for even a second. My body is ravaged with lust and pleasure, and I'm too far gone to care about anything other than what's coming next.

Then my knees hit the couch and I fall backward. Nicholas stands over me, tangling his hands in my hair, and I see his crotch right in front of me, a noticeable lump in his pants.

Who am I to refuse such an invitation?

I reach out to tug the zipper of Nicholas' pants down, and he pauses, his breath catching. I grin as I pull his trousers down and then his boxers, allowing them both to fall to the floor so he can step out of them and kick them away. His cock springs up in front of me, hard and throbbing, leaking at the tip. This, here, is the proof of how much Nicholas wants me, and it makes something deep within me purr with satisfaction.

"I'm going to suck you," I tell him, looking up at him with hooded eyes.

He opens his mouth to answer, but I don't give him the chance. I lean in and lick the tip of his cock, making his moan as his hips buck slightly. I reach out to grip his hips, preventing him from moving too much, and then I lick a long stripe down his cock, tasting the saltiness of the moisture gathering at the tip of it. He chokes above me.

"Fuck, that feels good," he gasps.

I lick around the tip and then slowly wrap my lips around it, suck lightly. He's shuddering under my hands, gasping and writhing, and the sounds are music to my ears. I want to hear him fall apart as I touch him.

I suck again, harder this time, and his hips try to buck forward, but my hold is preventing it. His hands are pulling on my hair, tugging the strands into a desperate anchor. But it doesn't matter; I have every intention of sucking him until there's nothing left.

I bob my head down further, taking more of his cock into my mouth, lapping at the skin as I go. I can feel him shaking, and his hands are both tugging my back and trying to keep me in place, not sure what he wants. I lick around his cock, feeling how his body is tensing...

And then, suddenly, he pushes me back.

“No,” he gasps. He breathes in deeply, trying to catch his breath, and then he sets his eyes on me. “I want to be in you.”

Well, that changes things a little. I want that too.

Nicholas pushes me back and straddles me. I’m half laying awkwardly against the arm of the couch, but I can’t bring myself to care as I feel the way his body presses against mine, his hard cock digging against my leg. His skin is as slick with sweat as mine and, as I look into his deep blue eyes, I can see that his pupils are dilated with pure want.

He wants this. I want it. For this small, precious moment in time, before reason has a chance to catch up to me, this hot, powerful man belongs to me.

“I want you in me, too,” I say.

At my words, he moves. Suddenly, the air is charged with electric energy, and I gasp as he slides down my body, my legs spreading so he can settle between them. I lift my ankles and wrap them around his waist, locking them at the small of his back as he lines up against me, the tip of his cock rubbing against my entrance.

He glances at me once more, perhaps to ensure that this is okay. I tighten my legs around him, and his eyes darken with lust before he sinks into me.

It’s slow. He pushes in inch by inch, and I can feel every bump and ridge, making my eyes roll back for a moment. Heat rises in me, and I buck my hips up to help, trying to take him even deeper.

Finally, he pushes forward the last inch and we pause, panting. Feeling him within me is almost overwhelming. His cock is pulsing and electricity is dancing across my skin.

But I’m not here to play nice. I reach up to grip his forearms tightly.

“Move,” I gasp.

Nicholas obeys, pulling out and the thrusting back in. He angles around for a moment, a look of concentration on his

face that turns to satisfaction when I cry out, my entire body shuddering, when he hits my sweet spot.

Then he starts a strong, steady pace. Pleasure rushes through me, and I try to meet each of his thrusts with little success, too overwhelmed to do more than allow the feelings to flood me. White and black spots dance across my vision, and my entire world has narrowed down to the feeling of his cock moving in and out of me.

“You feel so good around me,” Nicholas groans.

I clench my muscles around his cock and he moans. The sound shoots through me and, finally, tips me right over the edge. With a shout, my body shudders and releases, my orgasm crashing through me. I can feel Nicholas shaking, too, and I dimly realize that his release has happened at the same time, but I’m too far gone to think too much about him right now.

Slowly, however, my heart rate slows and I slump back on the couch, catching my breath. Nicholas is sitting beside me, groaning, and I can still feel his overheated body pressed along my arm. A tired spark shoots through me, and I shove it away, irritated both at my body’s reaction to Nicholas and at my own inability to stay away from him.

I know, even with my racing heart still calmly slowly, that I’ve made a monumental mistake. I was supposed to forget about sleeping with Nicholas. Trying to put that out of my mind is the only reason, right now, that I can go back to work.

And yet, here I am again, my body aching pleasantly after sex with Nicholas, berating myself for being such an idiot.

What does Nicholas think? I sneak a glance at him, but his eyes are closed and his head is tilted back as he breathes in deeply. I feel horrible, like I’m leading him on. What I’m doing isn’t fair to Nicholas, at all. He’s made it clear that he’s interested in me, and I’ve just used him because I needed comfort.

I open my mouth, and then close it again. What I am going to do? Apologize? It would probably be a start, but there’s nothing that I can say right now that would make any of this

better. He doesn't even know, yet, that this was just meaningless sex for me again.

I glance at him. Maybe not *entirely* meaningless. After all, I can't deny that Nicholas has been on my mind, lately. Then there's the fact that he's the father of my child...

I push the thought away. No. I'm not going there right now. I can't think about that. If I do, I'm going to cry and, if I do that, Nicholas is going to ask me what's wrong, and then I'll either have to tell him or lie to him, and I'm honestly not sure which one I would prefer at the moment...

"Stop thinking so loudly," Nicholas says. He cracks open one eye and glances at me. "I'm tired. Why don't we get some sleep and talk about this when we wake up?"

I feel my heart, which had started to beat frantically as my thoughts raced, start to calm. Yes, that sounds like a good idea.

"Okay," I say with a weak smile.

Nicholas offers me a hand up, and we gather our clothes. Part of me thinks that I should offer Nicholas the couch, but what's the point? He's seen all of me at this point.

"Let's go to bed," I say to him, and head into my bedroom.

He pauses before following, Maybe he expected to stay on the couch, too. It would be the most sensible thing to do. But I'm tired, I still feel sick, and I just want his touch right now. I don't want to be alone. As selfish as it is, especially since I'll have to tell him tomorrow that this can't happen between us again, I just want him to stay with me tonight.

We slide under the covers and I curl up, closing my eyes and hoping sleep comes quickly. Nothing makes sense anymore, and I can only hope things will be better in the morning.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Quinn

I slowly stir to wakefulness. I can hear heavy breathing beside me and I slowly look over to see Nicholas lying there, deeply asleep. His body is angled toward me, and his arm is between us, as though he's trying to hold me in his sleep, but was unsure if he was allowed to.

Part of me is grateful that he didn't. If he had his arm around me, it might have made everything that much harder.

I glance at the clock. It's early. Nicholas likely needs to be at work in a few hours. Normally, I would be too, but I still feel ill.

Remembering why that is, I shoot a look at my dresser, where I've stowed the positive pregnancy test for the moment. I still don't know what to do about that,

And, now, I need to make my decision quickly. I didn't expect Nicholas to come around last night, a smile on his face and flowers in his arms. It disarmed me and, when he came to help me with the coffee and our hands touched, something came over me that I couldn't control. Before I knew it, I kissed him.

Last night, everything felt so amazing. It felt right to have him with me once more, to feel the way his body responded to mine. I gave myself completely to my feelings and decided to deal with any problems later.

Well, now there is a problem. I didn't expect to sleep with Nicholas again, to start with. All the careful plans I made to

ignore the feelings that were slowly rising between us have been smashed to pieces. How am I supposed to face him now?

On top of that, I have no idea what he thinks about it all. He's been doing such a good job of pretending that that night a few weeks ago never happened, a much better job than me. I honestly thought he was happy to forget.

But the way he responded so eagerly last night, the moment I kissed him, told me a different story. He still wanted me in some way. I just don't know what way that is.

I shoot another glance at Nicholas. Still deeply asleep, his face is relaxed and open in sleep.

Slowly, I slide out of bed, gathering some clean underwear and a robe as I do so. My stomach lurches weakly as I move, but I don't feel like I'll throw up again, so I totter out to the kitchen and flick the kettle on with a yawn. Then I hunt for a tea bag, not sure if I can stomach coffee right now, and not wanting to risk it.

My apartment is quiet, but it feels different knowing what has happened here, twice now, and with Nicholas still being here, in my bed. This apartment has always been small but quiet, the result of me being the only one living here. The only time I ever really talk to anyone is when I go to work, or when I nod to one of my neighbors in greeting. This place has always felt a little lonely, a bubble out of place in the world where I'm the only one that exists.

Now Nicholas is within that bubble. I thought it would feel uncomfortable to have him invade my space like this, but it doesn't. Instead, my apartment feels a little brighter and warmer, as though the presence of another person has made everything seem better.

I huff and pour hot water into my cup. If that's the case, I'll just look at getting a cat if I'm really that desperate for companionship.

Deep down, though, I know it isn't about just companionship. It's about Nicholas.

He's here, in my life, and it seems like he's here to stay. I can't get rid of him, no matter how much I try, and god knows I've been trying very hard.

And now it will be even harder. My hand drifts downward and rests on my stomach. Still flat; it's hard to believe that another life is already growing inside of there. A life that Nicholas and I created.

It's a difficult concept to wrap my mind around.

"It's crazy," I whisper out loud.

"What's crazy?"

I almost hit the roof in my shock, and I swing around with a gasp. Nicholas is wandering into the kitchen, yawning widely as he rubs the sleep from his eyes. He's thrown on his rumpled trousers and shirt from the night before, and a spark shoots through me at the thought of him going to work like that.

"Lots of things," I say, telling my heart to stop racing as I draw in a deep breath. "Morning. Do you want coffee?"

"Yes, thank you," he says with another yawn. "Do you want me to make it?"

My stomach curls at the thought of smelling the coffee powder, and I grimace as I pick up the tea.

"Yeah, that's probably for the best," I say, stepping away.

He gives me a sympathetic look as we swap places.

"Still not feeling great?" he asks.

"A bit better than yesterday," I assure him. "But, yeah, still feeling a bit nauseous."

He nods and makes his coffee quickly. I've never actually seen him in a kitchen, before. I'm the only one that uses the little kitchenette at work, running coffees back and forth between myself and Nicholas while we work.

Once he's finished, he takes a sip of it and groans.

"Heavenly," he says. "Exactly what I need to start the day."

I feel a little jealous. I sort of wish I could have coffee but, at the thought, my stomach lurches again and tells me that that wouldn't be the best idea.

"I think I'm going to have to take today off, as well, if that's alright," I say.

"That's fine," he says easily with a nod. "I'm just going to have to call the agency and make sure they send someone different today." He scowls. "Preferably someone a bit more competent."

"The other one was that bad?" I ask sympathetically.

"He mixed up all my papers," Nicholas huffed. "I had to spend most of my time sorting them out. Because of that, I barely got anything done yesterday."

I grimace. That does sound bad.

"I get that these agencies are trying to find jobs for people who are struggling," Nicholas says. "But I run a fast-paced company. I need someone who has at least a little experience in secretarial work. I'm pretty sure the guy yesterday had none. And, if he said he did, then he definitely lied on his resume."

"Shame," I say, making a face. I pause. "Is he the reason you came by yesterday?"

"Sort of," Nicholas says, his smile dropping. "Actually, I came around to make sure you were alright. George tried to attack me on the street, saying that we were liars. He attracted quite a bit of attention before my security detained him. I told them to call the police, but I'm not sure what happened after that."

I frown.

"I'm really sorry," I say.

"I did try and message you about George," Nicholas says. "I was already on my way here, but I wanted you to know. You didn't get it?"

"Actually, George was messaging me too," I admit. "Eventually, I just turned my phone off so that I could get

some rest and not think about him.” I pause. “You don’t think he’ll come here, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Nicholas says, frowning. “He was pretty worked up. Said he saw that you’d moved the ring I gave you.”

“Which means he’s been keeping an eye on me,” I sigh. “Geez, I sure know how to pick them...”

“It should be fine,” he assures me. “It’s actually a pretty easy fix. If he appears in front of us again, we can just tell him that you moved the ring so we didn’t get any questions at work, and to protect you from the media for the time being, since we’re trying to keep them out of our personal life.”

I consider this. It’s really well thought out. It warms me to know that he came up with a plan for my sake, even if it is just more lies that have the potential to backfire horribly.

“Sounds good,” I agree. “If I see him, or if he messages me again, I’ll tell him that. Hopefully, he’ll believe me.”

“Hopefully,” Nicholas echoes.

We fall silent, drinking our warm drinks. Slowly, however, the air becomes heavy and awkward. We both know that we need to talk about what happened between us, but neither of us is willing to bring it up just yet.

I’m not really ready to have a conversation about it. I still don’t know what I want. I don’t know what Nicholas wants.

Maybe it really would be better if I just quit my job and disappeared. But, just now, we were talking amiably, with no sign of tension between us. It was nice. We obviously get along quite well, both in a professional and personal capacity.

So what does that mean going forward?

Finally, Nicholas sighs, breaking the silence first.

“So... last night,” he says.

He’s jumping in the deep end feet first, it appears. I draw in a deep breath and steel myself.

“What happened?” Nicholas asks.

“I’m not sure,” I admit. “I was feeling a little emotional, and I just wanted to be touched. I needed something to feel real after yesterday. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Nicholas assures me quickly. “I was a willing participant, after all.”

I smile reluctantly. He was very willing, that much was for certain.

“The question is, where do we go from here?” Nicholas asks.

It’s the question I don’t really want to answer, if only because I don’t know how to answer it. I run an agitated hand through my hair.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “What do you think?”

Nicholas goes very quiet. I realize that I’m waiting with bated breath for what he will say. His next words will change everything.

“I like you, Quinn,” he says abruptly, and my heart skips a beat at his words. “Very much so. I’ve liked you for some time, though I didn’t completely recognize it. Regardless of what happens next, I’m glad you decided to look past my previous behavior. I am sorry I made you so uncomfortable.” He pauses. “But the fact remains that I’ve been wanting something more with you. Something more than just sex. I want to be with you.”

I stare at him. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Somehow, even in my wildest dreams, I wouldn’t have expected those words to leave Nicholas’ mouth.

He wants to be in a relationship with me? He likes me?

“Wow,” I can’t help but say. A nervous laugh escapes me. “I just... wow, I’m sorry, I didn’t expect that.”

“It’s okay,” Nicholas says, unfazed by my reaction.

Nicholas wants me. He’s saying that unaware that I’m carrying his child, but because he wants me for me. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him about the baby at that moment.

But I still can’t bring myself to say the words.

“Nicholas, I wish I could respond, but I don’t even know what I want,” I admit. “Can I have some time to think about all this?”

“Take all the time you need,” he says to me, nodding. “I understand. And I’ll understand if you come to the conclusion that this isn’t something you want to try.”

“Thanks,” I say, touched by his words. “I’ll keep that in mind.

“In the meantime... let me take you out to dinner tonight if you’re feeling up to it,” Nicholas says. “Not as a date, not really,” he adds hurriedly. “Consider it me making up for my family’s behavior at the party.”

Going to dinner with Nicholas is probably just asking for trouble. But it would be nice, too, I decide abruptly. I’m sure I can handle having a small dinner with my boss.

“Alright,” I agree. “What time?”

“Six?” he suggests. “I’ll pick you up from here.”

I glance at the clock. There’s plenty of time to get ready.

“Okay,” I say with a smile.

I’m not sure where this is going, or even if I want it to go any further than it already has. Regardless, I can’t help but smile back when he beams at my exuberance.

I’ll just see where the current takes me. And, hopefully, I’ll find a moment to tell Nicholas about his child, as well.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nicholas

After work, I stop by my house to get changed for the second time that day, the first being when I needed to quickly pop home that morning since I was still wearing yesterday's clothes. I want to look nice for dinner with Quinn. It might not exactly be a date, but it is going to be a nice night. It's the night I'll finally get to make up for the utter fiasco the engagement party with my family was.

I still haven't spoken to them, and they hadn't reached out to me, either. I'm mad at them for the way they treated Quinn, and they're offended that I'm mad when they don't feel like I have any reason to be. It's become a stalemate to see who will break first and make contact with the other side.

Normally, it's me. After months of silence when I left for America, I broke down and messaged my parents, too lonely to remember all the reasons why I hadn't contacted them in the first place. This time, however, is different. This time they've insulted someone besides me, someone that I care for quite deeply. I have no intention of talking to any of them until I get some sort of apology, no matter how long it takes.

They have no right to decide who is and isn't good for. If I've chosen Quinn, then they need to just accept that and keep their mouths shut against their prejudice.

I grimace into the mirror as I button my shirt. Not that choosing Quinn has done me much good these days. It's

becoming more and more obvious that she might not chose me back.

Though.... I got a little closer this morning. I didn't get an outright 'no' when I brought the subject up. Instead, she told me that she wasn't sure how she felt and asked for a bit of time to think about it all.

I'll give her all the time in the world. Her words have given me the tiniest sliver of hope that maybe this *will* work out, after all.

I finish buttoning my shirt and shrug on my jacket. I told Quinn that this place isn't overly formal. She insisted that she would be okay for dinner tonight, despite once more not coming into work today, but I wanted to make sure that the restaurant I chose served foods that she would be able to eat on a currently weak stomach.

Paolini's is not the type of place I would normally choose. Its main draw is in being a family restaurant, and the food is nowhere near as rich as the thing things I'm used to consuming, so this will definitely be a change for me. But I have a feeling that Quinn will be more comfortable in a place like this.

I grin at my reflection. If I'm lucky, I might even win some brownie points.

Andy is waiting for me in the car. I'd forgotten to send him a message last night in the heat of the moment, but he knows me well enough to leave if I'm still at a woman's place after two hours, and then to pick me up the next morning. It's a sad reflection of my current lifestyle.

That can change, I tell myself. For Quinn, that part of my life has already changed. I won't go back to sleeping around like that, especially while I'm so busy chasing Quinn and trying to figure out the full extent of my feelings for her. I know I'm falling in love with her. But, every day, it startles me to realize just how deeply I'm falling for her.

"Where to, sir?" Andy asks.

"The same apartment as yesterday," I say.

I see Andy raise his eyebrow. It's not often that I return to a woman's place, especially not the next day.

"Do you know this woman?" Andy asks curiously.

Then he pauses, suddenly realizing that he's asked a very personal question. I just smile.

"She's my employee, and she's been sick," I answer, ignoring Andy's sudden anxiety; it's nice that he finally feels comfortable enough around me to say what's on his mind.

"She's also the woman I'm falling in love with."

Startled, Andy glances in the rearview mirror. I just smile back at him, completely comfortable with the words that just exited my mouth. Because they were the truth, and I didn't mind shouting it to the entire world.

Quinn is quickly becoming my everything. Even if nothing happens between us, I don't mind the people around me knowing that.

"I see," Andy says slowly. A small smile blooms across his face. "I'm happy for you, sir."

He doesn't say anything more on the matter as he drives me to Quinn's apartment, but the silence between us is more comfortable, as though Andy suddenly feels a lot more relaxed in my presence. I appreciate it more than I can say.

"Do you want me to wait?" Andy asks as he parks carefully.

"Yes, please," I say. "Quinn and I are going to a restaurant."

"Quinn... the woman who was pretending to be your fiancée?" Andy muses.

"That's the one," I grin.

I leave the car, hearing Andy chuckle, and I stretch. I feel good. Quinn has agreed to go to dinner with me, Andy is chatting with me, and the night is clear and fresh. Tonight is good.

When I get to Quinn's door, I straighten my jacket, hoping I'm not overdressed. I forewent my usual suits to wear a nice shirt and a pair of dark blue jeans, the only semi-casual clothing

that I could find in my closet. I clear my throat and knock on the door.

It opens immediately, and my eyes rove over Quinn. She's chosen to wear a loose blouse and a long skirt, mindful of the still cool weather. She looks beautiful with her hair pinned back and a simple pair of sparkling studs in her ears.

"Hey," she says, smiling at me.

"Hello," I return. "How are you feeling?"

"Better," she admits. "I've spent most of the day resting, and I don't feel sick anymore."

"Good," I say warmly, nodding.

I don't ask her when she'll be back to work, though I think she might be expecting me to. I have a feeling that she might take a little more time off if only to center herself before she returns. I'm happy to put up with a long line of incompetent secretaries as long as she does, eventually, return.

I offer her my arm, and she smiles as she takes it, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"Ready to go?" I ask her.

"Yeah," she says, smiling.

I lead her downstairs and to the car, where Andy is patiently waiting for us. He smiles when he sees us, opening the door for Quinn.

"Good evening," he greets.

"Good evening," Quinn says in return. "Andy, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Andy says, pleased. "It's nice to see you again, Quinn."

Quinn smiles, charmed, and Andy winks at me. I laugh softly as we get in the car, murmuring to Andy where we're going as I do; I don't want Quinn to know just yet.

I watch her face as we drive the short distance, and I'm rewarded when her eyes widen as we pull up in front of

Paolini's. She blinks wildly and then turns to me. No doubt she had been expecting me to take her to a fancier restaurant.

I feel a moment of panic. Have I misstepped?

"I thought you might not be able to eat foods that are really rich," I explain before she can ask, my shoulders tensing. "And the atmosphere is a bit warmer here."

She stares at me for a long moment, her eyes searching my face. And then she starts to smile.

It's a smile that I haven't seen before. It's warm and full, stretching across her cheeks and filling her eyes with joy. It's the sort of smile that tugs a smile from me in return, warmth suffusing my chest at the feelings she awakens within me.

"Thank you," she says simply.

Andy opens the door for her then, and she slips out. I stay sitting for a moment, giddy with the feeling that I've managed to do something right for once. I made her happy. The feeling that gives me is heady.

The restaurant, thankfully, isn't overly busy, and the smiling waitress directs us to sit at a small table in the corner, right next to a beautiful picture of a flowering field. The seats are comfortable, and the menus in front of us are bright and colorful.

It's a nice place, much nicer than some of the fancy restaurants that I tend to frequent. I'm going to have to come here more often.

Hopefully with Quinn.

"There are some nice things on the menu," Quinn comments. She glances at me. "You don't mind if I just get some soup and salad though, do you?"

"Get whatever you want," I assure her. "I knew you'd want something light to eat, which is why I brought you here."

She smiles that smile at me again and then turns to peruse the menu, scanning the items on it. I turn my attention to the menu as well, trying to wipe the silly smile off my face before she notices it.

Before long, the waitress returns, carrying a jug of water and two glasses.

“Are you ready to order?” she asks.

“Yes, please,” Quinn says, and I nod.

Quinn orders a mushroom and chicken soup, along with a garden salad. I order a schnitzel with some chips. The waitress writes them both down.

“Any drinks?” she asks.

Quinn and I glance at each other. I can almost see the same thought going through both our minds. Neither of us want to take the chance on alcohol after what happened between us two weeks ago.

“Water is fine,” I say.

Quinn grins as the waitress leaves, and leans across the table.

“So,” she says conversationally. “How did today’s secretary do?”

“Marginally better,” I grumble. “She at least knew how to stack papers properly. She left the kitchenette in a mess, though; there was sugar and coffee powder all over it. And there were coffee stains on your desk.”

“So, she’s messy,” Quinn laughs. “At least she was good at her job, though?”

“She wasn’t *bad*,” I admit. “I’m looking forward to your return.”

I didn’t mean to say the words. The air between us is sucked away. Then Quinn sighs.

“Right now, I have no plans on leaving,” she says.

It’s not a definite confirmation that she’ll be returning. But I’ll take what I can get. I give her a nod, regretting bringing it up. Thankfully, Quinn smiles slightly and changes the subject.

“George was let go,” she says. “He messaged me again today to tell me that the police didn’t hold him for long and that he’s angry at both of us for lying. I did message him what you said,

about us trying to keep a low profile, and he never replied. So, just be careful. I've never seen him like this before. I don't want him to come after you again."

"I'm more worried about him coming after you," I tell her. "He obviously knows where you live, and he's been watching you. Have you informed your building security about him?"

"I have," she nods. "There's not much else I can do, though. He's just messaging me, and his threats are pretty vague. The police would never listen to me."

"They might listen to me," I point out.

"Maybe, but you need to stop involving yourself," she says severely. "You can't afford to get involved in something like this, especially since you have your reputation and company to think about. Just leave George to me. He's probably going to disappear now, anyway."

I'm honestly not so certain, but I don't say anything, just give her a tight smile. George is definitely a problem but, like Quinn, I know there's little either of us can do about it right now.

I sit back and decide to put George out of my mind tonight. I'm here at dinner with Quinn, and we're having a pleasant time. Anything else can wait until later.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Quinn

As dinner carries on, it stays in the back of mind that I *still* haven't told Nicholas about our baby. The thought niggles at me as the hours slip away. We're at dinner, and we're having a good time together; this would be the perfect moment to tell him.

But I can't. Every time I consider saying the words, anxiety explodes within me, and my tongue freezes before I can say anything. A lump forms in my throat and I swallow around it. This is getting ridiculous. I need to tell him.

Later.

I'll tell him later when my heart stops beating so quickly every time I think about saying anything to him.

It doesn't really help that we're having such a good time tonight, either. This dinner isn't quite a date but, at the same time, it has all the feel of one. We're both dressed nicely. Nicholas is being extremely courteous, and he even made sure to bring me to a restaurant he knew I would like. He picked me up, complimented me, and made sure everything was alright with me before he took me out. Nicholas knows that this isn't a date; he's the one that phrased it as him making up for the fiasco that meeting his family turned out to be, after all. Yet it seems that neither of us can prevent ourselves from falling into classic date behavior.

Then there's the conversation. While I don't actively avoid conversing with Nicholas at work, our conversations are

usually short because there's so much to do. Tonight, though, work is off the table. I've been out of the office for two days, so I can't chat with him about recent work matters. Instead, we end up talking about the two dreadful secretaries Nicholas has put up with while I've been ill, about how he hasn't spoken to his family since that night, about our favorite foods, interesting movies we've watched, the last time either of us got on a plane... the conversation flew fast, jumping from one thing to another until I couldn't remember, anymore, how it all started.

And it's nice. Nicholas' voice is deep and steady, his thick accent clear as he enunciates each word carefully. I find myself hanging onto his every word, conditioned to do so over the years of having to listen to his every order and follow it to the letter. I'm truly fascinated by what he's saying, however, and I burst out laughing when he admits to being a gamer.

"I wouldn't have pegged it!" I exclaim. "What sort of games do you have?"

He shifts guiltily in his seat. "I have most of the consoles that are out. Then I just pick up whatever games catch my attention."

My eyes widen. In recent years, quite a few gaming consoles have come out.

"You must have an entire room just dedicated to gaming," I joke. He blushes and doesn't laugh, making me stare. "Really?"

"I had to put them somewhere," he protests.

"This I have to see," I decide.

"Do you play games much?" Nicholas asks curiously.

"Not much," I say with a shrug. "I like some games, but I'm usually too busy."

"I need to start giving you some time off so you can get a hobby," Nicholas says wryly.

"I have a hobby," I protest. "I read... sometimes."

"That just proves my point," Nicholas says. "When you feel better, I'm making you take some vacation time."

“I’ll hold you to that,” I tease.

We both know that it’s unlikely I’ll take the time, though. I live for my work and have for years. I would be lost if I didn’t have work to go to. Already, while I’ve been sick, I’ve felt restless and uneasy.

Then I remember *why* I’ve been unwell, and I deflate. When the baby comes, what will I do about work, then? I’ll have to take some time off. And, maybe eventually, I’ll have to either work less or even quit my job.

I shake the thought away. No. I don’t want to think about this right now. I just have to focus on the near future. I can think about the baby when my due date draws nearer. For now, I just need to put it out of my mind.

“Anyway, are you serious about seeing the gaming room?” Nicholas asks. “I didn’t get a chance to give you a tour the other week. I can show you around tonight.”

Part of me thinks that isn’t the best idea. But I’m admittedly curious about Nicholas’ world. I caught a glimpse of it a few weeks ago, during the party, but the house was far larger. I’d be interested in how Nicholas manages to live in that massive place on his own.

“Yeah, sure,” I agree. “I’d like that.”

It’ll be fine. We’re two grown adults who can control themselves around each other. I’m certain of it.

* * *

Nicholas’ house is just as large as I remember and no less impressive than the first time I saw it. I watch as it comes into view while we travel down the driveway. There are far fewer cars here tonight, and Andy draws in carefully beside a blue one.

“Want me to wait so I can take Quinn home?” he asks.

“No, it’s okay, I’ll drive her home,” Nicholas says with a grin. “You get home. Thanks, Andy.”

“My pleasure, sir,” says Andy.

He bids us farewell and then he’s gone, driving down the driveway again. I eye the blue car that’s sitting there curiously. Hadn’t Nicholas’ car been black?

“Yes,” Nicholas says with a shrug. “But I put it in the garage since I felt like driving this one.”

Wait... Does Nicholas have more than one car? The thought makes me feel a little shocked. I struggle enough owning just one car, especially since it’s an old piece of junk that’s at the mechanic every few weeks since I can’t afford a new one right now.

It’s a very stark, startling difference between Nicholas and me.

“Right,” I say. “So, tour?”

The house isn’t lit up like last time, but the dimness of the entrance makes me relax. There’s definitely no one here about to jump out and glare at me again.

“It’s a bit different without other people around,” I comment.

It’s a good difference right now, but Nicholas’ lips twist.

“Yes,” he says. “I’ve considered renting rooms out, but I have no idea if the people who apply will be trustworthy. The last thing I want to do is invite a thief into my home.”

Poor Nicholas. There are definitely things that he has to think about that I’ve never considered.

“I still think it’s worth looking into,” I urge him.

If Nicholas had roommates, he probably wouldn’t feel as lonely. Drifting around this huge mansion on his own is probably hard, sometimes.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Nicholas asks.

No... Alcohol is a no go, especially while Nicholas and I are alone. Then, of course, there’s the fact that I can’t drink alcohol while I’m pregnant.

“No, thanks,” I say. “I’m feeling a little unwell.”

Seconds later, I know I've used the wrong excuse. Nicholas' head whips around toward me, his face paling.

"Are you alright?" he asks sharply. "Do you feel nauseous again? Headache? Throat sore?"

I lean back from the sudden barrage of questions. It's hilarious that Nicholas is such a mother hen, but I can't say I appreciate the inquisition.

"No... nothing like that, but I have been sick, so I'm just exhausted," I claim.

"Right," Nicholas says with a determined nod. "There are some guest rooms made up already. You can stay the night if you'd like."

I'm taken aback, both by the offer and the fact that Nicholas is giving me a hard look that says he's unwilling to back down from this. He really is serious about caring about my health, isn't he?

I'm touched. But...

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," I admit. "Look, our track record isn't great right now. Twice, now, we've been alone at night, and..." I shake my head. "Staying here overnight might just be tempting fate."

Nicholas snorts.

"Right," he says, his voice dry. "Either way, if you're sick, it would be better for you to lie down. Why don't you come and lay on the couch for a bit?"

Without waiting for an answer, he grabs my hand and pulls, intending on heading for the living room.

Instead, we both freeze.

As soon as our skin comes into contact, sparks shoot through us both. My entire body shudders at the sensations. My eyes widen and my breath catches as Nicholas slowly turns to look at me.

He's is coming closer. He's moving quickly, giving me more than enough time to move or push him away, but I'm rooted to

the spot. Do I want him to kiss me? Part of me wants to say 'definitely not'. But the part that's keeping me here as he draws near is almost vibrating in excitement and anticipation. I want this. I want to kiss him again.

God... I knew coming here was a bad idea.

His lips touch mine. It's a feather-light touch that leaves me aching for more, and I lean in toward him as he pulls back, needing to taste him once more. I want him. I've wanted him for some time now, and he's within my grasp, somehow. But I didn't realize that *my* feelings for Nicholas have been growing in intensity.

I know I can't do this. I've tried my hardest to put some distance between Nicholas and I, and it was almost working until he showed up at my door, worried about George. Part of me is happy about that, while the rest of me wishes that he could have just stayed away, but there's nothing I can do about it now.

Nicholas deepens the kiss. I'm responding to him, my body gravitating toward him, and I know I'm lost. I can't help it. I want Nicholas. The two times I've had sex with him have just made me want more. Now he's here in front of me, in the middle of his hallway, kissing me again, and I never want it to stop. I press my mouth eagerly against his, tangling our tongues together and kissing him back just as intensely.

I can feel his hands roaming around my body, but I pay them little mind as I tug at the buttons on his shirt. I know where this is leading. I know what we both want.

It's a mistake. I know it is. But none of that matters, right now. What matters the most is the feel of Nicholas touching me before he thrusts inside of me. It's all I want, all of a sudden.

And he's here in front of me, ready to do anything I ask of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nicholas

I'm kissing Quinn. I thought for sure that she would push me away, but she just looked so beautiful at that moment that I couldn't help leaning in and capturing her lips, her allure too strong to resist. I needed to taste her lips again, desperate to chase that warm, euphoric feeling that fills me when I touch her.

The biggest surprise of the night is not the kiss, however. It's the way Quinn responds to it. Instead of pushing me away, she wraps her arms around me and pulls me much closer, dragging me in as far as she can while we stand in the hallway.

Something in me snaps. I just can't get enough of Quinn. I need her in every way possible, and, here she is, offering her body to me once more. I need her. There's no room for logic or rationality anymore.

It's just her, me, and this connection between us that we can't see to escape, no matter how hard we try.

I push her back until she hits the wall, and she arches against it, pushing her body against mine. The whole length of my body presses against her, and the way she moves against me drives me wild, making fire twirl around me until sweat slides down my face and my breath catches in my throat.

I can't get enough of her. I feel Quinn's smooth skin as I slide my hands down her arms, and press kisses across her jaw, making her tilt her head back. She's bucking against me, and my pants are so incredibly tight. I want everything to move

quickly but, at the same time, I want this to stretch out forever until the only things left in the world are her, me, and the way we touch each other.

Suddenly, I hear a sharp intake of breath.

“Fuck, do that again,” Quinn moans.

I pause. I’ve moved down to her collar bone, mouthing at a dip between her neck and shoulder, and her whole body jerked when I bit a certain spot on her skin. Experimentally, I bite down lightly again, and she writhes, gasping at the sensation. I’ve obviously found a particularly sensitive spot.

This is what I want. I want to explore Quinn’s body and find every part of her that makes her twitch and gasp and shout. I want to know her body as well as I know my own. Already, I know things about her, things that I’ve noticed during our previous encounters. She favors her left hand when she’s stroking my cock, despite being right-handed. She loves it when I run my hands down her thighs. She’s surprisingly wild in bed, liking rough, hard sex, though perhaps that’s because she only ever has sex with me when she’s trying to forget something. There’s a smattering of freckles over her shoulder. Then there are the freckles, beauty marks and scars all over her body, each with a story to tell.

I want to worship each spot and find out where they all came from. But I restrain myself because that’s such an intimate thing, and I doubt Quinn wants that, especially since we only recently spoke about taking our time so she could think about what’s happening a little more.

So much for that idea. We probably should have guessed it would never have worked, considering the chemistry that exists between us, but even I didn’t assume we’d fall into bed together again so quickly.

I just have to hope that this doesn’t make things worse. The last thing I want, right now, is for Quinn to disappear again.

“What are you doing?” Quinn asks softly, obviously noticing the way my hands are roaming around her body, tracing the

scar on her shoulder, the mark on her hip, and other parts of her body that makes her uniquely Quinn.

“Loving how amazing you are,” I say, kissing a trail down her neck and over her shoulder.

She doesn't respond, simply grips my shoulders tightly, winding a leg behind my knees to drag me in closer. I feel the way her body is pressed so tightly against mine, and I know I need her.

“Are you going to fuck me out here, or do you want to go to the bedroom?” Quinn gasps, tilting her head back against the wall.

Fire sweeps through me at her words.

“We need to go upstairs for a room,” I tell her.

Something sparks in her eyes.

“Fuck that,” she says. “It's too far away.”

She drags me in. She intends to have me right here and now, and I can't say no. There's a door beside us, and I fumble with it for a moment before managing to push it open.

“Study,” I groan when she looks up at me.

“The study will do,” she purrs.

It's not romantic or sweet. Everything about this meeting is hasty and desperate. It's everything that I wanted when I first decided I would sleep with Quinn and everything I've despaired of since I realized that my feelings for her were stronger than I expected. But I don't think about that, because she's here with me, and it's far more important that I have her right now. I can care about the hows and whys later.

My study is lined with bookshelves, only a seldom-used desk near the window and a couch that I regularly flop on while reading. I push Quinn back, heading for the couch. It gives me the oddest sense of *déjà vu*; we had sex on *her* couch, last time.

My couch is thick and plush, as good as any bed. I guide her toward it, intending on pushing her down onto it, when she

suddenly changes our position, curling her body around mine before shoving me down onto the pillows. I start to sit up, startled by the suddenness of it, but she pushes me back until I'm lying down and straddles me. Her eyes are dark with want behind her glasses, and strands of blonde hair fall into her hazel eyes.

"I'm going to ride you," she says, sliding her hands over my chest. "I'm going to take your dick out of your pants and ride you so hard you'll scream my name."

Oh yes, I can get behind that. I groan at her filthy words, panting. I want that very much. I want to feel her moving on top of me, showing me just the way she likes it.

"Yes, fuck yourself on me," I hiss.

She scrambles with my pants, undoing the zipper and pushing them down, followed by my boxers. Then she moves her hand over my shirt, undoing the buttons and parting it. It leaves me half-dressed, my cock springing free, waiting eagerly for her body.

"You're still wearing too many clothes," I tell her.

"Good," she purrs.

She lifts herself up and flips up her skirt, revealing the satin panties underneath. Then she shimmies them down her hips, lifting her leg off me for just a moment so she can slide them off completely and drop the floor.

Then she straddles me again, her skirt riding up around her hips, fully intending on fucking me like that. My breath catches and I settle my hands on her hips, holding on tightly as she lines herself up and slowly sinks down onto my cock.

The heat is overwhelming. My body trembles as she slowly takes me in, pushing down until she's sitting on my hips, my cock fully sheathed within her. She gasps, her head thrown back, her fingers digging into my shoulder.

"That feels so fucking good," she breathes, struggling to draw in a deep breath.

I wait, trying not to move, as she adjusts. Before long, however, she raises herself up and then thrusts herself down, my hips bucking up to meet her.

Quinn sets the pace, bouncing on my lap, and the world is full of gasps, groans and the slap of skin. I guide her as much as I can, meeting each thrust to go deeper and deeper into her body, struggling in the fire blazing around us. I can see her above me, her body moving against mine, her eyes half-closed and her mouth open as she rides me, chasing both her pleasure and mind.

But I can already feel her faltering, her knees trembling as she struggles to lift herself, too overwrought to continue like this for long. Finally, when she clumsily misses a thrust, I reach up to grip her shoulders, wrap a leg around her knees, and push.

Quinn tumbles back and I go with her, my cock pushing deeper into her body before I manage to stop myself from falling on her completely. Quinn looks up at me, splayed on the cushions, panting.

“Fuck me,” she gasps.

I pull out and thrust back in. We’re both close, now, and I’m determined to take us both over the edge. Quinn writhes beneath me, her nails scratching down my arms, and black spots are already forming in my vision.

Finally, I fall over the edge. My orgasm hits me hard, ravaging my body, and I’m dimly aware of Quinn shuddering beneath me, too, groaning. The crashing waves of pleasure seem to last forever, but, eventually, they fade, and I’m left with the sound of my own thundering heartbeat and gasping breaths.

“Fuck, that was good,” Quinn breaths.

I push myself off her and collapse onto the couch. My shirt is hanging off my shoulders, and I’m soaked in sweat. A yawn rises up in me, and it’s impossible to fight it.

“Bed?” I suggest. I hesitate, not sure if I should say the next part in case it ruins the illusion that’s come over us both, but the words escape me anyway. “We can talk about this in the morning.”

Quinn shoots me an unreadable look. Part of me wonders if she's about to refuse and go home so she can avoid the looming awkward conversation. But then she nods.

"Sounds good," she says.

Her voice is quiet, and the reason is starting to come back to her eyes, bringing with it shock and unease. I know, just from that expression alone, that our conversation tomorrow isn't going to go well.

But that's for tomorrow. For now, I can bask in the feeling of being well sated and put it out of my mind until I'm forced to face it.

* * *

I wake suddenly, with full memory of what transpired the night before. For a long moment, I almost don't want to open my eyes.

But I know I have to. I have to face what happened. This time, it was me who initiated it, too busy thinking with my cock than my head. If I'd just stopped to *think* for a moment, I would have realized what a bad idea it was.

But I didn't. And now Quinn and I are in bed once more, naked, after having sex the night before. The only difference, this time, is that we're at *my* house rather than at her apartment.

When I open my eyes, I know I have to face Quinn. I know that we're equally responsible for what happened, of course, but I can't help but feel that me starting it was what put us in *today's* mess.

Though, maybe I shouldn't be *too* hard on myself. Quinn, after all, started it the other times.

There's no point putting it off anymore. I open my eyes and lift my head.

Quinn is already awake. That shouldn't surprise me, after what happened. She's staring at the opposite wall blankly, though

she blinks to awareness when she hears me shifting.

“Nicholas,” she greets. She tries to smile, but it comes out like a grimace. “It looks like we really can’t trust ourselves, after all.”

There’s a lot I want to say to that. The top thing is that there’s a *reason* this keeps happening between us. Obviously there is chemistry there, and denying it is just making everything worse.

But I don’t say it. Quinn doesn’t need to hear it just now.

“What do we do, Nicholas?” she asks. Her eyes are searching mine, desperately looking for an answer.

But I don’t know. I know what I want, and I know what Quinn wants, and our wishes are vastly different. Because of that, we keep clashing in the middle and end up in encounters like these that leave a bad aftertaste and a mile-long road of regrets behind us.

All I know is that something definitely needs to change.

I just wish I knew how to make that change happen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quinn

How the fuck am I supposed to face Nicholas now? I gave him a big speech about needing to think about it, about not being sure whether my thoughts on a relationship are positive or not right now.

Then I go and have sex with him at the first chance I have. I'm probably sending him such mixed signals that the poor guy has no idea what's going on.

I sigh and slump back on my couch. I'm bored, upset and guilty. At least I'm too sick to go and say something stupid to try and make it up to Nicholas. Or to get his attention... whichever happens to come first.

I shake the thought out of my mind. What is *wrong* with me?

I'm starting to think that the only option is to quit my job. It's a drastic option, but I can't be trusted around Nicholas anymore. And there's too much going on, what with George starting to send me small messages again and a baby growing in my stomach, to have to keep worrying about being alone with Nicholas and these *feelings* that I keep experiencing when I see him.

I'm not entirely sure what's going on. My heart thumps when I see Nicholas, which is normal. When *isn't* normal is how warm I feel when he enters the room, as though he's brought a little bit of the sunlight with him. I'm starting to think that my feelings for Nicholas run deeper than I thought they did.

And, if that's the case, then I *do* need to quit. Because I love my job, and I don't think I would want to leave until right before the baby is born.

I grimace. I only hope that I manage to work up the courage to tell Nicholas about the baby before I make the final decision about my job.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. My shoulders instantly loosen. I messaged Christy an hour ago, to see when she could keep me company for a little while, and she messaged back that she was out shopping, and that she would join me soon.

As soon as Christy steps inside, she takes one look at the bags under my eyes and at my pale, drawn expression before scowling.

"Sit," she orders, pointing sternly at the couch. "You look horrible. Are you still sick?"

"Um. Not really," I venture.

I wouldn't call it an *illness*, anyway...

Christy frowns at me like she doesn't believe me, her eyes narrowing. It makes me sit quickly on the couch.

"So?" she finally asks. "What's been happening? Why do you look like shit?"

I wince. Her blunt appraisal is painful to hear. I've really let myself go the last few days. I run a hand through my hair, grimacing at how dry it feels. I really need to look after myself better, especially since...

My hand drops down to my stomach. I have a baby growing there, now. I need to look after myself if I want the baby to be healthy and happy from now on.

"Quinn?" Christy asks, her voice full of concern.

I look up with a weak smile. Nicholas is the person I *should* be telling, but I just can't bring myself to do that right now. Instead, I'll talk to the woman who has always been there for me. Christy might not be able to take this burden from me, but experience tells me that she'll help it feel a lot lighter.

“I’m pregnant,” I say simply.

Christy stares at me, her mouth falling open. She looks over my face, trying to see some trace of the joe she seems to half-believe I’m telling, and I just gaze back at her seriously.

“Seriously?” Christy finally asks in a hushed voice. “How long?”

“Just a few weeks, I’d say,” I say with a shrug.

I see the moment she gets it. There’s only been one man that I’ve slept with in recent weeks, after all.

“Nicholas’?” she asks incredulously. “Does he know yet?”

“Not yet,” I say, shaking my head. “I haven’t even wrapped my head around it. I need to figure this out before I even think about telling him.”

Christy sits down on the couch as well, shocked. This is not what she was expecting to hear when I called her around.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she admits. “This is just... it’s *really* unexpected.”

“How do you think I feel,” I point out. I sigh. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Well, your next step should be to tell Nicholas,” Christy says instantly.

I knew she’d say that, of course. After all, she’s been trying to get me to talk to the guy since we slept together after his brother’s engagement party. Part of me suspects that she’s got some crazy notion of ‘true love’ stuck in her head, but I don’t believe in that sort of thing. As far as I’m concerned, Nicholas is my boss and our relationship that *shouldn’t* have progressed the way it did.

“I’ll get to it,” I say, a hint of annoyance creeping into my tone. I’m tired, I’m sick, and there’s way too much to think about right now. “When I’m ready. In the meantime, I’ve been stupidly sick every day.”

“Morning sickness?” Christy asks, accepting the change of subject with nothing more than a slanted glance at me.

“Bad,” I say with a nod. “It was why I went to the doctor in the first place. I can barely keep anything down in the morning. I’ve had to take a few days off work.”

“I thought you were going to take a few days off, anyway?” Christy asks.

“Not sick days,” I snort. “Being sick sucks. I don’t have any desire to think things through. I just want to sleep all the time.”

“Pregnancy can do that,” Christy points out. “We’re going to have to do some research to make sure both you and the baby are healthy at all times. Have you booked an appointment to see a gynecologist yet?”

A seed of panic blooms in my stomach. I’m not ready to start making plans like that just yet. I’ve still barely accepted that I’m pregnant.

Something of how I’m feeling must have shown on my face because Christy draws back and then nods.

“Let’s leave it for now,” she suggests, and I relax in relief. “We’ll have to talk about it soon... but not right now.”

“Thanks, Christy,” I say quietly. “I just...”

“I understand,” she says when I trail off, struggling to find the words for what I want to say. “So, have you seen Nicholas since you stopped going to work?”

Red blooms over my face. Christy sits up eagerly, sensing gossip.

“He, uh... came around to see how I was,” I admit. “With flowers. He had a run-in with George, and wanted to make sure I was alright.”

“George tried to attack Nicholas?” Christy gasps.

“Nicholas’ security detained him and called the police,” I explain. “He wasn’t there for long, though. He’s started messaging me again.”

“Seriously?” Christy demands, a dark look crossing her face. “Let me see.”

I hand the phone over and look over her shoulder as she unlocks it with my password and navigates to my messages. I've gotten several messages from George over the last few days, and I read them along with her.

'I still think you're both lying.'

'Leave him, he's a bastard.'

'I bet you're missing me.'

'Why did you lie?'

"They're all like that," I say tiredly. "He just won't stop. He's not making threats anymore, but the messages are annoying, especially when he starts talking about how I'm ignoring him."

"Are you ignoring him?" Christy asks.

I nod.

"I only sent him one message, where I told him that I'm not wearing my ring because Nicholas and I are trying to keep a low profile in public," I explain. "He went quiet for several hours, then he started up again."

Christy frowns at my phone.

"We really need to do something about him," she says. "You can't afford to be worrying about him on top of everything else."

She glances at me.

"How are you feeling?" she asks. "Honestly, this time."

I close my eyes briefly. I called Christy because I need to talk about this before I burst. But, now that the time has arrived, it's hard to start.

"Frightened," I say finally. "Overwhelmed. I want to tell Nicholas, but I feel sick every time I think about it. I keep wondering what I'm going to do in nine months when the baby arrives. What do I do about work? About my apartment? About money?"

“I’m certain Nicholas will support you and the child,” Christy says gently.

“I know,” I say. I sigh. “But it’s not just about that. I’m going to have to go on maternity leave. Then I’ll have to cut back my work hours unless I want the kid raised by a nanny, which isn’t an option for me. All I do is work. Even Nicholas told me I needed a hobby. Then...”

I hesitate, wondering if I should say what’s on my mind. Then I look at Christy and give in. I need to tell her everything.

“I slept with Nicholas again,” I say softly, and she gasps. “Twice. The first time was when he came around to see how I was. Our hands touched and I just... I’d just found out I was pregnant, and then he came to tell me about George, and I needed to forget. So I kissed him again, and one thing led to another.”

“And the second time?” Christy asks in a carefully controlled voice.

I sneak a glance at her. But her face is calm, giving nothing away.

“He kissed me,” I say. “He took me out to dinner, to make up for what happened with his family, and then offered to give me a tour of his house when I wanted to see his game room. And, we just...” I shake my head. “It just keeps happening. I can’t even say it’s because we were drunk, because we were both totally sober the last two times.”

“So, I guess you like him then?” Christy says.

Do I?

“I don’t know,” I confess. “I’m definitely attracted to him. And I felt so warm when he brought me those flowers. And we got along really well at dinner. When I told him I needed some time before coming back to work, he told me to take all the time I need. He’s been really good about everything. He’s really worried about me. He even took me to Paolini’s so I could find lighter food since I’d been so sick.”

“He’s got it bad for you,” Christy says, impressed. “He’s really trying, isn’t he?”

“He is,” I sigh. “And that’s making this harder. Sometimes I think about what it would be like to be in a relationship with him, and I *want* that. But then I remember that he’s my boss and that, up until recently, he slept around a lot.”

“But he hasn’t done that since he started flirting with you,” Christy points out. “On top of that, *you* were the one that he asked to be his fake fiancée. He trusts you. I think he wants to be with you, too.”

“Maybe,” I say quietly. I shake my head. “Either way, nothing can happen until I tell him about the baby. And I can’t do that right now. This can’t keep happening between us anymore. I have to make sure it doesn’t. Even if it means keeping away from him for a little while.”

Christy sits back.

“I think you’re doing the wrong thing,” she says slowly. “But this is your decision, and you need to do what makes you most comfortable. I’ll support you, no matter what.”

My eyes fill with tears. I know I can count on Christy. She’s the only point of stability in a world that has otherwise gone completely mad. I didn’t realize how much I needed that until I feel her quiet and solid support.

I close my eyes and lean against the back of the couch. I’ll figure this all out somehow. I have to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nicholas

Two weeks later, nothing has improved.

Over the last five working days, Quinn has only been to work three times, and she leaves early when she does come in. On top of that, every time I see her, she just seems paler and more drawn. It concerns me, and I *know* something is very wrong, something more than just what happened between us.

I'm happy to give Quinn her space. What happened between us... it shouldn't have, not again, but it did. Unable to control ourselves, we had sex for a third time, and that's left us both in a very awkward position. Quinn, I know, is not on the same page regarding her feelings as I am, and that makes it even harder.

But why is she looking so sick all the time? What is going on with her? I wonder what the doctor said about her blood test results. Would they reveal something seriously wrong causing her to be so unwell?

I want to ask. But, frustratingly, I know I have no right. Quinn is just my employee and tentative friend. I'm not her boyfriend or someone she's close to. If there's a problem that affects her work, *then* I can inquire, but I already told her, two weeks ago at dinner, that I was more than happy for her to take as much time as she needs. Asking her what's wrong now will mean I'm going back on those words, and I don't want to do that, especially since I know she does need some time away from me to sort out her thoughts.

But this is getting a little ridiculous. She came into work two days ago and only stayed until lunch, claiming that she couldn't focus on her work. She looked so pale that there was no denying she was still sick, which made me wonder why she even tried to come into work in the first place.

What is she trying to prove?

A knock on my door makes me look up. The latest substitute secretary is at my door, a memo in her hand. I'm starting to feel like the employment agency is getting fed up with me; I've found a problem with every secretary they've sent me, no matter how minor. Eventually, they're going to refuse to send any more workers.

Grudgingly, though, I feel like I could put up with this secretary for a little while. Her name is Anne, and she has nearly thirty years of experience as a secretary. She's efficient and clean. The only downside is that she's very quiet, but I don't think the employment agency will allow me to send her back because I want her to chat more.

At the end of the day, no matter how good at their jobs they are, not one of them is Quinn, and that's their main failing. I want Quinn to return. She's the best secretary I've ever had, and I miss her working in the office with me. Yesterday, I caught myself before I sent her a message saying just that.

I can't put pressure on her. If I do that, I'll just drive her away.

Though it is, admittedly, getting to the point where I'm going to have to step in as her boss, as much as I don't want to. For any other employee, I would have called them to find out what was going on after the first week. With Quinn, I've let this go on for two weeks, which is far too long considering I need to think of the running of my company. The parade of secretaries has definitely hurt my efficiency.

"Sir, this was sent up from Gary in advertising," Anne says, adjusting her glasses. "He's requesting a meeting with you this afternoon. Shall I let him know you're free?"

I glance quickly at my calendar. Most of the events are written carefully in Quinn's neat handwriting.

“Tell him he can come to my office at once,” I say, thinking quickly. “I have a meeting with the manager of Fairmont at three, so I’d like to get business with Gary done before that.”

“Yes, sir,” Anne says.

Then she’s gone. I wrinkle my nose. Actually, there are *two* things wrong with Anne. The first is how quiet she is. The second is the horrendous perfume that she’s wearing.

Still... I feel like I could put up with Anne for more than a day, which I hadn’t been able to say about any of the other secretaries. Hopefully, Quinn will be back in a few days, and my problems with Anne won’t become an issue.

The employment agency will probably be happy that I’m settling on someone. I can’t help but grin as I imagine what their faces would look like if Quinn returns to work in a couple of days and I’m forced to send Anne back simply because I no longer have a position for her. They’ll likely ban me from ever contacting them again.

Still, it would be worth it to have Quinn back at work.

Suddenly, my phone dings with an incoming message. I start, not expecting it, and open it. Very few people message me, simply because messages are unprofessional. The only person who ever sends me messages is...

My eyes widen. Quinn!

‘Sorry I’ve been so flaky. My health is still up and down. I promise I’ll sort something out soon.’

There’s no promise that she’ll be back at work, but my spirits rise slightly, anyway. She’s sending me this message because she was thinking of me, and she obviously feels like she’s letting me down in some way. I quickly type a message in return.

‘Just think of your health for now. I hope you get better soon.’

There. Not too personal, and no pressure to return.

I sigh and put down my phone. Am I doing the right thing by leaving her alone? It’s clear that Quinn is hiding something, but I have no idea what that is.

Should I press her for answers and risk pushing her away?

Or should I leave her alone and risk her drifting away?

I just don't know what the answer is here.

Frustrated, I tap my fingers on the desk. When we were teenagers, I would go to Dominique if I needed help. My brother and I never really got along, and it felt like Dominique was like my twin sister, at times. We told each other everything until we became adults and started drifting apart because we wanted different things in life.

Maybe, if it was about anything else, I still would have reached out to her. But this is about Quinn, the woman that Dominique thinks isn't good enough for me. If I tell her I'm having problems with Quinn, she'll use that chance to try and get me to break up with her. I snort. Not that it matters; Quinn and I aren't in a relationship, and it's starting to look like we never will be.

No, I don't need Dominique or anyone else in my family. I can figure this out on my own.

Somehow.

I shake my head and shove my phone in my pocket. I need to put Quinn out of my mind for now. I have work to do.

* * *

I rub my hand over the bridge of my nose.

"*How* has this happened?" I ask through gritted teeth.

Gary Smith, my head advertisement manager, swallows.

"Sir, the main problem has been lack of communication," he says very carefully. "Unfortunately, our requests for a little more budget didn't make it through, and, so, we reached the end and simply... ran out of money."

God... this is a nightmare. The advertising team doesn't have enough money in their budget to cover the costs of printing for

the new products they're promoting, especially since we added Fairmont to the list and therefore needed more materials.

This is not something that should have happened. If the advertising team put in a request for more money, it should have been forwarded to me *immediately*. Unfortunately, the current lack of a competent secretary has made that hard. I *knew* I should have just checked Quinn's emails myself.

I press the button on my intercom.

"Anne, can you please come in here?" I say tiredly.

There's a pause, and then Anne enters.

"Yes, sir?" she asks.

"Could you please go through Quinn's emails, and find all recent emails from the advertising team?" I ask. "Then forward them onto me straight away."

"Of course," Anne says. "Anything else?"

"Not right now," I say. "Oh... have you gone through today's emails?"

"I've forward everything pertinent so far," Anne says.

I nod and dismiss her, reminding myself to double-check Quinn's computer before I leave this afternoon, just in case. It might be too late, but I need to make sure I haven't missed anything *else* that important.

"Alright, we'll solve the issue, and I'll add more funding as soon as possible," I say to Gary. "Can you hold off for another day or two while I rearrange things?"

"Of course," Gary says in relief. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," I counter. "I hope that this hasn't set you too far behind."

"As long as the problem is fixed quickly, we'll be able to catch up in no time," Gary says, standing.

He leans across the desk to shake my hand, and then he's gone, a spring in his step. Well, at least *he's* happy.

On the other hand, I've just been confronted with yet another consequence of Quinn being gone while I entertain a circus of supposedly qualified individuals. How am I supposed to run a company when I can't trust other people to do their jobs?

There's a knock on the door and then Anne peers inside.

"I've sent all emails from the last two weeks from advertisement," she says. "Some didn't seem important, but I send them anyway, just in case."

I sigh.

"You don't want to go through the last two weeks of emails and see if anything important has been missed, do you?" I ask gloomily.

Anne steps into the office.

"It seems you've had some bad luck with secretaries?" she guesses.

Great, *now* she's talkative.

"My regular secretary is away sick," I say. "Unfortunately, your agency has chosen to send me several people who don't know with which end of the pen to write with."

An unladylike snort escapes Anne, and she hastily covers it into a cough.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says. She pauses. "I'll go through the emails from the last two weeks if you'd like."

"If you did that, you'd be a godsend," I say fervently.

Her lips quirk.

"It's okay, it's my job," she says.

Then she's gone. It's nice to finally have someone around who actually knows what they're doing. I'm definitely okay if Anne sticks around for a little longer. At the very least, she knows how to do her job, and I can finally get some of my work done.

I just hope it isn't for *too* long. I miss Quinn, and I know I can't bear losing her – either as a potential partner or as a

coworker.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Quinn

I miss Nicholas.

I can't believe how much I actually miss him. But spending two weeks away from him, for the most part, has made me realize just how much I enjoy having him in my life.

I miss his cheesy grins and his deep, foreign accent. I miss the way he taps his pen against his lip when he's thinking. I even miss the way he clumsily flirted with me before wising up and realizing that he needed to treat me like an adult.

How can this be possible? All I ever did was complain about him. He was a good boss, but his flirty, often unreliable personality made it hard to get along with him, sometimes. I could recognize that he was extremely hot, but I wasn't interested in interacting with him in any more than a professional capacity.

Yet, now, I'm carrying his baby, stressing out about how to tell him, and actually missing him after not seeing him much over the last two weeks. It's funny how things can change.

I only wish I could laugh about it.

I groan and burrow deeper under my covers. Maybe it's only the pregnancy hormones that are doing this to me? Gloomily, though, I know that isn't true; these strange feelings I have for Nicholas started even before I slept with him, back when he stopped flirting with me all of a sudden and I became paranoid because some part of me *missed* it.

God, I'm such a fucking sap.

I wonder if I should call Christy. She hasn't yet teased me about any of this, recognizing that this isn't the right time for it. I know she won't tease me if I admit that I actually want Nicholas around.

But I feel like I've unloaded enough on Christy lately. Also, I'm tired of always complaining. Ever since I found out I was pregnant—no, even before that, when I first slept with Nicholas—it feels like nothing has gone right. All I do when I speak to Christy or anyone else is complain about how my life is going.

I curl up, unconsciously protecting my stomach, and wrap my arms around my ribs. It's Saturday, so I don't need to be anywhere today. Not that I've been going to work, anyway; I've only been to work three times, and, each of those times, I left around lunch, unable to stomach being in such close proximity to Nicholas while I still haven't told him about his child.

How could things have changed so drastically? I wish I could go back in time to about a month ago, before I pretended Nicholas was my fiancée and then slept with him, back when everything was simpler. When my only concern was wondering why Nicholas' behavior toward me had suddenly changed.

Had that really only been a month ago?

My phone goes off on the bedside table. I look at it blearily, not having the heart to pick it up. But it just keeps ringing and ringing and, eventually, I rouse myself enough to grab my phone and answer it.

"Hello?" I say tiredly.

"*Quinn, it's Nicholas,*" the person on the other end greets.

Damnit, exactly the person I *don't* want to talk to right now. I'm half surprised that he hasn't called me before now, though. I've missed over two weeks of work. Anyone else, and he would have been knocking down their door last week.

"Hi, Nicholas," I say. "How are you?"

“I’m more interested in how you are,” Nicholas says seriously. “How is everything going?”

It makes me feel warm that his first words aren’t a demand for me to return to work, but a question about my health. Part of me is a little disappointed, though. I’m so lost right now. I need someone to tell me what to do before I go completely crazy.

“I’m still up and down,” I say, leaning back on my pillows. “I’m insanely tired all the time, though. I can hardly keep my eyes open through the day.”

“You looked really sick, the other day,” Nicholas says.

I remember that day. Of the three days I came into work, it was the only day where Nicholas actually stepped in and sent me home.

“Yeah,” I sigh. “I’m annoyed by how weak I feel. I just want it to be over.”

Unfortunately, it won’t be over any time soon. I have another eight months of this.

“I’m not surprised,” Nicholas says. He pauses, and I can almost hear his hesitation. “Quinn... is something more going on? You’ve been so sick, recently. Did your doctor find anything?”

It’s the perfect opening. I should tell him now, while I have the chance. But my tongue freezes and I pause too long, making him rush ahead, babbling in his haste.

“I know I don’t have the right to ask, but I’ve been really worried, and you’ve missed so much work...”

“Nicholas, I don’t mind that you asked,” I say, finally find my voice. “It’s really sweet of you. No, the doctor didn’t find anything...” Technically true, since *I* was the one who took the test and discovered the results. “...So I think I’ve just had some stomach problems.”

Also somewhat true... the baby in my stomach is technically a problem right now.

“*Right,*” Nicholas says. He doesn’t sound like he entirely believes me. I can’t say I blame him. “*I really hope you feel better soon.*”

“Same,” I agree. I wonder if I should ask, but I’ve been dying to know... “How go the secretaries this week?”

Nicholas has been keeping me entertained with stories about my replacements over the last two weeks. Someone of them sounded truly horrendous (like the one who managed to shred a very important contract), while others have seemed halfway competent. But Nicholas had a problem with every single one of them, and none of them lasted more than a day.

“Actually... I’ve had the same secretary since Wednesday,” Nicholas says.

I blink, surprised.

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says with a laugh. “She’s an older woman named Anne. She actually knows how to do her job. She also sorted through the emails for me and cleaned up. She’s really helped me get back on track.”

I stay silent for a moment. There’s an odd, unfamiliar emotion rising within me. It takes me a moment before I realize that I’m actually jealous.

Nicholas has finally managed to find a competent replacement secretary. I was fine with all the others because they were no threat. But a *competent* secretary is a threat to me. What if Nicholas eventually decides to give up on me and just hire Anne full time?

“That’s great,” I finally manage to say.

“Yeah, if it wasn’t for her, we would have had a major budgeting incident on our hands the other day,” Nicholas laughs. “She’s come at just the right time to help us through some of the more difficult phases of our contracts with the stores.”

But that’s *my* job. Irritably, I shake away the irrational jealousy. I’m the one who has chosen not to go back to work

yet. I have no right to feel upset that Nicholas has someone helping him while I try and figure out what I want.

Though, the jealousy does do one thing. It tells me that my feelings for Nicholas are definitely deepening.

“Anyway, I’ll let you go back to resting,” Nicholas says. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks, Nicholas.”

We hang up. The conversation has given me a warm feeling, but it’s also left me with roiling guilt, jealousy, and frustration with myself. I really need to decide what I’m going to do. It’s unfair to leave Nicholas hanging like this. I get the impression, somehow, that he’s prepared to settle in and wait for me for as long as it takes, but I’m not prepared to allow him to do that.

So, it’s time to decide.

Later, though. I put my phone back on the bedside table, curl up around my pillows and close my eyes. I can figure it all out later after I sleep.

* * *

Monday dawns, and I’m still no closer to figuring it all out than I was before. It’s becoming a real problem if I’m going to be honest. I called Nicholas this morning to tell him I wouldn’t be at work, and he told me not to worry because he’d already asked this Anne to return. So, he was expecting that I wouldn’t be there, either.

That’s when I know things have definitely gone too far.

I pace my apartment. I sent Nicholas a message this afternoon, asking him to come around to my apartment. I’m going to tell him about the baby now. I don’t want to, but I have to. This has gone on long enough. I’m four weeks pregnant, and Nicholas, as the father of the child, has a right to know. It’s too early for there to be a noticeable bump yet, but it’s going to get to that point eventually, and I won’t be able to hide my pregnancy even if I want to.

I just... really don't want to do this. I don't want to say it aloud. I've told Christy, and that was hard enough. Now I'm going to have to look Nicholas in the eye and tell him that I'm carrying his child. I don't know if I'm going to be brave enough to do it.

I set my shoulders. No, it doesn't matter if I'm brave enough or not. I'm *going* to tell him tonight.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. I start, flinching at the sound, and swing around to face the door. Shit, he's here already. He must have left work early to get here so quickly.

I take in a deep breath and pat down my hair before striding to the door. I can do this.

"Hello, N..." I say as I open the door.

I trail off, staring. I can feel the color draining out of my face.

The person at the door is not Nicholas.

"Quinn," George says, his voice low. "We need to talk."

What? What's George doing here? My mind races, trying to figure it out. He's not supposed to be here. Logically, I knew that he'd discovered where I lived, especially since he seems to have been watching me, but I never expected him to actually arrive on my doorstep.

Shit. What do I do?

Okay, I need to calm down. I know George. He isn't the violent sort. He's probably here just to get somethings off his chest, and then he'll leave in a huff, hopefully, to never return.

"George," I say, swallowing. "You shouldn't be here."

"I can't even visit my girlfriend's apartment?" George asks, raising an eyebrow.

Alright, worse than I thought. He's pretending that our breakup never happened.

"Look, George, I'm sorry you took it so hard, but you and I broke up last year, and I've moved on," I snap. I quickly change which finger Nicholas' ring was on, and then hold up my hand. "I'm even engaged now."

George just throws the ring an uninterested glance and then shrugs. It's a little irritating, especially with how much he's been going on about the ring not being on my finger.

"None of that matters," he says. He steps inside, forcing his way through the door. I stumble back, too shocked to do anything to prevent his entry. "You and I aren't meant to be together."

"No, we aren't," I say. I'm sick and I'm tired, and I just want him to go away, now. I don't want to deal with any of this right now. "I broke up with you; get over it already. I'm not coming back to you. Ever."

George's face abruptly changes.

"So, you'd rather stay with your pretty boy, huh?" he sneers, his personality doing a complete one-eighty. I stare at him. I've never seen that look on his face before. "Was it his money that attracted you?"

I gape at him. How *dare* he?

"Get out," I say tightly.

"No," George says. His eyes are alight with an insane determination. "I'm not leaving until you and I are together again. Drop the rich city boy. He can't treat you as well as I can."

I rub the bridge of my nose. I just want this day to be over. I wish there was some way to get rid of George right now.

And, as if my thoughts summoned it, a knock sounds on the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Nicholas

If I'd hoped that our conversation on Saturday would make things better, I was sorely disappointed on Monday when Quinn called me early in the morning to tell me that she won't be at work yet again. However, it isn't like I didn't expect it. I told Anne, on Friday, to come in on Monday unless she was told otherwise, not wanting to take the risk that the agency would send someone *worse* than the guy that shredded my contracts.

I want Quinn back. At the same time, I want her to have the time she needs to think. But, if I don't do something about this soon, I'm going to have HR breathing down my neck to ask me why my secretary has taken so much time off. At the moment, they're letting it go. But I'm expecting an email soon, and it will likely come in the next few days if Quinn doesn't return to work soon.

And if they get involved, then Quinn's continued position at this company may not be in my hands any longer.

I know I need to tell Quinn this. I know I have to demand that she make a decision. But I don't understand what she's waiting for. Is she waiting for me to make the first move and tell her to come back to work? Or is she still, slowly, working through the same issues that led to her taking time off in the first place?

I just don't know.

"Penny for your thoughts?" a voice at the door says.

I look up to see Anne on the threshold of my office. Her expression is as stern as always, but her words are kind.

“You look like you need to talk,” Anne says matter-of-factly, striding into the office to lay a small stack of paperwork on my desk. “Do you?”

Do I? Of course, I do. But who am I meant to talk to? Quinn? The issue is about her. My family? I’m still not talking to them at all. Andy, or any of my other employees? I’m not close enough to any of them. It leaves me with very few options about who I can talk to.

“I’m offering a listening ear,” Anne continues when I don’t say anything. “Sometimes it helps to get things off your choice.”

I still don’t think I should say anything. But words bubble up before I can stop them, relishing the chance to finally say what’s on my mind.

“Quinn.... My secretary?” I say, and Anne nods; I’ve mentioned Quinn more than once, after all. “I’m in love with her.”

There, I’ve said it out loud to someone. The way the words hang in the air is terrifying but, at the same time, it feels like a burden has lifted slightly.

Anne nods shortly. There’s no surprise on her face.

“Have you told her?” she asks.

“She’s been avoiding me,” I explain. “I’m not sure what to do about it. Do I leave her alone, or do I say something to her? On top of that, she does need to come back to work eventually. Her leave will run out soon, and then she’ll be in trouble with HR if she still refuses to come into work.”

“Understandable,” Anne says briskly. “In that case, you need to talk to her.”

Well, that’s not helpful at all.

“I know, but I don’t know if I should leave it for a little longer,” I sigh.

“No.” I look up at the short word to see Anne giving me a hard look. “You need to talk to her *today*. Right now. Nothing has changed between the two of you because you aren’t communicating. She’s outright ignoring you. If you keep on going like this, you’ll lose her. You need to tell her that you love her. Then you need to tell her to decide whether or not she’s returning to work this week.”

I stare at Anne. It all sounds so easy like that but... it’s also a relief. I think I needed someone to say it to me. I’ve been so busy worrying about making things worse, that I accidentally did just that, anyway.

“Interested in a job?” I ask her.

She raises an eyebrow.

“I thought you want your secretary to return,” she points out.

“I do,” I say with a nod. “I’m thinking about another position. Like a management role. I think you’d be good at keeping people on task.”

Anne grins at me.

“Go get your secretary back, then we can discuss particulars,” she says.

Then she’s gone, the door snapping closed behind her. I can’t help but laugh as I lean back and close my eyes.

Tell Quinn... yes, I need to go to her, this afternoon, and tell her. It’s about time we have a conversation that’s long overdue.

* * *

“What do you think of these?” I ask Andy.

Andy gives me a deadpan look.

“They’re nice,” he says shortly. “Why am I even here?”

“For a second opinion,” I say. “You have a wife, right? What sort of flowers do you give her when you want to be romantic?”

“Her favorites,” Andy says, his voice dry.

In the last two weeks, lonely from Quinn’s continued absence, I tried out conversing more regularly with Andy. To my delight, the man has started to relax around me and has participated in the conversations.

Bringing him flower shopping might have been stretching it, though. I just really wanted to pick the perfect flowers out for Quinn, ones that tell her just how much she means to me, and then beg her to consider staying with me, both as a partner and as a coworker. I’m in love with her, and I can’t bear the idea of losing her.

“Look, Quinn isn’t interested in grand, expensive gestures, right?” Andy finally sighs. “What about these?”

I look at the bouquet he’s picked. The small bouquet has a neat selection of dahlias, bluebells, and sprigs of baby’s breath. It’s not as large as some of the other bouquets, but I can see immediately why Andy picked it out. Quinn hasn’t been too impressed, so far, with my wealth, and she definitely preferred the louder, cheaper restaurant over the fancy engagement party I took her to. Yes, those flowers will be perfect.

I make my choice and, once the florist has wrapped them nicely for me, I carry the entire package out to the car, ignoring the way Andy is smiling in amusement at my behavior. This is important. I want everything to be perfect, right down to the very last petal.

If I’m going to convince Quinn to stay with me, then everything *has* to be perfect.

“Good luck, sir,” Andy says as we pull up at Quinn’s apartment.

“Thanks,” I say with a tight smile, unaccountably nervous.

I’m not able to quite stop the anxious jiggle of my foot in the elevator as we go up to Quinn’s floor, make the other occupant of the elevator look at my strangely before shuffling away as quickly as he could. I just ignore him and, once I get to Quinn’s floor, I almost fall in my haste to get out.

Okay, I’m here. Time to do this.

I head toward Quin's apartment. The hallway seems to yawn in front of me, and my body feels oddly heavy for some reason. Shit, I'm scared and nervous. The worst she can do, of course, is reject me... but rejection is something I *don't* want right now.

"Deep breath," I tell myself, trying to breathe in deeply. "I can do this."

I stand in front of Quinn's apartment door. Never before has a simple door looked so ominous. I raise my hand to knock.

And then pause as I hear a shout.

It sounds like someone is yelling. I frown and lean in closer. I can hear Quinn's voice. And a vaguely familiar voice... a man? There's a man in that apartment. I'm half tempted to just drop the flowers and walk away. But the sounds from within the apartment are not pleasant. The two are definitely arguing about something.

The door is slightly ajar and I hesitate for a moment before I push it open fully. It's open, and I'm growing concerned about what's happening here. So, I peer inside.

The two arguing are on opposite sides of the room. Quinn is behind the lounge, her arms around herself in a way that makes her look incredibly vulnerable. On the other side...

George? So much for getting right of him.

I knock to get their attention and then step fully into the room. They both turn to stare at me, though I see Quinn's eyes dart to the bouquet in my hands before a light flush starts to rise in her cheeks. At any other time, that expression would be heartening. Right now, however, I'm angry to see George here.

"What's going on?" I ask, my tone harsher than normal.

"George is harassing me again," Quinn says with a sigh.

"And you're just a lying bitch!" George yells back. "Your boy toy is going to get tired of you soon, and then you'll have no one, just like you deserve!"

Okay... No. I am not going to stand here and just listen to this.

“Excuse me,” I say, stepping up, my voice carefully controlled. “Hi, I’m Quinn’s ‘boy toy’, as you put it. It’s nice to see that you’re worried, but I can assure you that I’ll be taking very good care of her, even more, once we’re married.”

Instantly, I knew it was the wrong thing to say. Reminding George that Quinn and I are apparently engaged just makes the angry flush rise in his cheeks once more.

“You’re both as bad as each other,” he hisses. “The two of you deserve each other.”

That I can agree with. Both Quinn and I deserve to be happy, and I really am hoping to make a move toward that.

“Please leave,” I say, stepping out of the doorway. “You’re not welcome here, George. Leave and don’t come back.”

“Make me,” George snarls, skipping back a few steps and putting his fists up.

I’m taken aback. He wants to *fight* me? Just because he can’t accept that Quinn left him a very long time ago? The guy is utterly delusional. Unsure, I glance at Quinn for help.

“Sorry,” she says quietly, and her expression is apologetic. “I don’t know how to handle him when he’s in this mood.”

Just great. I have George, who won’t leave well enough alone, a secretary who has no idea how to handle her ex, and a possible fight on my hands. What am I supposed to do now?

I have a feeling that I have very few options left to me. I don’t want it to, but it looks like it’s going to come down to a fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Nicholas

It feels like George and I are stuck in limbo. Quinn has made her way toward me, which seems to incense the guy even further, but he hasn't yet made a move toward me. On the other hand, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

George has already proven, once, that he'll rush me, and I don't any handy security guys here to take him down for me, this time. On top of that, it seems like the security in Quinn's apartment isn't what it's cracked up to be, especially since she made them aware that George is stalking her, yet he was *still* able to get into the building and into her apartment, before I got here.

"Come on," George challenges. "You and me. If you win, I'll leave. If I win, you leave Quinn alone."

I give him an incredulous look.

"Do you really think I'm going to agree with something so ridiculous?" I demand. "Quinn has the right to decide for herself. I'm not going to bet her in a stupid contest of strength."

I feel Quinn draw closer to me. George's eyes narrow.

"Your words are nice, but can you back them up?" he snarls. "You won't even acknowledge her publicly!"

It takes me a moment to realize what he's referring to. Right... didn't Quinn and I decide to tell George that the reason she

wasn't wearing her ring was that we were trying to keep a low profile? I'd forgotten all about that.

George's eyes are narrowing. It's taking me too long to answer.

"I'm trying to protect her," I defend lamely.

"Right," George snorts. "By pretending she doesn't exist."

"You don't know what the media is like," I say sharply, warming up to my argument now. "That would eat Quinn alive if I released information about the engagement. I want us both to settle into it before I start informing the public. It's no one's business but ours, anyway. I don't need to tell the public that I love her. I just have to tell her."

I hear a sharp intake of breath behind me, and I try not to flinch at the words that have just exited my mouth. I wanted to tell Quinn I loved her. But not like this.

I focus on George. He looks furious now. I'd seen Quinn with her phone out, and I hope she's messaging someone for help. For now, I just have to stall George.

But it looks like time has run out for me. George isn't going to hold back any longer. He's got it in his head that I'm his enemy, and he is determined to take Quinn back from me at all costs. He won't stop until he's won, even if it means beating me to a pulp.

Something that I'm not sure I'm capable of stopping him from doing.

"You bastard, sitting high and mighty on your pile of money," George growls. "Let's see how proud you are after a few good hits."

He rushes forward. The next few seconds are a blur of motion. My mind is surprisingly sharp, despite the situation, and my first thought is for Quinn. I can hear her crying out beside me, horrified, and I push her away, to get her out of the line of fire. I'm only dimly aware of her stumbling back; my push wasn't too hard, just enough to get her away from this.

Then George is on me, his fist swinging forward. Desperately, I throw my hands up to cover my head, and I wince as the strike hits my arms with the force of a rock. Then next second another fist drives into my now unprotected stomach, and I choke at the strength behind it, all the air leaving me in a giant gust.

I can hear Quinn yelling, but I don't know what she's saying. I straighten and grabble with George, trying to stop him from hitting me again, but his knuckles clip my cheek before I manage to push him back again, barely taking a moment to care about my injuries.

"I'm here!"

I hear the voice, but it doesn't register until Andy is there, dragging George off me. I stumble back a few steps and then sit heavily on the floor, breathing in deeply.

"Andy?" I gasp. My stomach and face are stinging. "Where did you come from?"

"Quinn messaged me," Andy growls, glaring down at George. "Building security is on their way up."

I watch, too tired and stunned, as Andy effortlessly restrains George, and then hands him over the security when they arrive. He scolds them fiercely for allowing George up here, especially since they should have known his face after one of their tenets informed them of him.

Meanwhile. Quinn has made her way over to me at some point. She doesn't touch me, and her body is tense, her eyes surveying the scene with shock and lingering horror. Together, we stare as George is escorted out.

"We'll be delivering him to the police," Andy announces. "Sir, you'll need to come down and tell them what happened later, likely. You too, Quinn."

"Right," I manage to rouse myself enough to say. "Thank you, Andy, for everything."

"Don't worry about it, sorry," Andy says with a small smile. "I'm not sure what time I'll be back, but..."

“Nicholas can stay here tonight,” Quinn suddenly blurts. She blushes when Andy and I both stare at her. “It makes sense, right? Andy has to deal with George, and you need sleep. I’ll get bedding for the couch and you can stay here.”

I’m hit by a sudden sense of déjà vu. Isn’t this how everything started.

“Thank you, Quinn,” Andy says with a nod. It looks like the decision is being made without me, then. “Sir, I’ll see you in the morning.”

He leaves, snapping the door closed. Quinn and I stare at him, both of us still sitting on the floor.

“Wow,” I finally say. My eyes widen as a thought strikes me. “The flowers!”

“Here,” Quinn says, offering the bouquet to me.

It’s not as nice as it was in the store, but none of the flowers are squashed, so that’s okay. I clear my throat and hand them back to Quinn.

“A get well present,” I explain when she looks at it.

“Thanks,” she says, pleased. “The flowers are beautiful. I’ll need to find a vase for this.”

She pulls herself to her feet, and I envy her for doing so; I can barely get my legs to walk right now.

“Tea or coffee?” Quinn asks when she gets to the kitchen.

“Coffee, thanks,” I say.

I need to tell her that I’m here to talk, as well. That’s the entire point of me coming here. I need to tell her what’s on my mind so that she can make her final decision, once and for all. We’re not getting anywhere like this.

But, despite the promise I made to myself, I don’t say anything. I didn’t expect George to be here, but his presence definitely derailed all my plans. I can’t bring up work right now, not while we’re both still so frazzled.

On top of that, she hasn’t said anything about me claiming I love her. I doubt she’ll bring it up, and I’m not sure if I should.

Maybe not yet, though. Another serious conversation that we can put on hold for a little while.

“I’m sorry you got caught up in that,” Quinn says as I finally pull myself up off the floor, wincing at the bruises that have already started to form. “George isn’t normally a violent man, though...” Her shoulder slump and she avoids my eyes. “I guess I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did.”

“Don’t think too much about it,” I advise. “People have a way of letting you down when you least expect it, and it’s not your fault.”

I know that as well as anyone. My family, after all, let me down in a terrible fashion.

Quinn gives me a wan smile as she carries the hot drinks carefully to her small table, and I take a seat with a relieved sigh, rubbing my stomach where George hit me. The coffee slides down my throat, warming my insides and picking up my spirits.

“Look on the bright side,” I say with shrug. “The police can deal with him now. He can’t get away with assault.”

“Yeah,” Quinn says, and I’m pleased to see a small smile twitching at her lips. “On top of that, they’ll investigate and find all the messages he keeps sending me, so I might even be able to prove that he’s been stalking me.”

“Not ‘might’, we will prove it,” I correct her.

I’m not letting George go free this time. He’s proven himself to be a danger to both Quinn and me. I’ll make sure he goes to jail.

Quinn’s smile grows and she takes a sip of her own drink. It’s tea, I note, which is unusual. Quinn loves coffee as much as I do.

“Tea helps the nausea,” Quinn explains, seeing where I’m looking.

“You’re still nauseous?” I ask with a frown. “It’s been over two weeks.”

“Mostly in the morning,” Quinn says.

She's avoiding my eyes like she doesn't want me to read something on her face. I want to ask. But I can't. She'll hopefully tell me when she's ready.

"I was thinking... I might come back to work tomorrow?" Quinn says after a long silence, staring intently at the table.

My heart leaps. But I stamp down on the urge to jump in the air and cheer.

"Only if you're ready," I say to her.

Quinn looks up at me. Her expression is conflicted.

"I..." she says, and she pauses.

I can't help myself. I reach across the table and gently hold her hand. She starts but doesn't pull away.

"Quinn, I'll wait as long as you need," I say gently. "Give me the word, and I'll do something about HR, too, until you're ready." The words are trembling on my lips. I can't hold them back any longer. "I wasn't pretending when I told George I loved you. It's true. I've fallen in love with you, Quinn. And I know that might mess things up, but I'm not going to push you into anything." I give her a small smile. "I just miss you at work."

Quinn looks at me. Her eyes are wide and shocked at my words, not expecting the admission that seems to have come from nowhere.

"You..." She swallows. "I can't believe..."

She trails off again. She grips my hand and tears form in the corners of her eyes.

She's not ready to respond. And that's okay. Eventually, she'll tell me what she thinks about it. For now, I find myself drawn into her beautiful, hazel eyes, a magnetic pull that I can't resist even if I want to. I draw closer slowly, giving her the chance to pull away, but she just watches me, and my eyes dart down to her full lips as she licks them lightly, making them glisten.

She's beautiful. She's everything I didn't know I was looking for until I had her in my arms. I still don't know what's going

to happen between us from here. But I do know that I'll never stop loving this woman sitting in front of me now.

Overcome with emotion, I kiss her, a soft press of our lips together. I feel her lashes fluttering on my cheek as she closes her eyes, and then her arms wind around my neck to pull me closer, her mouth parting in clear invitation.

I half expected her to push me away, but she doesn't. Instead, she's responding, moving closer to me. My elbow knocks the table, making the drinks on it slosh, but neither of us pays attention to that as we stand up, our tongues tangling together and her fingers curling in the hairs at the back my neck. My hands rub down her shoulders and back until I find the dip in her spine. My cock is stirring in my pants, hardening in interest, and the fire is starting in my stomach.

But I'm not making the same mistake again. I pull away, panting, and Quinn draws back too.

"Do you want this?" I ask, my voice rough. "Really want this? You're not going to regret it afterward?"

Quinn stares at me, her eyes searching mine. Then, finally, her face relaxes in a smile.

"My only regrets have come from overthinking everything after," she says softly. "But in the heat of the moment, when all I want is your touch, there are no regrets." Her hands slide up my neck and cup my face. "After, remind me of all the reasons why I shouldn't ever regret this. It's what I want, and it's what I've wanted for longer than I care to admit."

I don't know if it's the answer I'm searching for. My heart flutters at her touch.

"You want this?" I ask again, double-checking. Every time we've slept together, after all, she's tried to disappear on me.

"I want *you*," Quinn replies.

That's the answer. I dive in and kiss her again, desperately this time, half afraid that she's going to disappear from my arms. But I can feel her body against mine, rubbing herself over me as she steps in even closer, my head spinning from all the sensations.

Quinn's feelings may not be on the same page as mine. But she wants me, and that's the perfect start. We can move forward from there, and, hopefully, find stable ground between us for once.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Quinn

I can feel the lump in Nicholas' pants, hot and heavy against my thigh, and I scramble to find purchase on his shoulders for some sort of anchor as he parts from our kiss and immediately starts kissing down my neck instead, grazing his teeth against my skin. My eyes flutter closed for a moment as I gasp and writhe, too far gone to care how wanton I must sound.

It's funny how everything seems so much easier now that I've finally surrendered to the inevitable. My feelings for Nicholas crept up on me without my permission, and a lot of my energy has gone toward fighting those feelings because I didn't want to accept them. Here and now, though, with Nicholas holding me as we touch, desperate to feel each other, I can't remember why I've been fighting this. I've wanted Nicholas for long enough. It's time to finally give myself what I want.

"God, that feels so good, don't stop," I moan as he nips my fluttering pulse and then sucks lightly on it.

I feel him grin against my skin and he moves lower, to my collar. I shout, startled, as he suddenly bites down, worrying my skin between his teeth and sucking hard. Then he licks the area and I feel dizzy as I realize that he's leaving a mark on me, something I'll be able to look at and remember what we did.

Two weeks ago, the very idea might have horrified me, not wanting to remember a moment when I utterly failed to

control myself or my emotions. Now, however, I tilt my head back to give him better access and hope that the mark is clear enough to still be there tomorrow. I want to see evidence of our lovemaking today. I want to know that this is real and that I'm doing this with no regrets because *I* want it.

"You're perfect, Quinn," Nicholas breathes between fluttering kisses, up my neck again and across my jaw. "Completely perfect."

That means a lot, from a man who until recently saw a lot of different women. The fact that he would call *me* perfect, out of all of them, when I know I'm nowhere near that. I have glasses, I have freckles and scars and...

"I can almost hear you thinking so loudly," Nicholas says, amused, as he pulls back. He gently cups my cheeks and rests his forehead against mine. "You're perfect to me. And that's all that matters."

My eyes fill with tears. Stupid hormones, and stupid up and down emotions. I let out a teary chuckle.

"You're not so bad, yourself," I tease.

Nicholas grins and starts to walk backward, pulling me with him. It takes me a moment before I realize that he's walking toward the open door of my bedroom.

"You definitely want this?" he murmurs.

I smile. He's trying so hard to make sure that I'm certain. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling us to a halt for a moment.

"More than anything," I promise.

Nicholas moves, and it's the only warning I get before my feet are swept off the ground and I'm being lifted into Nicholas' strong arms. I tighten my arms around his neck. This is the man that did everything he could think of to make me fall in love with him by changing his playboy ways. This man got into a fight with my ex, despite the fact that's it obvious he barely knows how to throw a punch. And this man has waited and waited for me, never knowing for certain that the wait wasn't in vain.

How could I not be sure of this? Nicholas has told me in every way possible that he loves me. I would be a fool to disregard that.

Nicholas carries me into the bedroom, and I grip him tightly, both because I don't want to fall and because I want to be closer to him. My heart is thudding in my chest, and my entire body is tight in anticipation. I want Nicholas so badly that I almost ache. I want to feel him moving within me.

"You're wearing too many clothes," I say, starting to work at the buttons of his shirt.

"We'll change that," he promises, his low voice sending a shiver of need down my spine.

We reach the bed and Nicholas drops me down. I spread my knees and he slots in between them as I continue undoing his buttons, almost ripping the last one off in my haste. I push his shirt back and run my hands over the firm muscles on his smooth chest, feeling the heat of his skin under my palms. Nicholas runs his hands down my sides and tugs up the hem of my sleep shirt, and I'm suddenly glad that I didn't bother to get dressed today.

Nicholas' eyes widen when he pulls my shirt over my head and sees that I'm not wearing a bra underneath. I grin at him and work at his belt, slipping it free so that I can tug down the zipper on his pants. Then I slide my hand under the elastic of his boxers and rub my hand gently on his cock.

The reaction is immediate. Nicholas' hips buck as he gasps, not expecting the sudden sensation.

"Fuck, that feels good," he groans.

He shoves his pants down, taking his boxers with them, and steps out of them, kicking them away. I pull my hand away and slide my shorts and panties down over my hips, leaving us both completely bare.

I look him over. This is not the first time I've seen Nicholas naked. But there's something more amazing about this time when there's no part of my mind preoccupied with regret and

frustration at myself. Nicholas is standing before me, and he's all mine.

Then I reach out and wrap my hand around his cock again, giving it another good tug. He chokes and moans, his eyes rolling back as he thrusts his hips forward, looking for more.

"How much do you want me, Nicholas?" I ask him.

"Fuck... so much," he gasps.

I let go of his cock and scoot backward, my legs falling open further as I lay backward. Nicholas blinks and refocuses on me.

"I want you to fuck me," I say. "Fuck me hard, so I never, ever forget."

Nicholas steps forward and wraps his hands around my hips in a strong grip. His thick cock presses against my thigh as he leans in and kisses me fiercely, and my body arches off the bed, needing him. When we pull away, panting, Nicholas straightens and lines up against me.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't think about anything else," he promises.

And then he's in me. He slides smoothly into me, not pausing as he pushes in until he's fully seated in me. I choke and grip the covers beneath me, writhing and struggling to hold on. I can feel his cock pulsing within me, eager and desperate, but Nicholas pauses for a moment to give me time to adjust.

But I don't want time. I want him. Now.

"Move," I gasp, reaching up to grip his shoulders so tightly that my nails dig into his skin.

Nicholas doesn't reply. He pulls out and thrusts back into me, and stars explode across my vision as he slowly angles himself, looking for the sweet spot inside me. I buck my hips to meet his, struggling to keep up with the pace as he moves in and out of me. Sweat is pouring from my body as an inferno blazes around us, and I almost choke on the heat.

Then I cry out as Nicholas finds that spot, and I'm helpless to do anything other than writhe and hold on, knowing that I'm

not going to last much longer. I can feel Nicholas' muscles bunching beneath my hands, his shoulders flexing with each thrust, and he's panting heavily above me, his teeth gritted.

Finally, I lose control, and my orgasm sweeps over me. My body clenches tightly around Nicholas' cock, and he thrusts once more before he shudders, too. I blackout for a split second too overwhelmed to do anything else, and, when I come to, Nicholas is crashing down beside me with a groan.

We're panting, trying to catch our breaths. I look over at Nicholas to see that his eyes are closed as he slumps back on the bed, his chest heaving. I feel a thrill at knowing that I've had such an effect on him.

Then his eyes open, and he turns to look at me. He gives me a tired, lopsided smile that I find myself returning, helpless to do anything else. His eyes are clear and peaceful, and I wait for what he's going to say next, wondering how ridiculously sappy it's going to be.

"No regrets?" he says instead.

It startles a laugh out of me. I was the one that told him to remind me of why I shouldn't be regretting anything that's happened between us. My smile turns fond.

"No regrets," I say. I turn over onto my side. "None at all."

Nicholas kisses me softly. The touch is warm, and I can feel the love that he told me he feels in it, making my heart soar.

"Good," he whispers. "I never want you to ever regret being with me. Not ever."

I look over his face, searching his expression. It's at that moment that it strikes me just what I've done. I've had sex with Nicholas several times, now, and, after each time, I made it absolutely clear that it was the worst thing that could have happened. Meanwhile, Nicholas has been quietly waiting in the wings, doing his best to change his lifestyle so that he could be worthy of me, hoping that I would finally look over and see him.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out.

But he grins at me.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” he tells me. “Sometimes, people just aren’t in the same place, and that’s okay.”

What did I do to deserve this man? He’s tried so hard for my sake.

“If it helps, you’re the best pretend fiancée I’ve ever had,” I tell him.

He laughs.

“I’d like to hope I’m your *only* pretend fiancée,” he grins. He yawns widely. “I could use some sleep.”

I yawn in response, unable to help it, as a wave of tiredness washes over me.

“Sleep sounds good,” I agree. “We’ll talk more when we wake up.”

We scoot under the covers, and I angle my body automatically toward Nicholas, curling up against him. His arm settles around me, and I feel safe and secure with him right there beside me.

I hear Nicholas’ breathing even out quickly, and I crane my head back to look at him as his face relaxes into sleep. There’s no sign of the weight of an entire company or the increasing concerns that came from me avoiding him.

I’ll go back to work, I decide at that moment. This week, for sure. Nicholas clearly needs me, and it’s time to stop being so selfish. I need to stop avoiding him... and, more than that, I need to stop avoiding my feelings. It’s become clear, over the last few weeks, that my feelings for Nicholas have grown beyond expectation. I don’t know if I’m ready, yet, to say that I love him, but I know I care very deeply for him.

I let out a quiet breath and relaxed onto the mattress, closing my eyes. There’s still so much to consider.

But, right now, I’ll just let myself sleep and be reassured by the knowledge that Nicholas is right beside me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Quinn

I need to tell Nicholas.

That thought is the first thing on my mind as I wake up. It's the only thing that is still hanging between Nicholas and me. Everything else has been resolved; George is with the police, he isn't talking to his snooty family, and we've finally decided that we both feel the same way about each other.

But there is still the baby to consider.

I look over at Nicholas. He's still sleeping. He's such a deep sleeper, which is funny considering what a hard worker he is during the day. He looks content, a small smile curling his lips, and I resist the temptation to lean in and kiss him, not wanting to wake him until I'm ready to face him.

When I tell Nicholas about the baby, everything is going to change yet again. It's such a huge thing that there's no way things *won't* change. As it is, I've already waited too long, and I'd be surprised if he isn't mad at me when I finally tell him.

Will he look at me differently after hearing that I've kept this a secret for so long? Several weeks ago, I would have done anything to put a bit of distance between us. Now, however, I can't bear the idea of him looking at me like a stranger when he finds out.

Fuck, I should have told him weeks ago. I *knew* should have, but I was selfish and kept it to myself. Now what do I do? How do I tell him that, several weeks ago, I found out I'm carrying his child, and I never told him? Instead, I went out of

my way to avoid him, missing almost two whole weeks of work just because I couldn't cope with anything.

But the time has definitely come. No matter what happens next between us, Nicholas has a right to know about his child before he finds out some other way. I want him to hear it from me first.

Quietly, I slip out of my bed. My stomach is churning with nerves, and I've found tea is the best way to settle it recently. Perhaps it's the hormones, but the smell of coffee has started to make me feel ill, which has been hard; I've practically lived on coffee for the last three years.

Of course, the sudden hatred of coffee isn't the *worst* thing my stomach has demanded of me. I grimace as I remember the mad drive down to the twenty-four-seven supermarket last week, desperate for asparagus and ice cream... together.

My apartment building is quiet. There is no one around, everyone is either still asleep or at work. Even the road below is almost empty, and the sound of the kettle as it begins boiling is abnormally loud as a result. I get out my cup, and then another for Nicholas just in case.

It was the right decision. Just as the kettle flicks itself off, Nicholas stumbles into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Coffee?" I offer.

"Yes please," he groans. He stretches and winces. "I slept wrong; my back hurts."

"I might have kicked you," I say with a small chuckle. "I tend to be a violent sleeper. My half-strangled pillows can attest to that."

Nicholas snickers and makes his way toward me. Before I realize what he's doing, his arms slide around my waist and he rests his chin on top of my head, his breath tickling my scalp.

"No regrets?" he asks.

I smile and turn around in his arms, winding my arms around his neck. I lift myself up and press a soft kiss to his lips.

“No regrets,” I assure him.

The smile that crosses his face is as brilliant as the sun. There’s relief in his eyes, too, and his arms tighten briefly around me before he steps back.

“I’m glad,” he says softly.

Now is the perfect moment to tell him. But it feels wrong to just blurt out the truth.

“Though... there is something we need to talk about,” I say slowly. “About why I’ve been so sick lately.”

“Oh,” Nicholas’ smile falters slightly.

“It doesn’t affect my feelings for you,” I say, correctly interpreting his sudden worry. “But... there are some things you need to know about. You should sit down.”

We take a seat at the table, and I lay the hot drinks on it, sliding my tea toward myself in the hopes it will calm me. But it doesn’t. I fiddle with the handle as Nicholas waits quietly, his shoulders tense.

“You know how I’ve been so sick lately?” I say slowly. He nods. “There’s actually a very good reason for that.”

Nicholas hesitates and then leans forward.

“I thought you were just avoiding me for as long as possible,” he confesses.

My heart clenches. I never meant for him to think that. I *was* avoiding him, though not entirely for the reasons he assumes.

“I’m sorry,” I sigh. “No, that wasn’t it. A... test came back positive.”

Alarmed, Nicholas straightens, and I realize belatedly that I could have phrased that better.

“What do you need?” he demands. “Medicine, appointments, specialists? Let me know and I’ll take care of everything, okay? It’s the least I can do after how you’ve looked after me for the last three years. Damn it, I *knew* should have asked, I *knew* there was something wrong...”

“I pregnant,” I blurt out.

Nicholas’ voice trails away, his swiftly rising panic coming to a sudden halt. He stares at me, blinking several times. It’s not the way I imagined telling him, but I could see that Nicholas was working himself into a state wondering what’s wrong with me, and I couldn’t allow that to go any further.

“What?” Nicholas breathes.

“I’m pregnant,” I repeat. “When... when I went to the doctor, he asked if it was possible, so I went and bought a test, and...” I swallow. “Though, in case you wanted to know, all my other tests came back fine. A few changes in levels here and there, but apparently that’s normal during pregnancy.”

I blabbering on, filling the silence. Nicholas still hasn’t reacted past his stunned look with widened eyes.

“Pregnant?” he says.

Obviously, it hasn’t quite sunk in yet. My hand twitches, and I itch to reach out to him, but I’m not sure how to take it right now.

“Yes,” I say simply.

“I’m going to be a dad?” Nicholas asks.

There’s a surprising amount of hope and amazement in those words. Nicholas has never mentioned wanting kids in all the time I’ve known him. The look of wonder on his face, however, leads me to realize that having children is a dream he has kept close to his heart.

“You’re going to be a father,” I confirm. I look down. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. There’s no good excuse, but I was just so overwhelmed that I could barely think. So...”

“You ran,” Nicholas finishes.

I look up. I’m stunned to see no blame or anger in his eyes. Instead, there’s a small, sad smile on his face.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that by yourself, on top of everything else,” he says. “It must have been hard.”

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

“You’re not mad?” I manage to say.

“I’m a bit disappointed that I haven’t been here for the first part of the pregnancy, but that’s okay,” Nicholas says. “I’ll be here for everything else.”

Nothing changed. I can’t believe how lucky I am. Nicholas is still looking at me with love in his eyes, and he’s making it clear that he intends to help in any way possible.

“Hey,” Nicholas says, alarmed. He reaches out and brushes away the tear I didn’t realize had fallen. “Why are you crying?”

“Hormones,” I say with a teary chuckle.

“That’s fine,” Nicholas says. He smiles and cups my cheeks. “We’re going to be parents.”

“It’s terrifying,” I say, and he leans his forehead against mine. “I’m not ready to be a mom. I don’t know what to do about my job and my apartment and... *everything*.”

“The job is easy,” Nicholas says with a shrug. “I’ll just set up a playpen in the office.”

I pull back and stare at him incredulously, certain that he’s joking. But he just looks back very seriously, and I realize that he actually means it. He intends on setting up a nursery in the office so that we can both keep working while looking after the child.

I burst out laughing. It’s part amusement and part hysteria, a release of emotions after weeks and weeks of confusion and frustration.

“You are absolutely ridiculous,” I giggle.

“So they say,” Nicholas says with a chuckle. “Don’t worry about these things just yet. We’ll work them all out when the time gets closer. We still have a few months to plan. Together, we’ll make sure everything goes the way we want them to.”

Together. I like the sound of it. I finally give in to the urge to reach across the table and lace my fingers with Nicholas’. He turns his hand over and holds mine gently like it’s something precious. He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips.

Together, the two of us will make sure everything works out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Nicholas

I'm going to be a father.

Three days later, I'm still amazed by it.

A tiny part of me is upset, despite the fact that I'm trying not to be. Quinn kept this information from me for a while. On the one hand, I do understand. There's been a lot going on between us that neither of us were ready for, and a baby that's happened because we were careless the night of my brother's engagement party just would have made everything that much harder.

But that baby is also mine, and I had a right to know about it. Maybe knowing about it sooner could have helped matters. I don't know.

But what's done is done, and I'm not going to dwell on it, especially since I'm still trying to concentrate on making things work with Quinn. The fact that she's the mother of my child has only made me love her even more, though I don't say it, well aware of the fact that she's not emotionally, in the same place that I am yet.

Though, it turns out that the only thing I've missed regarding the entire pregnancy is the actual discovery. Too overwrought and shocked by it all, Quinn hasn't made any move to book herself in for sonograms or to see specialists.

Well, that changed quickly. My first priority, now, is to make sure both Quinn and the baby are healthy. As such, on the same day I found out about the child, I booked a sonogram

with no protest from Quinn, who seemed relieved that someone else was taking control of the situation.

It must have been hard, facing all this alone. As much as I wish Quinn had told me, I can't help but feel sorry for her carrying this burden by herself.

Well, maybe not quite by myself.

I stare at the hand the confident young woman before me is offering, blinking at the ink spots covering her skin. She's introduced herself as Christy and is apparently Quinn's best friend. Unfortunately, Quinn is running a little late, so I can't even ask her for confirmation.

Or find somewhere to hide from the woman's piercing eyes.

"It's good to meet you, Christy," I say, deciding to go for polite as I gave her hand a firm shake, resisting the urge to try and wipe the smeared ink off. "Quinn has spoken about you a lot."

"And you," Christy says.

What has Quinn been telling this woman? I felt a tiny bit of panic sparking in my chest. Good things, I hope? Shit, what if she told her all the *bad* things that happen.

"You're not bad," Christy comments, looking me up and down and derailing my thoughts. "Quinn's definitely picked a good one!"

"I'm sorry.... What?" I ask, suddenly very confused.

Christy chuckles.

"Quinn would always have stories about you," she says, ignoring my question entirely. "Either because you've spent the day flirting with her, or because the two of you made some sort of breakthrough at the company."

"I see," I say, wondering where she's going with this.

"And when she wasn't complaining in person, she was texting me," Christy says, rolling her eyes. "If it helps, I tried to get her to tell you about the baby sooner, at least."

"It's okay, I do understand," I assure her,

For the most part, anyway.

Christy shoots me an unimpressed look, as though she doesn't entirely believe me.

"That's good of you," she says finally. "Listen, I've been hoping to find a chance to talk to you, anyway."

"What about?" I ask curiously.

Christy leans in close. Nervously, I lean back, not liking the sharp, narrowed look in her eyes.

"You better look after Quinn," she says in a low voice. "If you don't, there *will* be hell to pay. Understand?"

I manage to nod. Considering Christy is slight and short, she's quite intimidating.

"Christy! I didn't know you were coming!"

At the sound of the greeting, Christy leans back and smiles at the approaching Quinn, as though she hadn't just threatened me. I manage to smile as Quinn glances at me. Who would have thought that the most difficult thing about this pregnancy would be meeting Quinn's best friend?

"Sorry I'm late," Quinn apologizes. "Traffic is horrendous out there."

"Yeah, we were watching through the window," I say. "They haven't called you yet, so don't worry about it too much."

As if on cue, a nurse steps into the room.

"Quinn Butler?" she calls.

Christy, Quinn and I all stand. I wonder if it's odd that Quinn's best friend is coming into the sonogram with us. But I don't say anything. From what Quinn has told me, Christy has been with her through everything. It only makes sense that she would be here on such an important day, and I'm glad that she's coming with us, if only for Quinn's sake.

The room we enter is small. Christy easily solves the problem by nudging me gently toward Quinn and then sinking back into a corner of the room, where she can still see the screen and see what's happening.

“Alright,” the nurse says kindly as she sits. “You’re here for a sonogram? Please lift up your shirt.

Quinn pulls up the hem of her shirt until her stomach is exposed, shivering slightly in the cool room. The nurse picks up a bottle.

“This is going to be cold,” she warns and then squirts clear gel-like liquid over Quinn’s belly.

Despite the warning, Quinn still jumps, and her hand momentarily becomes a vice grip around mine. I wince but keep holding on until her grip loosens once more.

“Sorry,” the nurse says, noticing Quinn’s discomfort. “Just lay back and relax.”

She takes a strange-looking device and presses it against Quinn’s stomach, murmuring to herself as she clacks a few keys on the computer. Then she starts moving the device slowly, and I watch in fascination as the picture changes, not entirely sure what I’m seeing.

“Would you like pictures?” the nurse asks, glancing at us.

“Yes,” Quinn says, and I nod, pleased.

The nurse nods and keeps searching. Then, suddenly, she pauses.

“Oh, my,” she says, sounding surprised.

There’s nothing alarming in her tone. But panic rises instantly in me anyway.

“What?” I ask sharply. “What’s wrong?”

The nurse chuckles, which makes both Quinn and I relax. I wince as blood returns to my fingers.

“Nothing wrong,” she informs us. “I’d just like to congratulate you on having twins.”

I stare.

“Twins?” Quinn squeaks.

“Yes,” the nurse says. “Here, watch.”

She moves the device around a bit more. I lean in closer.

“There’s baby number one,” she says, pointing out a shape hanging in the otherwise dark expanse of Quinn’s stomach. “And, right next to them, is baby number two. You said you were at least six weeks pregnant?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Quinn says, sounding numb.

I shoot her a worried glance. Her expression is worryingly blank.

“Both hearts are beating strong, and they’re both developing as expected for the time frame,” the nurse says with a nod. “They’re both growing, and they will likely be much larger next time you come. Unfortunately, there’s no way to tell the gender right now, but you can decide if you want to be told later.”

“Thank you,” I say.

The nurse glances at Quinn and suddenly realizes that something is wrong.

“This is a big surprise, so I’ll let you talk while I grab your pictures,” she says, standing.

She leaves the room, snapping the door shut behind her. As soon as she’s gone, Quinn looks up. Swiftly, panic forms on her face.

“Twins?” she gasps. “I wasn’t prepared for *one* baby, let alone *two!* How the hell can we afford two?”

She’s obviously not thinking properly, otherwise, she would remember that money is definitely not something we need to worry about.

“It’s going to be fine,” I say soothingly. “So, there are two babies. Well, there’s two of us. We can manage between us, and I’m sure Christy will be happy to help.”

“Naturally,” Quinn says with a grin as she approaches.

Quinn looks between us. Her eyes are wild. She’s completely freaking out about this. I can’t say I blame her; I’m screaming internally, too.

“But that’s only assuming we last,” she says, and I wince at the blunt words. “What if we break up? What if it’s a nasty break up that makes me lose my job, and then we have to go to court and fight for custody, and you’d probably win because you have money and a stable job whereas I’d have nothing...”

Okay, I’m going to stop her there. This is ridiculous. I reach out and grip Quinn’s shoulders, stopping her mid-rant.

“Calm down,” I say. “Breathe with me, Quinn. Come on. In... and out.... In... and out...”

Quinn doesn’t follow for a long moment. But then she begins to calm and she struggles to draw in a deep breath, following me, her eyes on my lips as I exhale.

“In... and out...” I say. “That’s better.”

“I feel a little better,” Quinn admits. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to have a panic attack.”

“I’m not surprised you did, this is huge,” I admit. “But, I think I can reassure you about something.”

I lean in and kiss her softly, pushing all the love I feel for her into it her lips.

“Even if you and I don’t work out for some reason, I won’t let it affect the lives of our children any more than necessary,” I promise. “We’ll still raise them together, in some way. And I’ll always be there to help.”

Quinn stares at me, searching my eyes. Then, with a barely suppressed sob, she throws her arms around me and buries her head in her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she says. “I needed to hear that.”

I glance up at Christy. She grins and gives me a thumbs up.

Then Quinn pulls back, drawing in a shuddering breath. But at least there’s a smile on her face, which was missing before.

“You’re amazing,” she says. Gently, she takes my hand and looks into my eyes. “I love you.”

My world narrows. Those three little words ring in my ears, three words that I didn’t expect to hear any time soon. Quinn

loves me? Quinn is *saying* that she loves me.

I don't know what to say. I feel such incredible warmth, however, that it spreads all the way to my toes.

Before I can say anything, the door opens and the nurse arrives with an envelope.

"How are you all feeling?" she asks.

"Better," Quinn says with a wan smile.

"Amazing," I breathe.

Christy giggles behind me.

"Good," the nurse says, bemused. "See the front desk on your way out, please. It's best to book a follow-up appointment now since we can sometimes get busy."

"Thank you, I'll do that," Quinn says.

The four of us leave the room and, with a last wave, the nurse heads down the hallway, evidently heading to another job. I feel like I'm floating.

"Nicholas?" Quinn asks, looking worried.

Is she concerned about my reaction? She shouldn't be. I feel lighter than air.

"I love you, too," I reply, unable to help saying the words.

Quinn blinks and then smiles warmly at me. This wonderful, beautiful woman loves me. It was a hard road to get here, but we've managed to find our way. Quinn slides her arms over my shoulders and kisses me. Now, I can feel *her* love in that kiss.

"Come on, let's go back," she says. "And we can look over these pictures."

I would love nothing more.

I don't know what the future will hold for the two of us. I don't know if we'll work together after the children are born. But I *do* now that Quinn and I are a team. Together, we'll definitely make everything work.

EPILOGUE

Quinn

The sound of the waves crashing against the shore is peaceful and makes contentment wash through me. My toes wriggle in the sand, and the wind blows my hair around my face. A few particles of sand fly through the air, but my glasses stop any of them from getting in my eyes.

It's a nice evening. The sky is already darkening as the sun begins to set, and most people have left the beach by now, looking for food or for warmer places to be.

For me, though, there's nowhere warmer.

A shriek of laughter catches my attention, and I turn my eyes away from the ocean to see a little girl tumble into view, tears of mirth falling from her large blue eyes as she laughs. I smile and kneel down to help her sit up, brushing sand out of her brown hair.

"Katrina, are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah!" she says, beaming at me. "Daddy is a dinosaur!"

"Rawgh!" I hear on cue behind me.

A laugh bubbles up and bursts from me as Nicholas, his eyes as brilliantly blue as his daughter's, stomps into view, his hands held like claws as he growls unconvincingly. Katrina laughs again and is off, her small feet kicking up sand as she goes.

"Don't let her get too far," I warn Nicholas.

“Quinn, she’s three,” Nicholas says, amused. “She’s nowhere near as fast as me.”

I snort and push him, making him stumble forward a few steps. “Then you better get after her.”

Nicholas grins and takes off after Katrina. I shake my head at their yells and turn to glance at Katrina’s twin brother, Michael, who is building a sandcastle. While Katrina has inherited her father’s larger-than-life attitude, Michael is more like me, quieter and more studious. I can only hope his hazel eyes work better than mine.

“What are you building?” I ask, squatting down.

Michael looks up and grins, black hair flopping in his eyes.

“A castle,” he says proudly.

It’s nothing more than a bundle of piled sand, but I gush over it like it has real walls and turrets, making him smile happily. We’re still sitting there when Nicholas returns, huffing a little, Katrina swept up in his arms.

“Run out of steam, old man?” I ask teasingly.

“Who are you calling old?” Nicholas asks in mock-offense. He looks down at Katrina. “I’m not old, am I?”

Katrina just giggles, and Nicholas looks offended.

“You’re asking a three-year-old,” I remind him. “To her, you’re probably ancient.”

Nicholas chuckles.

“Probably,” he agrees. “Now, who’s ready for dinner?”

Katrina and Michael both cheer, and I laugh. I’m starting to feel hungry, myself.

The picnic on the beach at sunset had been Nicholas’ idea. Out of the blue, he said he wanted to bring us here.

“We’ll always be able to tell the twins the story of how we brought them here,” he insisted when I said I wasn’t sure about taking the children to the beach. “And it will be a great experience for us, too.”

Eventually, I caved in, and I'm glad I did. Here, on the beach, there's no pressure. I'm not both girlfriend and secretary to Nicholas Dubois, the richest man in the state, something the media was quick to jump on three years ago when we first went public with our relationship. There's no internet opinions either supporting or harassing me for who I chose to be with. I don't even think of the quiet, lingering doubts that have begun to form lately, as our relationship, for whatever reason, refuses to go any further. Out here, it's tranquil, and I can leave all of that behind me.

Perhaps that's why Nicholas brought me out here. It's been no secret that I've been under some stress lately. I smile fondly as I watch him unpack the picnic basket that he went out and bought, more thrilled than the children to be going on a picnic.

"You act like you've never had one before," I had said to him, amused, as I watched him rush around.

"That's because... I haven't," he had replied awkwardly.

To have never been on a picnic... I know Nicholas grew up in a very rich, very snobby home, but it's sad to know that he missed out on so many wonderful childhood memories, a picnic being one of them. It's the reason he's so determined to give the twins as many experiences as possible.

"Here," Nicholas says, handing me a sandwich on a plate; we had decided to pack some light food for dinner since we were on the beach. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I am," I say with a soft smile at him, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "This place is beautiful."

"It's going to get more beautiful when the sun goes down," Nicholas says.

We settle in, the twins between us, eating our sandwiches and watching as the sun slowly inches its way toward the horizon. The distant cries of seagulls and the low hum of the city behind us is comforting, reminding us that we aren't all alone in the world, despite what the endless ocean seems to be saying.

"Look, Katrina, Michael," Nicholas says. "Look at the colors."

The twins make exclamations of delight. I can't blame them. As the sun sinks below the horizon, the sky is washed in shades of orange, splashed across the sky like paint on a giant canvas. The sun's rays run across the water, setting the sea on fire. It's an awesome sight, and I watch with bated breath, unable to tear my eyes away.

But, of course, the twins are too young to sit and watch something like this for too long. They start to squabble over a sandwich, and I'm forced to look away to break them apart. By the time I look up again, the sky has darkened and only a few rays of light are left.

"Wow," I say. I lean over and lay my head on Nicholas' shoulder now that the twins are engrossed in the toy cars I've given them. The peace won't last, I know, but I'll take these precious moments when I can get them. "That was amazing, Nicholas."

"It was," Nicholas says.

He turns his head and presses a soft kiss to my forehead. The action warms me inside but, at the same time, makes me feel sad. How many more of these moments will we get? Our relationship hasn't gone anywhere since the birth of our children. I understand him not pushing for anything more while they were babies, but they're older now. Surely we should at least *talk* about the next step now?

Of course, does it even matter? We have two children. We're now living together. What does it matter if we have a piece of paper and a ceremony to tell us how much we love each other, something we already know? It shouldn't matter.

Unfortunately, it does, a little.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Nicholas murmurs.

I sigh and shift to lean more fully on him.

"Nothing much," I say.

We remain in companionable silence for a while. Katrina and Michael are playing together in the sand, and it sounds like they're using their trucks to dig a hole. Nicholas' breathing is

even but, as I run my hand down his chest, I notice that his heart is beating very fast.

That's curious. I wouldn't have guessed before this moment that Nicholas was nervous, but his heartbeat has given him away. I sit up and lean back, frowning.

"Nicholas?" I ask. "Is everything alright?"

He laughs and scoots back, shaking his head.

"Looks like my body gave me away," he says. "Oh well. Now's as good a time as any."

"Good time for *what*?" I demand as Nicholas stands, pulling me up with him.

He winks at me.

"Be patient," he chides gently.

Then he gets down on one knee.

My breath catches. Is he going to... ? My thoughts stutter to a halt. My heart is beating wildly now as Nicholas slowly withdraws a small, black box from his pocket, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Quinn," he starts.

"That's mine!" Katrina suddenly shrieks, making me start.

We look at each other, surprised at the interruption. Then, suddenly, I laugh. Nicholas is down on one knee in front of me, my children are playing and arguing nearby, and, suddenly, it all feels so perfect.

Nicholas clears his throat.

"Katrina, honey?" he calls. "Can you keep it down a little? Daddy has something important to say to mommy."

"Okay!" Katrina yells back.

"Right... where was I?" Nicholas asks, looking vaguely embarrassed.

"You said my name," I point out, fighting the urge to laugh again.

“Of course,” he says, and flashes me a brilliant smile. “The most important start. Now... Quinn. Three years ago, things were different. I went about trying to seduce you because you kept saying no, and you were annoyed by everything I did.”

“No arguments here,” I say with a fond smile.

Nicholas chuckles.

“These last three years have been the best of my life,” he says. “I’ll never regret the day that brought you into my life. You are my everything, Quinn. The light of my life and you brought two more little stars with you. Sometimes, I look back on the arrogant playboy I was back then, and I can hardly believe how much I’ve changed.”

“Not entirely,” I interject warmly. “You just... matured.”

“A lot,” Nicholas laughs. “It was because of you, Quinn. It was always because of you. Without you, I don’t know where I would be. For you, I would throw away everything if you asked. I love you so much, Quinn. I wish I could give you the moon, if only it were possible. You deserve everything this world can offer you. And you chose *me* to be the one you want to be with. I’m thankful every day for that.”

He takes a deep breath. Tears are pricking my eyes.

“So, Quinn Butler, I would like to ask you if you would do me the honor of spending the rest of your life with me?” Nicholas says quietly.

He flicks open the box. I gasp. I take in the gold vines woven intricately together into a ring, dotted with emeralds and blue sapphires. It’s the ring Nicholas gave me when we were pretending to be engaged. When everything was sorted out with George, I regretfully returned it.

Yet now, here it is. He must have saved it for just this moment, to remind me of how we started, and how much further we can go.

“Yes,” I say, my cheeks hurting from how widely I’m smiling. “Of course. I love you, Nicholas.”

Nicholas smiles, and his expression is brighter than the sun. He slips the ring on my finger, and only then do I throw my arms around him before pulling back and kissing him fiercely. Everything about this is utterly perfect.

“Took you long enough, though,” I joke as I pull back.

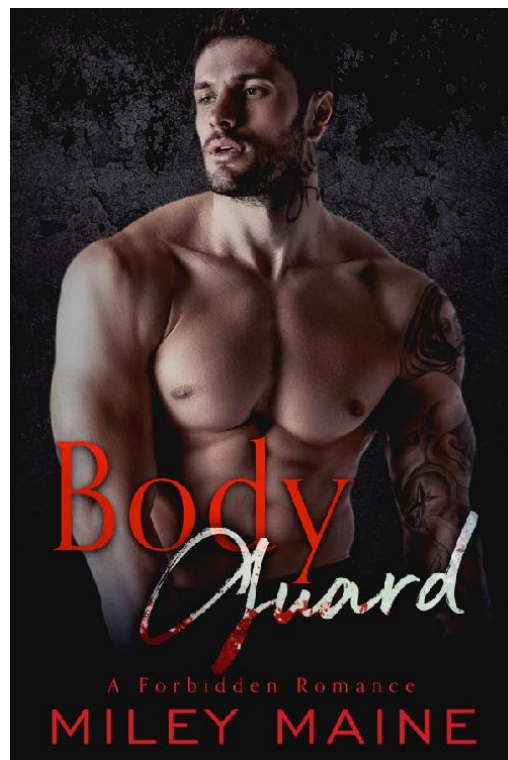
Nicholas smiles and reaches up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“For you, everything needed to be absolutely perfect,” he says.

I kiss him again. After everything that happened three years ago, so incredible that it all felt like a lifetime ago, it’s hard to believe that we’re actually engaged, and this time for *real*. We have two children together. We’re going to get married. Maybe we did everything backward, but none of that matters.

All that matters is the man in my arms and how much I love him. With the knowledge that he loves me back just as fiercely, I know I can face anything life throws at me.

EXCERPT: BODYGUARD



I was hired to protect her, not get her pregnant.

Her father would kill me if he finds out.

But her perfect plan to seduce me worked so well.

I knew I was falling deep,

And this time, it was too deep to be saved.

Mistakes will be made,

Prices will be paid.

But I'm not going back now.

No, I play by *my* rules.

The only one being: Be loyal to my job and...

Well, my job is to keep her safe and I'll do anything for that.

Aleissa

I finally have it, the perfect scheme to get him to notice me. There's no way that he'll be able to resist me now.

"Is that really your plan?" one of my friends asked, leaning over to whisper in my ear. My group became a giggly mess after I told them my plan to seduce the man that I had been pining after for at least four years now.

I mean, they had good reason. He was right there.

Carter Richards. Age thirty. From the neighborhood of Lincoln Park in Chicago, now living with me in a luxury apartment downtown. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and impossibly fit. He had dark skin, dark green eyes, and hair shorn close to his head.

What was there not to like?

There was only one little problem: Carter was my bodyguard.

"I don't see why it shouldn't work," I replied, tossing my hair in a way that I hoped Carter would see.

Georgia, my best friend, shot Carter a quick look and brought her finger up to her lips. "He's gonna come over here if you don't quiet down!" she said in a hushed voice.

Veronica, who was applying another coat of lip gloss after having finished her lunch, nodded. "And then you'll never know if your brilliant plan will work because it'll be spoiled."

"Oh, come on, let her have her fun," Julie said, nudging Veronica in the shoulder. She glanced down at her watch. "Speaking of fun..." She groaned and showed us the time on the digital face. "We should probably get to class now."

“Oh, joy,” Veronica said. “Another three hours of figure painting.”

“It’s important for your portfolio.” Georgia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She was always the practical one about our classes. I don’t think she’d ever skipped a day in her life. Probably because she drank so much orange juice, so she never got sick.

“Oh, portfolios, don’t remind me.”

We were first-semester seniors at Columbia College of Arts in Chicago, which meant we had to think about what we wanted to do after graduation. Some of us were lucky enough to have gotten jobs from internships or have companies scouting us. Some of us, like me, didn’t have to worry about money or connections.

My friends thought I was from a wealthy family, which was true, but they didn’t know my father was a large part of the organized crime in Chicago. He tried to keep me out of that part of his life as much as he could, but it wasn’t something that I could really get away from or forget. Especially when my bodyguard followed me everywhere, even to school.

I didn’t want to rely on my father’s wealth, though, or his connections in the art world to make me successful. I wanted to succeed because people liked my art and because it meant something to them, but I knew that would be near impossible without relying at least a little on my father and the resources he could provide me.

The four of us got to class on time and settled in to finish our seven-hour day of more figure painting. When you were doing something that took a long time, like figure painting, your classes had to be long. They were called studio classes because they resembled what a typical day in the studio might look like for a working artist. At least, that’s where I assumed the name came from.

After the three gruelling hours of painting, I gave a wink to my giggling friends and headed over to greet Carter.

“How was your day?” he asked politely.

I smiled up at him. “Long, but good. I’m excited for the semester.”

“That’s good, then.” He gestured for me to follow him. “Let’s get you to the car, and we can head home.”

“Okay.” I wondered if he could tell from the gigantic smile on my face that something was off. Hopefully not. I wanted this to be a surprise.

I followed him to where the car was waiting for us and slid in next to him in the back seat. My heart was beating fast in my chest, and I wished I could reach out and touch him, maybe take his hand. But that would be rude and foolish of me. I couldn’t do that, not right now, not without prefacing it.

“How was your day?” I asked, wanting to keep the conversation going. He was oh so handsome as he stared hard at our surroundings, looking for any threat. My heart felt like it would burst from my chest, and I wanted a bit of a distraction.

“Same as usual,” he said, short and sweet. I almost smacked my forehead. That was a stupid question. He spent all day watching me.

“Was it interesting, at least?” I tried, not sure where to go from there.

He shrugged. “You know, I’ve never understood the art world much, Ms. Romano.”

“You know you can just call me Aleissa. It’s been long enough now.”

“The nature of our relationship dictates that I address you as Ms. Romano. Your father wouldn’t want anything else.”

Of course, my father. Always one for tradition and decorum. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if he arranged a marriage for me to increase his power. That was the man he was. I loved him despite all that, though. He had done a good job raising me all on his own after my mother died in childbirth, and he loved me with all of his heart.

“What if I order that you call me Aleissa?”

A rueful smile crossed his face, just for a split second. We had had this conversation before quite a few times. It always went the same way, but it still felt like a joke between us.

“Your father’s orders take precedence over your own, Ms. Romano.”

“Even if it’s just in secret?”

“Even if it’s just in secret.”

I pouted and crossed my arms over my chest. The bodyguards before him had always bowed to my wishes, but I had been a child then, and my father had found it amusing. Now he wouldn’t say so much. Now he would see it as crossing a line because now I was a woman, not a girl. I just wished that Carter would see me as such.

We didn’t need to take a car back. I lived in a luxury apartment in downtown, and it was only a few blocks from the school building. Well, maybe more than that. I didn’t know if I would want to walk back, but I thought I could. Like many other things in my life, taking the car was an extra precaution that my father deemed a necessity.

When we arrived, Carter and I thanked the driver and headed inside. I waved to the receptionist and took out my keycard to buzz us into the elevator area. We rode the elevator in silence to one of the top floors where Carter engaged in his usual routine of exiting first, looking around suspiciously, and then waving me in.

Someone had decorated the apartment with my tastes in mind. It was all pastel and gold accents with plenty of beautiful silk flower arrangements. I headed to my room to change, but not before calling over my shoulder.

“Wait for me to get dinner! I want to make something tonight.”

I knew that Carter must have looked after me with a confused expression, maybe even one of slight concern. I never cooked dinner. Either he made something, we ordered in, or we went out to eat. We went out to eat a lot less often, mostly because I imagined it must annoy him when people mistook us for a couple all the time.

Tonight was a special occasion, though. I wanted him to see me as a woman, with all my temptations and my skills.

In fact, I had bought an outfit just for the occasion. I slid into the slinky, gold silk slip, then put a poor excuse for an apron over it. The 'apron' was pink silk and definitely wouldn't protect me if I spilled anything. It was more for the aesthetic and to draw attention to my cleavage.

I pranced back out into the adjoined kitchen and dining room, confused when I didn't see Carter. Didn't he want to watch me cook? Or at least figure out what his fate would be?

"Carter!" I called, and he popped his head through the archway that led to the living room.

"Yes?" he asked, and I didn't miss the slight moment where his eyes glanced over my figure. "Is everything all right?"

"Aren't you going to watch me cook?" I bent over slightly, putting my cleavage on full display and giving him my best pout.

"Did you want me to?" He definitely sounded confused.

"Yes! I mean, what if I end up hurting myself?" I batted my eyelashes at him. There was no way I would end up hurting myself. That was not the plan. I was making pasta and sauce and some veggies, which I had practiced before. I knew it wasn't that hard.

He sighed. "One second." He popped back into the living room and then re-emerged several seconds later with a book in hand. He sat down at the table, angling himself to face me, and opened up his book.

"Are you really going to read?" I asked.

"Do you not want me to?"

I didn't want him to! I wanted him to watch me, to appreciate my body, my cooking skills, and my cute little outfit.

My frown must have communicated my discontent well enough. He sighed and set aside his book. "Fine, go ahead."

I gave him my best grin and began making us both dinner. I hoped he was watching me as I did. I made plenty of motions that would draw attention to my assets. I knew he had to be hungry now, for both my body and the food that I was making. It smelled delicious. He even said as much.

“Thank you,” I said with a wink. “I wanted to do something special for you.”

“And what is the occasion?” he asked, raising one eyebrow.

“You’ll see.” I giggled.

Once I had finished, I served out two plates. Then came the culmination of my plan. I untied my apron and let it fall to the floor with what I hoped was an appropriate bedroom smile. Then, I slid onto Carter’s lap, prepared to grab a forkful of the pasta and feed it to him.

He was still for a second, and both shock and panic crossed his face at the same time. Then he gently took both of my shoulders and pushed me back to where I was standing in front of him again.

“Aleissa, you can’t do that,” he said.

“But why not?” I whined. “Don’t you want to be with me? Don’t you think I’m attractive?”

I reached out to touch him, prepared to get on his lap again, but he grabbed my wrist with a firm grip and pushed it down. God, even that turned me on.

“It’s not about that.”

“Then what is it?” I crossed my arms over my chest, propping up my breasts. “Don’t you see me as a woman?”

“I will not deal with you right now, not when you’re like this,” he replied, getting up and pushing past me. I watched in shock as he headed to his room.

So much for that plan.

With a pang of regret in my chest, I wondered if I had pushed things too far this time. I didn’t mean to, but judging by the

way Carter had reacted, he hadn't been pleased. He had looked a little scared, even. Maybe angry.

I sighed and plopped down in the chair he had vacated. Now I had to eat dinner alone.

Hope you loved the excerpt of **Bodyguard**. You can read the full story **here**.

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