



BILLIONAIRE'S

Desire

IRIS WILLSON

Billionaire's Desire

**An Age Gap Enemies to Lovers
Romance**

Iris Willson

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Also By Iris Willson

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Chapter 1

Max

There is nothing I would like more than to be on a tropical island licking ice cream off my girlfriend's tanned body, but instead I am stuck in a three-hour meeting that could have been an email. I groan inwardly. I am so tired of these day-to-day meetings, but this is the obligation no one warns you about when you go into business with your brother. Some days your brother is so wrapped up in his own grief he can't even see straight. So instead of time with my hot girlfriend, I end up in meetings from Monday all the way to Saturday.

I am exhausted, and I am frustrated.

I would rather be with Mia and her perfect breasts in that hot pink bikini that I like taking off her.

I groan again.

How long is this fucking meeting going to last, anyway?

The other board members must sense the pure boredom on my face because like clockwork Mr. Clint, who has been

holding us hostage for the better part of the morning, finally wraps up.

“So that’s it on the new housing project we were looking into, Mr. Cole. I will send the documents to you for review before we can move forward,” Mr. Clint says.

I stand up, thank him for his presentation, and shake his hand. Then I shake the hands of all the other six men in the conference room. I straighten the lapel of my charcoal suit and walk out.

Fucking freedom at last.

I swear these men love to hear themselves talk.

I take out my phone ready to text my younger brother letting him know that I am done with the meeting when an incoming call comes through.

Mia.

Right on cue.

“Hey beautiful,” I clear my voice, bringing out all the charm, not wanting to betray my frustration.

“Hey handsome. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

“I wish you were here.”

I groan inwardly.

I have a feeling I already know the next words out of her mouth before she even speaks them.

“I wish Finn would step up so you could spend a lot more time with your girlfriend.”

Just like fucking clockwork.

Finn is always a sore topic between us. Mia does not get that he is still in the throes of his grief and that it is up to me as his elder brother to pick up the slack whenever he needs me to. All Mia interprets my long working hours as, is me pushing her away and not spending enough time with her.

She does not get it.

She will probably never get it.

“Baby, let’s not.”

She lets out a little huff. “Okay, okay. I have another photoshoot in a few minutes then we will move locations.”

Mia is my twenty-five year old girlfriend who is also a swimsuit model. She is currently on a shoot off the coast of the Maldives for some cologne campaign. I am not going to pretend to think that I know exactly what she does. All I know is, we see each other occasionally, hookup whenever we are in the same city, and the rest is just details. Details I do not have. Details I do not care enough to have. And this goes both ways. She immediately zones out whenever I bring up the family business. Our relationship is purely physical, and we are both okay with that.

“Have fun. Send me pictures after.”

That finally gets a giggle out of her.

One thing Mia Canelli likes more than attention on her body, is my attention on her body.

“Yes, sir!” she replies with a low husky voice.

That sends some of my blood rushing.

I bet I can get on our private jet and get to the Maldives and be back in time for my next meeting.

Nope. That’s crazy talk, I remind myself just in time for another meeting notification.

Meeting with Charles and Co. Twenty minutes.

Well, there goes my plan for a quick trip to the Maldives, or for any semblance of lunch, either.

“Behave, baby,” I warn.

Mia laughs on the other end of the line. My sexy little brat. I miss her. My cock for sure misses her.

“Never!” She responds.

“The next time you are in town, I am making sure I spank you so hard, you won’t be able to sit straight for a week.”

Her breath is already getting heavy as she replies, “I can’t wait.”

I can already picture the way the color in her cheeks rises whenever I talk dirty to her. My cock stirs further.

Fuck!

“I have got to go now.”

Even with the miles between us, I can feel the defiance and disappointment in her voice.

“Okay, Max.”

“I will fly over next weekend,” I add.

She immediately perks up. “For real, babe?”

“For real, babe.”

“Okay. I will send you pictures later.”

My already hardening cock is very onboard with that idea.

“Okay, baby.” Then I hung up.

I have to be across town in a few minutes, so I quickly type up my current address and order an Uber.

The next available ride is about twenty minutes away.

Fuck car riding services sometimes.

I cancel that and go for the cheapest option.

Gray Mini Cooper will be arriving in three minutes.

That will do.

I check for the driver.

Driver: Alice Maine.

Perfect.

Gray Mini Cooper with a female driver; I memorize.

I will make sure to keep a lookout for a car with that description, and because I have a few minutes to spare, I decide to call Finn.

After about three rings, he picks up.

“Hey, Max.” He sounds low today. It must be one of those days.

“Hey, Finn.”

“Are you in the office today?”

“No. I came in to sign some documents then decided to take the rest of my work home.”

If he had delivered the same message with such a monotone voice five years ago, I would have chastised the hell out of him. But that was before everything. Before Penelope. Before the accident. Before.

So instead, I try to keep the frustration out of my voice when I reply, “That’s okay, Finn. Anything you can’t deal with, send it to my assistant and I will take a look at it in the evening.”

Because what else can I say?

I am exhausted and overworked. I am basically running on fumes lately. But Finn is sad and grieving and angry most of the time.

Finn was the most hardworking man I knew. He was in the office early, and he left it pretty late. The only time he wasn’t working his ass off for our company, he was spending time with Penelope. Then one day, Penelope was taken away from him and the Finn I knew was taken away from me.

“Thanks, Max.”

“No problem at all.”

“Are we still up for tomorrow?”

Finn is quiet for a beat. I am about to remind him of the scheduled meeting when a beat-up Mini Cooper stops right in front of me. It is a lot more beat-up than I had expected, but a lot more convenient, right? I am already running late for my next meeting anyway.

Gray, and by the looks of it, a female driver.

This must be it.

“My ride’s here Finn. Give me a minute to get in...” Then I open the car door and plop right in.

“So, as I was saying...” I resume my phone conversation, but my words are immediately cut off by the loud shrieking of my Uber driver.

What in the actual fuck?

“What is happening? Who is yelling?” Finn asks.

“Let me call you back in a minute.” Then I hang up and face the screaming woman.

“What the hell?”

She has whipped around and is screaming.

This close to her, I am hypnotised by her big brown eyes, and if she was not my Uber driver, or even screaming at me, she is kind of the woman I would strike up a conversation with.

Not to cheat on Mia or anything, but this woman is beautiful.

She is brunette, and her lips are painted some kind of cherry color.

She bangs her fists on her wheel and all thoughts of her beauty leap out of my head.

“Get out. Get out. Get out.” I finally manage to decipher.

Beautiful, but absolutely no manners at all. What in the hell is wrong with her?

“No. I am running late.”

There is a flash of confusion on her face as she continues to stare at me.

“So what? How the hell is that my problem?”

I am so confused by the lack of decorum from this woman. Is it because I was a few minutes late? I don't understand what could warrant such behavior from her.

There is now a line of vehicles behind us, honking because she is holding back the traffic.

“Can you fucking calm down?”

“No. I will not fucking calm down. Get the fuck out of my car. Get the fuck out right now!” There is clear exasperation in her voice and if it was any other day, I would have been inclined to try having an adult conversation with her, but today is not that day.

I am late, and I am exhausted and she is the rudest Uber driver I have ever met. I have no time or energy for any of this bullshit.

Is this how the other half live? A shudder runs through me.

This was not worth the time I was trying to save if I had just waited for the expensive ride I am usually accustomed to.

I am running late and sitting here with her in a stalled car isn't helping.

"Fine!" I unfold myself from the backseat, and I make sure to bang the car door as soon as I am out of the car.

She immediately honks and speeds off.

I took a look at my app. She has cancelled my ride and given me a low rating.

Well, fuck you too!

Then, I order a different Uber because I have places to go, and about a million things to do.

Chapter 2

Maggie

I scroll through my emails again, hoping I will find the one I am looking for, but so far, all I can find are rejection letters.

I sigh deeply and immediately wish I could pick up my phone and call Poppy, but I can't because she isn't here anymore. Instead, I log into my backup and scroll through pictures of us; hiking, clubbing, having random girls' night in. This makes me nostalgic and sad, so I toss my phone on the couch and head straight to the kitchen to grab a drink.

Pinned to my refrigerator, there is a RENT DUE notice which I try my hardest to ignore. I take out my bottle of Merlot but when I open it, I only find drips. I completely forgot that I drank that yesterday.

Damn it!

I have been job hunting for a week now, since the temp agency I have been working for hasn't had any postings in a while now. I have bills waiting to be paid, and with the amount

of money I have remaining in my bank account, I can only afford to buy groceries or pay my rent, not both.

I let out another frustrated groan.

A notification pings on my laptop and I bang my hip running back to the couch, but when I open it, it is not a job lead. Instead, it is another reminder of what my life was supposed to look like and how much I lost.

The email is from Mr. Scott, the elderly office building owner where my family bakery is located. He is inquiring on the status of the bakery's reopening as he does every couple of months or so. At this point, I am not sure if he is genuinely concerned or just being plain nosy. Either way, tears prick my eyes when I read it.

Fields Bakery belonged to my family. My mom used to be the baker while my dad acted as the accountant and the marketing person. The thought of weekends spent sitting in the kitchen watching them work makes the tears trickle faster. Back then, I had my mom, my dad, and my best friend. And now, I am sitting all alone, in my tiny apartment, trying to figure out whether I get to have a roof over my head, or whether I get to eat.

Life can be so cruel sometimes.

Maybe I should get a dog?

Nope, that's crazy thinking. I would not be able to walk him or take great care of him at all. I would need money, which I so glaringly do not have. Pushing the thoughts aside, I walk

back to the kitchen and decide to water the emotional support plants I have lined up on the window sill.

I spend a few minutes watering them, and by the time I get back to the living room, there is a message sitting in my inbox.

I wonder what bill needs to be paid, but when I open this message, it is from the temp agency.

I immediately released the breath that I was holding in.

They have an opening for a waitress job, but to get it, I need to be at their offices before noon. A quick glance at the clock tells me that I have exactly one hour to drive across town. I am still in the long t-shirt I wore to sleep. I don't even want to imagine the state of my hair. But I have to do this. I have to get this job.

I run back to my bedroom and pick out a dress that does not look too wrinkled. I do not have the few minutes I would need to iron out a better outfit. I jump into the shower and before the water gets warm, I am already out of there. I quickly brush my teeth, get dressed, get my hair and makeup ready, and in less than fifteen minutes, I am picking up my car keys and running out of the door.

My Mini Cooper is parked right outside the building. The tank indicates that I will need to refuel it, but luckily, it has enough gas to get me across town and back.

Within minutes, I am on the highway. I run my mind through interview questions. I have worked with this agency before. Once, I got a job as a temporary bartender for an art

gallery opening. I also got a delivery job for a bookstore when they had a signing with the author. They always get me odd jobs, but the jobs end up paying pretty well, and at this exact moment, I could use a lot of cash.

I have some money saved up to reopen my bakery, but that is in a fund that I do not touch. It is still a couple of grand short, but I am happy with how much I have saved up over the years. If I can't make rent this year, then I will have to take out money from that account, and that would mean keeping the bakery closed a lot longer. I cannot afford to do that. It has been out of business for way too long.

I am about fifteen minutes away from the office building when I stop at the lights. There has been an accident and the route I usually use is blocked. I decide to switch lanes and stop outside one of the complexes as I try to figure out an alternate route. I am distractedly looking at my phone when my car door opens and someone gets in.

My initial reaction is to scream. This cannot be the day I get robbed. I literally have no money on me.

When I turn around to look at my assailant though, my jaw immediately drops.

The man is on the phone and judging by the suit he has on, he doesn't look like the robbers I see in movies. Who knows? Maybe they evolved? I haven't had cable in a few months and maybe they have changed their look since then.

The man is handsome. He is dressed in a charcoal gray suit and he is running his fingers through his black hair. A quick

scan of his face niggles at me. He looks familiar. Very familiar, but I cannot for the life of me place where I have seen him before. Maybe around town?

This thought quickly jolts me back to the realization that there is a strange man currently sitting in the back seat of my car.

“Get out, get out, get out!” I yell at the top of my lungs.

Despite how handsome he is, this is still a stranger in my car.

He is still staring at me with a confused look on his face so I bang my fists on the steering wheel trying to get my point across.

He clears his throat before he responds.

“No. I am running late.”

Fuck! My interview! I am going to be so late.

“So what? How the hell is that my problem?” I cannot help the exasperation in my voice when I question him. I need him to get out of my car and I need him to do so immediately.

Why the hell did I forget to lock my car doors as soon as I got in?

There is a vehicle behind us now, honking loudly.

At least I have got this one thing going for me. There is no way he could kidnap me now.

Or maybe he still could?

He could command me to drive off.

But there is the strange calm and collected way he is carrying himself that does not scream car thief or kidnapper.

“Can you fucking calm down?” His gravelly voice draws me back to reality.

The audacity of this man. How dare he? This is my car for fucks sake. He is the one in the wrong in this situation, and he has the audacity to ask me to calm down when I tell him to leave?

“No. I will not fucking calm down. Get the fuck out of my car. Get the fuck out right now!”

I am so late, and I do not have the time for any of this.

The insistent honking of the first car’s horn has now been joined by several cars parked behind them.

I need to start driving. I need to get to the temp agency and I need this guy, whoever he is, to get out of my Mini Cooper immediately.

After a few minutes where our eyes are locked in some semblance of a stand-off, I finally succeed, because he shouts, “Fine!” then proceeds to bang my car door on his way out.

What an asshole!

If I had the time or the energy, I would have gotten out and given him a piece of my mind. What a strange and rude fellow.

But I do not have the time for any of it, so instead I drive off with my fingers crossed that I make it to my interview on time.

I get to the building with five minutes to spare and hurriedly run up the steps.

There are a few other women sitting in the reception area.

I pass my ID and personal information to the receptionist and then sit down beside a blonde woman who is busy scrolling through her phone.

If this had been a few years back, I would have struck up a conversation with her, asked her what her name was. That was the old Maggie. The extroverted and quick to make friends Maggie. So much has changed since then. So instead, I stare at the floor, quiet and reserved and wait for my name to be called.

One by one, the other women get called.

Close to two hours later, a woman emerges from the back room.

“Hi, I’m Kimber. You must be Maggie.”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Great, come with me and we’ll get started.”

I follow her into a small office and she closes the door behind us. We take a seat at a small table and she pulls out a folder with my resume and application.

“So, Maggie, tell me why you’re interested in this position.”

“Well, I’ve always loved working in the food industry and I think this would be a great opportunity for me to gain experience. I have worked with your agency before, actually. I

have a passion for providing excellent customer service and I believe I have the skills and experience to be a great asset to your team.”

“That’s great to hear. Can you tell me about a time when you had to handle a difficult customer?”

“Sure, there was a time when I worked as a server and a customer became very unhappy with their order. Instead of getting frustrated, I stayed calm and listened to their concerns. I then offered to have the kitchen prepare a new dish for them, which they accepted. By the end of the meal, they were very satisfied and even left a generous tip. It was a great learning experience for me, and I learned the importance of always remaining professional and finding a solution to any problem.”

“That’s excellent, Maggie. You have a great attitude and I think you would be a great fit for our team. When would you be available to start?”

I almost leaped from my seat in excitement. “I’m available to start immediately and I’m very flexible with my schedule.”

She beams at me. “Great, I’ll speak with HR and get back to you with next steps. The job is going to be on a private yacht. Is that okay with you?”

I nod emphatically. This means that I not only get to pay my rent, I would also be saving up on my grocery expenditure. The heavens are finally smiling down on me.

We shook hands after the interview and I walked out of her office.

I left the interview feeling confident and hopeful. I was eager to hear back from them and start my new job. I take the elevator and just as I am getting back into my car, I get an email confirming that I got the job and I will start on Monday.

The money was decent enough that I would be able to add it to my *bakery reopening* savings and still have a little more to tide myself over. I would have to sell my crappy car, and cinch my belt a little more, but I could already feel my tides changing.

I scream with joy and excitement. “This is it!” I bang on my steering wheel. “This is my lucky break.”

I need to celebrate.

Before I can think about it too much, I drive to a local supermarket. I need to get Merlot to celebrate.

It would cost a little more than I should spare, but this is the first time in a long time that I feel like I have something to look forward to and celebrate.

I park my car and walk straight to the liquor store.

Only one bottle remained.

Just my luck.

I reach for the bottle just as another hand does the same.

I look up and find myself staring at the same eyes that I had looked into this morning. This is the same strange man that jumped in the backseat of my car.

He looks at me and says, “What are you doing? That’s mine.”

I’m taken aback by his rude tone, and I respond, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that since I found the bottle on the shelf.” I cannot help the sarcastic tone in my voice.

But he doesn’t stop there. He continues, “Can’t you see that I’m trying to buy this bottle? You’re always getting in the way.”

“I don’t even know you,” I almost screamed. “Now let go of my bottle.”

His rude behavior is uncalled for and it leaves me wondering what I did to deserve such treatment.

This man must be the antithesis of all my good luck; I got a job interview then he showed up almost making me run late, and now I want to celebrate my first win in months and here he is again, trying to take it from me.

His eyes bore into me, and I am aware of the scene we must be making I try not to start a screaming match with him.

He drops his hand and I pick the bottle and nestle it to my chest.

“Thanks for nothing,” I cannot help but say.

I turn to leave when he stops me again.

“Can I at least buy it from you?”

“Excuse me?” I turn back around and face him.

“Look, I will be honest. I genuinely need that bottle more than you do, and you could use the money, so fair exchange?”

I could use the money? This man is dripping with audacity. What is it with rich people always thinking of ways they could throw money at problems? It has happened with some of my past employers. It happened with Mr. Cole. For some reason, I always end up screwed.

I could use the money for sure, but the way he said it so condescendingly and painstakingly rudely pricks at my pride.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t need your money.”

“I didn’t mean it like that-”

“I know how you meant it. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a bottle of Merlot to enjoy. I will buy this bottle and then I will jump into my shitty ass car and drive to my shitty ass apartment and enjoy it, all by myself.”

He blinks his eyes and runs his hand through his hair.

Before he can get another word out, I turn around and walk to the cashier.

I pay for the bottle and walk out into the parking lot where my trusty little Mini Cooper waits for me.

What a rude man!

However, I will not let this man ruin my day. The two times I met him today I ended up in a bad mood.

Hopefully, this is not a pattern. I don’t need more bad luck in my life.

Chapter 3

Max

What in the heavenly fuck was that?
Fuck!

This day keeps getting worse and worse.

And I don't know this Uber driver, but somehow we keep getting off on the wrong foot.

When I first ran late for my meeting after wasting half my morning in another one, I thought that that was the worst of it. I was obviously wrong.

Then the encounter with the rude driver happened and I got to the meeting with a few minutes to spare.

The entire meeting was redundant and boring and I caught myself daydreaming about Mia's body more than once. In my defense, my girlfriend is super hot.

But after that meeting, Finn called me, he wants to talk to me urgently. I took an Uber immediately after and headed to our offices.

By the time I got there, I found Finn in my office already waiting.

“Hey bro. Everything okay?”

He shakes his head at me. “I am okay Max. You have got to stop asking me that.”

I scan his physique. He still has dark circles under his eyes, which means he is still having trouble sleeping, but his suit is impeccable and not a single strand of hair is out of place. He is clearly doing relatively okay, all things considered.

When I got a call from him asking me to come in, my heart had nearly dropped out of my chest.

I would never admit this to anyone, but ever since Penelope died, I have had this fear that he might do something drastic, something to hurt himself.

This loss has been really hard on him.

“I have to worry about you. It is my job as your brother.”

He smirks at me, “Well, I hope you remember that when I give you the next piece of news.”

Oh for fuck sake!

“What did you do?”

“Well,” he fiddles with the cufflinks on his shirt, “I got us a major deal.”

“This is good news, right?”

“It depends.”

I arch an eyebrow at him.

“Finn? What is it?” I ask.

“The potential investors we’ve been trying to impress, they own a yacht and they want us to join them on a trip,” Finn explains. “It’ll be a great opportunity for us to network and make a good impression.”

I considered his proposal for a moment. “I don’t know, Finn. I’m not much of a yacht person,” I responded.

“Neither am I, Max, but consider it for a moment.”

“I don’t like large water bodies, you know that. Plus, how long would this trip even be?”

“One month?”

I almost jumped out of my seat. “I can’t be off shore for a whole month, Finn.”

He nods understandingly. “I understand your concerns, Max, but this could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Trust me, this will pay off in the long run. And, who knows, maybe you’ll even have a little fun in the process.”

I take a moment to think it over. Finn makes a valid argument, and there could be potential benefits to this trip.

“Okay, let’s do it,” I finally say. “But we need to make sure that we stay focused on the business aspect of the trip, and not just let it become a frivolous vacation.”

Finn nods in agreement. “Absolutely, Max. I know we can make this work for us. There is just one more thing.”

“Go on!” I urged him.

“Pen’s anniversary is coming up. There is no way I will not be here for it.”

I swallow a painful gulp.

Next week, Thursday, would mark the day he proposed to her, and he always brings her flowers on that day. There is no way I could ask him to break tradition.

“Then we can stay, and we can figure something else out.”

“No, Max, you can still go.”

“I can’t let you do that alone Finn.”

His eyes shone with genuine gratitude when he looked at me. “I will be fine, Max. I promise.”

So, I ended up reluctantly agreeing to the trip, alone.

I had to find a way to call Mia and tell her that I was not going to be able to make the trip to the island after all. I dreaded that conversation.

I dialed my girlfriend’s number and waited for her to answer. When she did, I could hear the excitement in her voice. “Max! I’ve been counting down the days until you arrive. What’s the plan for your trip?”

I take a deep breath before speaking. “Hey, Babe. I have some bad news. I won’t be able to make it after all.”

There was a pause on the other end. “What do you mean you won’t be able to make it? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine. Something came up at work and I won’t be able to get away,” I explained.

She sounds disappointed. “Max, I was really looking forward to seeing you. We haven’t seen each other in so long.”

I feel guilty cancelling our plans yet again, but it was not like I had an option out of it. “I know, and I’m sorry. I was looking forward to it too. But this work trip can’t be ignored. I promise, I will make it up to you soon.”

“I understand,” she says, but I can still hear the disappointment in her voice.

“I’m really sorry, Babe. I will take some time off work after this trip.” I say, trying to reassure her.

“It’s okay.”

“I will text you once I am back on land.”

There is a long silence on the other end. “What do you mean?”

I knew that there was no way that conversation was going to end well, but I braced myself and tried explaining the situation to her as calmly and as gently as possible. Mia let out exasperated sighs the entire time I was talking.

I want her to understand where I am coming from, but I also know that I am asking way too much from her.

“Look, Max,” I can tell that she is trying really hard to keep calm as she speaks, “I have tried and tried for us to work. I

have needs, needs that are not being met. We are both too caught up in work at the moment.”

“What does that mean, Mia?”

“That means that, maybe we can try again when we are in the same city.”

I let out a breath. I was expecting this conversation to go exactly as it is unfolding.

“Does that mean what I think it means, Mia?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” She waits a beat before adding, “Goodbye, Max!” Then she hangs up.

I expect to feel something. Hurt, anger, confusion. But instead, I am filled with frustration and exasperation, a kind of frustration that only my bottle of Merlot could cure.

I reach for the remaining bottle of Merlot when I come face to face with the last person I expected to lay my eyes on.

It is her.

She is beautiful and unexpected.

It is the gorgeous, yet rude Uber driver from this morning.

Every time she lays her eyes on me, my breath hitches. I have no idea why my proximity to her brings out such a side from me, but I find myself saying all the wrong things.

I just cannot shut up.

What follows is one of the second most awkward conversations I have ever had and before I can apologize, or

get to talk to her and figure out everything, she huffs and storms out of my sight.

Why did I even offer to buy the bottle from her? Why didn't I just let her have the bottle then have my assistant scouring the city for another bottle just for me? Why is this the second time in less than twenty-four hours that I am finding myself in the middle of a confrontational screaming match with this woman? This city is definitely big enough.

And I can tell by how great that interaction went, that she was having a long day as well.

So instead of reaching out to her or running to catch up with her, I just let her go.

It is better that way, for both of us, I believe.

What a fucking disaster of a day!

As I drive home at the end of the frustrating day, a random thought infiltrates my brain.

Maybe Finn was right after all. Maybe I am better off taking a few weeks off. I will still be working, but I cannot compare that to the day-to-day working of in-person meetings.

Maybe this trip is the break I need.

Thoughts of calling my assistant and asking her to find a bottle of Merlot for me slowly dissipate and like most days, my mind drifts to worries revolving around my brother.

I just hope that Finn will be fine without me around.

I need to reschedule some meetings. I don't think he is ready to attempt all of them. I want to take as much weight from his shoulders as I can. I am also going to ask my assistant to get a hold of his calendar and his assistant. I will pay them extra just to deal with as much of the paperwork without having to directly involve him.

I hope that I will score this deal because this would be amazing for our company.

I wish for some semblance of peace and quiet.

I wish for a good fucking trip.

That last thought draws a smirk from me.

I didn't have the Merlot to wallow in, but maybe that was a sign that there was no wallowing needed after all.

Chapter 4

Maggie

I woke up feeling nervous and excited for my first day on a yacht. I've always dreamed of working on one of these luxurious boats, and today is finally the day. My bags are packed, my plants watered and my rent paid.

I had to keep the car in storage for the duration of the trip or I would have had parking receipts to pay for in plenty.

I lock my car and make my way to the deck.

As soon as I step outside, I am in awe of the beauty surrounding me. The sun is shining, the water is a vibrant shade of blue, and the yacht is glistening in the sunlight.

I meet the captain and the crew and am given a tour of the yacht. I am blown away by the size of the boat and all the amenities it has to offer. There's a swimming pool, a movie theatre, and even a spa.

I am filled with nervous excitement.

This is my first day as a waitress on the yacht and I want to make a good impression. I look around taking in the luxurious

surroundings. The yacht is massive with gleaming wood finishes and elegant furnishings.

I make my way to the crew quarters and introduce myself to my new colleagues. They are all friendly and welcoming, making me feel at ease. I quickly get settled in and start learning the ropes of my new job.

This is it. This is the first day of my job on board. I have not taken such a luxurious or well-paying job before and I am a little more than excited for the trip.

Our supervisor gathers us in a circle before issuing instructions.

There are the basic rules and nuances of being a waitress, be patient, be calm, pay attention to details, all that gist. Then we are issued our standard uniforms and provided with our work time schedules.

I find out that I am sharing a room with Hilda, a blonde woman who is also part of the wait staff.

“Hey, have you done this before?” she asked me as we put our luggage away.

“Not exactly. What about you?”

She has a smile that immediately puts me at ease. “Yeah. But not on this yacht. The Sapphire is new. This is her maiden voyage, actually.”

“Her what?” I ask, perplexed.

She lets out a little giggle. “It means that it is the first trip. I heard through the grapevine that the Wheelers won the lottery and used the money to buy this.”

I laugh in what feels like the first time in a long time.
“There is no way that’s right.”

“I don’t think so either, but it is always so much fun speculating about the rich folk.”

I have nothing else to add to the conversation so I pick my uniform up and walk towards our little shared bathroom.

“Mind if I change first?”

“Sure, just hurry up. I think we will be called for our shifts once boarding starts.”

I hurriedly get dressed and then she does the same.

“So,” she continues as soon as she is out of the bathroom,
“do you have a boyfriend?”

“Nope.”

“A girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“A significant other?”

“Nope. You?”

She smiles at me. “I sometimes hookup with Zach, but it is more like a fling.”

“Who is Zach?”

“Don’t worry. You’ll meet him later on. Just, wrap it up if you decide to get down with any of the other crew members. There was a rumor that something nasty was going around on in the Miami cruise.”

I have no idea what she is talking about, but it hits me that this is the first time I have had a prolonged conversation with another woman, a conversation that bordered on friendship, since Poppy died. I had missed this, these casual open conversations.

“I won’t be hooking up with my fellow crew members, Hilda.”

“So, you want to get down with the rich folk, huh?”

I sputter out a laugh. “I am not getting down with anyone at all.”

She has no idea how strongly that statement actually rings. I have not really *gotten down* with anyone at all.

She cocks an eyebrow at me. “I won’t judge you if you do, just remember, don’t get caught.” She emphasizes the last sentence by pointing her finger at me as she says it.

“I will not get caught.”

“Okay, good. Because—“ but Hilda doesn’t get to finish her statement. There is a beeping in our room. We were all waiting for that sound. This is an indication that all staff members are being called to our assigned areas. We hurriedly put on our shoes and walked out of our rooms. Boarding must have been completed which means our shifts have officially begun.

We both hustle towards the kitchen as we await further instructions.

“Don’t worry, Maggie,” Hilda grabs my hand and squeezes it once before letting it go. “I will show you the ropes. I have done this countless times. If you have any questions, find me.”

I return her reassuring smile.

I just met this woman and I already feel so lucky to have her by my side. I always tend to err on the side of caution when I meet new people, but Hilda’s warm and bubbly personality puts me at ease.

I am ready for this job and all the money I am going to make from it.

“Okay.” A loud voice breaks through our murmurs, “Remember the training you had?”

We all nod.

“Good. I will give you your assigned table numbers. Take the orders, bring them to the kitchen. Chop chop. No wasting time around here. All of you have waitressing experience so I expect zero hiccups. The chef’s special will be announced in a few minutes. Make me proud.” Then she walks right out of the kitchen door.

Hilda’s about to say something else when the woman with the loud voice saunters back in. She is already spewing instructions before we have all caught on to what is happening, and in less than ten minutes, I am walking towards the dining hall ready to take down orders for tables seven and thirteen.

I quietly repeat the chef's special in my head so that I don't forget it.

The first stop at table seven goes smoothly.

"Hello, welcome to the Sapphire. May I start you off with something to drink?" I say, offering the elderly couple a large smile.

The man nods and says, "Yes, I'll have two glasses of chilled sparkling water for me and my wife, please."

I nod and write down the order. "Certainly, and would you like to see a menu or do you already know what you would like to order?"

He looks at the menu and says, "We'll have the chicken alfredo, please. For both of us." The woman sitting across from him nods appreciatively.

I write down the order and repeat it back to him to make sure I have it correct. "Chicken alfredo, got it. And for your side dish?"

He thinks for a moment and says, "We'll have the garlic bread."

I nod and say, "Excellent choice. That'll be two servings of chicken alfredo and garlic bread. Would you like anything else?"

They both shake their heads then she adds, "No, that's it for now. Thank you."

I smile at both of them, “You’re welcome. I’ll place your order right away and it should be out shortly.”

I rush to the kitchen and place their orders, bring them their glasses of water before I head to the second table.

Table thirteen.

I am a lot more confident now, but as quickly as that thought gets into my head, it dissipates.

The last person I expected to find is sitting at table thirteen and beside him is Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. I recognize them from the large portrait hanging in the ballroom and almost every other room of this gigantic yacht. They are the owners of the Sapphire, and they are seated with the rude man from two days ago. The one who almost cost me my job and then almost cost me my dignity over a bottle of Merlot. The very same guy, with the same stormy gray eyes, and today he is wearing a black suit.

What in the hell is he even doing here?

What the fuck?

“Universe,” I want to scream, “I was doing so well. Why now?”

But instead, I plaster a fake professional demeanor on my face and begin a conversation with the table.

“Hello, welcome to the Sapphire. May I start you off with something to drink?” I say trying really hard to keep my calm.

There is a small hint of a smile on Mr. Wheeler's face when I mention the yacht's name.

"Can we get a bottle of your best whisky and three glasses of water, please?" Mr. Wheeler says to me.

"Of course, sir." Then I hurriedly head back to the bar to grab a tray and the drinks for them.

I shake my hands, trying to keep the jitters away.

"I can do this. I can do this. I can do this," I repeatedly murmur the mantra to myself.

I walk slowly, balancing the filled tray precariously. If I broke this bottle, I would not be able to pay for it. Also, dropping an expensive bottle of whisky in front of my boss is a guaranteed way of never getting hired by them ever again. I cannot afford to miss out on the opportunities provided by the temp agency.

I wonder if the Wheelers would throw me into the water if I couldn't afford to pay for the bottle. I am pretty sure the sexy stranger would help hold me down as they tied me up. The images those thoughts conjure have me biting my lip to hold my breath.

As I approach the table, the man has his eyes trained on me even though Mr. Wheeler seemingly is in the middle of explaining something to him. There are a bunch of papers littered on the table. They must be important.

I reach the table cautiously and I am sighing a breath of relief before everything implodes.

In slow motion, I saw the tray tilt and the glasses of water spill all over the stranger's pants and the documents laying on the table.

My blood immediately chills.

"Fuck! Fuck!" I scream internally, but all I can let out is a low whisper.

"Oh no, I am so sorry!" I exclaim, laying the tray on the table and reaching for a couple of paper towels.

The look of horror on Mr. Wheeler's face is only offset by the pity on his wife's face.

The stranger however, is looking up at me with an expression of annoyance and frustration. "This is just great," he mutters.

"Let me help you clean that up," I offer, trying to salvage the situation.

The stranger is clearly upset, and for once in all the times we have interacted so far, he is rightfully so.

My heart beats erratically. "I can't believe this happened," I say, feeling more and more embarrassed by the moment. "I feel terrible." My hand is dabbing on his lap. His pants are drenched and, distracted, I notice that I have been rubbing on a spot that is very close to his crotch.

Something sharp twists in my stomach and I am pretty sure beneath all this makeup, my face is flaming red.

“That’s enough,” he says just as Mrs. Wheeler says, “There is a restroom around here. Can you please help him get cleaned up.”

“Of course,” I nod, feeling nervous, then step aside to leave room for the man to stand up.

I have never been in a situation like this before and I don’t know what to expect. The stranger grudgingly allowed me to help him clean up, but he is still clearly angry as he follows me to the restroom.

I am hyper aware of everyone’s eyes on us as we shuffle across the room.

When we step inside the small room, he turns around and closes the door.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“You don’t mean to do a lot of things, huh?” he asks as he shrugs out of his coat jacket.

I am ready to apologize or retort, but the words dry up on my tongue from the simple movement.

God, he has such defined shoulders. The shirt he has on is molded to his rippling arms and I have to swallow in appreciation.

“Look,” he interrupts my embarrassing moment. “Can we get this dried or not?”

I have to drag my gaze away from him. “We have a dryer. I can organize the laundry and have it dried, ironed, and sent to

you.”

“That works. But I need a solution right now. Maybe I can get it laundered after dinner. I will go up to my cabin and get a change of clothes for now.”

I feel a twinge of guilt. “I really am sorry.”

“You should be,” he replies sternly. “This is the second time you almost cost me a meeting with investors, you know?”

I am honestly confused as I inquire, “What do you mean?”

“The taxi.”

“What taxi?”

God! This man frustrates me so damn much.

He gives me an exasperated sigh, “This deal is important to me, so just stay away from me. Okay? I cannot afford to mess this up, and I swear there is a dark cloud that follows you around giving me all your bad energy.”

I am hurt by this statement. For some reason, it reminds me that I am alone in this world. Maybe he is right. This is why I lost my family and my best friend. Maybe I am bad luck after all.

Either way, that analysis was uncalled for.

“That was uncalled for, sir,” I say, willing my tears away.

“Just stay away, okay?”

I want to say more, but the man picks up his suit jacket and walks out of the stall, leaving me dazed, hurt and confused.

I rub my eyes furiously.

I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry.

I pinch the tears away and that finally seems to have worked in stopping the dam. I am aware that I have been standing in the same position he left me in for close to two minutes.

I need to get to work, maybe do some damage control.

But when I step out of the restroom, I find Hilda standing right outside.

“Girl, are you okay?”

“Yes. I just needed a minute.”

She lifts her shoulders in a subtle shrug. “That is what I figured. That is why I gave you a few minutes instead of knocking, but I... uhm... have bad news for you.”

Shit!

She notices the panic in my eyes and she reaches for my hand.

“It’s okay Maggie. It will be okay. They just want to talk to you.”

“Who?”

She pauses before replying, “The matron and the manager and some other guys.”

Fuck! They are definitely going to throw me off the yacht now. I breathe heavily as I follow Hilda across the room and into the kitchen, and when I walk in there, the faces waiting for me do not look pleased.

They do not look pleased at all.

I know I messed up and I'm about to face the consequences. I take a deep breath and wait like a prisoner waiting for the guillotine.

“What just happened out there?” the woman from this morning asks.

I strain trying to catch a note of kindness in her voice, but she is just plain pissed off.

I will have to take my chances with the actual sharks.

Are there sharks out there?

I am not sure, but this is definitely not the train of thought I should be having while my livelihood is being threatened.

“I am sorry. I... I tripped.”

“You what?” she bellows.

I think it is wise to stay silent so I do so.

“I understand that things can get busy and stressful,” the man standing next to her weighs in. “But we can't afford to make any mistakes. Our customers expect the best from us, and we have to deliver.”

I nod, feeling ashamed.

I let them down and even worse, I let myself down. I am unnerved and frustrated.

“I'll make sure it doesn't happen again,” I say.

“You sure as hell will not. Take the rest of the day off. I will see you tomorrow. Is that understood?” the woman says.

“Yes ma’am.”

I turn to leave and I can feel all their eyes on me. If there was a right time to be tripping, this would be it.

“Oh, and one more thing,” she continued, and I turned back around quickly to face her. “We are docking a day’s wage from your pay.”

Anger flashes deep within me.

This fucking man and his fucking everything is threatening not only my career but also my dream of reopening my bakery.

Fuck him. And fuck all these people, too.

Rich people have been screwing me over for way too long. First it was Poppy’s boyfriend and then this man.

Instead of growling my frustration and making a scene, I demurely nod, then hurry right back to our cabin.

Then I plop myself on my bed and sob until I doze off.

I must have napped for a long time because I am shaken awake.

I look up to find Hilda’s face hovering over mine.

“Hey, girl. How are you holding up?”

I am not sure I can talk about today’s incident without breaking down in tears so I just shrug in response.

“Do you need a hug? I can give you a hug, but it will have to be fast because I am still on shift.”

“Why are you here?”

She shoves me playfully, “I wanted to check on you.”

I feel my heart squeeze as I lean into her open arms. I am touched that she would take the time to come down and check up on me even though we are just strangers.

“Thank you,” I mumble into her shoulders.

“Of course.” Then just as quickly as the hug began, she stood up from my bed.

“Supper will be served at ten. Can I come and get you then?”

I shake my head, “Nope.”

“Okay, can I bring you anything?”

I am touched by her kindness. “Thank you, Hilda, but I am okay.”

She shuffles out of the room.

“See you later, yeah?”

I smile at her retreating back.

“I will see you later.”

And as soon as the door closes, I quickly undress and put on a baggy t-shirt for comfort, then plop right back on my bed and pass out.

I'm jolted awake by the sound of Hilda's moans. I rub my eyes and try to shake the grogginess, wondering what's going on. Then I hear her voice, filled with pain.

"Maggie, Maggie. Something is wrong."

Fuck! Let her not be sick. Let her not be sick.

"Zach is throwing up, the chef is throwing up. Everyone is a mess."

A sense of dread blooms through me when she utters her next sentence.

"I think I have food poisoning," she says, sounding weak.

I jump out of bed and go to her bunk. I can see she's sweating, and her face is pale. I feel her forehead and it's burning up.

"Shit, you're burning up," I say, feeling worried. "What can I do to help, Hilda?"

"Just leave me here to die."

I gently shake her arm, "C'mon. I am being serious. What can I do?"

"I think I need to go see the nurse." Hilda says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, knowing we have to act fast. I grab my clothes and get dressed, then help Hilda get dressed too. I grab a blanket and wrap it around her, trying to keep her warm.

"Come on, I'll take you to the doctor," I say, trying to sound reassuring despite my heart beating a mile a minute.

We make our way down the narrow hallway, trying not to wake anyone up, but judging by the sounds of retching, I don't think anyone is sleeping tonight.

The yacht is moving gently with the waves, and I can hear the sound of the water lapping against the hull.

We finally reach the doctor and I knock on the door. A nurse answers, looking bleary-eyed.

“What's going on?” she asks, rubbing her eyes.

“Hilda has food poisoning,” I explain. “She's burning up and she's in a lot of pain.”

The nurse nods then lets us in.

There are a bunch of other people laying in beds in various states of distress. Hilda was right, almost everyone is sick. This is a shit show if there ever was one.

The nurse, whose name is Matilda from the lanyard hanging off her neck, helps Hilda onto a bed and starts to examine her. I stand to the side, feeling worried and helpless.

“We need to get her hydrated,” the nurse says. “I'm going to give her an IV.”

I nod, feeling relieved that Hilda is in good hands. Matilda starts to work, and I watch as she inserts the IV and starts to give Hilda fluids. Hilda starts to relax and the color starts to come back to her face.

“Thank you,” Hilda says, looking up at me.

I nod, “Don't mention it. I need you to get better.”

I am feeling hopeful that she's going to be okay. I stay by her side for another half hour or so keeping her company, until she falls asleep.

This day just needs to end.

I'm making my way back to my cabin feeling relieved that Hilda is going to be okay. I'm exhausted and just want to crawl back into bed, but as I turn a corner, I see another stewardess leaning against the wall, looking pale and sick.

"Are you okay?" I ask, feeling concerned, although the look on her face tells me that she is far from okay.

The stewardess shakes her head. "I think I have food poisoning," she says, looking miserable. "I don't know how this happened."

I nod, feeling worried. This is not good. We're on a yacht and half the staff is now sick.

"I was just on my way back from the doctor," I say. "Hilda is sick, too."

The stewardess nods, then looks at me with a serious expression.

"Maggie, the head waiter just informed me that you've been upgraded to a hostess and stewardess," she says. "Half the staff is down and they need someone to step in."

I feel a surge of panic.

I've never been a stewardess before.

This is my first time on a fucking yacht, and it is already going so horribly.

“Are you sure?” I ask, feeling unsure.

The stewardess nods. “Yes, he said you’re the only one who’s not sick and it is an all-hands-on-deck situation right now,” she says. “You have to do it, Maggie. We need you.”

I nod, feeling the weight of responsibility on my shoulders. I know she’s right. I can’t let the others down.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” I say, trying to sound confident, “But what exactly does it entail? Please give me the rundown.”

She looks like she is trying really hard not to throw up.

“Okay, you’ll need to cover the VIP Section. It is the basics, clean up, serving meals, yada yada yada. Normally, we just chaperone them and make sure they don’t need anything.”

She fans her already clammy face, “Anticipate their needs and get them what they need. Any questions?”

I have about a billion more questions, but she is really not in the right space to answer me, so instead I just shake my head. “No, that’s all.”

The stewardess nods, looking grateful. “Thank you, Maggie,” she says. “You’re a lifesaver. Now I am going to see Matilda so she makes sure that my insides don’t come out.”

She staggers past me in the direction of the doctor. I realized too late that I forgot to ask her name even though she quite clearly knew who I was.

Maybe next time.

I continue down the hallway, feeling a mix of nerves and determination. I'm going to have to step up and do my best. I can't let the others down.

I head to the kitchen where I am given a list of instructions and cabin numbers for the guests I need to cater for tonight.

I take a deep breath and knock on the first cabin door, feeling nervous and a little apprehensive.

No answer.

I will try again.

Still no answer.

I wait a few beats and decide to knock again before moving on to the next assigned cabin when I hear a crash and bang on the other side of the door.

Oh heavens above, I hope I do not screw this up.

The door opens and I come face to face with him.

Again.

Fuck!

When will this fucking day end?

I feel like I am the butt of a very cruel joke.

Chapter 5

Max

After the whole disaster with the water spillage and the documents, the rest of the dinner flies by without a hiccup. The Wheelers apologize profusely for the entire mishap and I feel a twinge of guilt at how I reacted towards the waitress.

I blame it on part shock and part confusion.

Why the fuck does she keep popping up everywhere I go?

She is like a bad coin, really hard to get rid of.

And her timing? The worst timing in the entire universe. Of this, I am convinced.

“It’s okay. Accidents happen,” I tell the couple as I take my seat. Deep down, I wonder why I never offered the same courtesy to her.

I shrug, not liking the gnawing feeling that I fucked up, again.

“We promise, this won’t happen again,” Mrs. Wheeler says.

“Shall we proceed with our discussion?” Mr. Wheeler adds.

I nod, “Of course,” I said. “Let’s get back to business.”

And so, we continued our discussion, diving into the details of the yacht industry and potential investment opportunities. I was impressed with the knowledge and passion of the Wheelers, and I felt confident that we could make some great deals together. They are new yacht owners, but they are really invested in making the best of the purchase.

Despite the earlier mishap, the meeting ended up being productive and successful. I was really looking forward to sealing the deal with them.

The dinner went spectacularly after that.

After devouring the best chicken soup I have ever had, I walked back to my cabin feeling content and relaxed. But my high did not last long at all.

Suddenly, I started to feel a little off. My stomach was cramping and I felt a wave of nausea hit me. I tried to ignore it, but it only got worse.

I realized that I must have developed food poisoning from something I ate. I quickly ran to the bathroom and emptied my stomach, feeling a terrible pain in my gut. My head was spinning and I felt lightheaded.

This was worse than any hangover I have ever had before.

I stumbled back to my bed and lay down, trying to calm myself. But the cramps were getting worse and I was breaking out into a cold sweat. I felt like I was going to pass out.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to gather my strength. This wasn't the way I wanted to spend the evening. I was on a yacht, supposed to be enjoying myself and closing business deals in the process. But now, I was stuck in my cabin, feeling miserable and helpless.

Fuck! Everything hurts.

I was curled up on the edge of my bed when I heard a knock on my door.

Must be the angel of death coming by to pick me up. Like an Uber, but for the dead.

The food poisoning must be making me delusional.

The knock sounds again.

I am definitely not in the mood for visitors. Can't this person take a hint?

I try to sit up but instead slide back to my bed. Whoever is at the door can wait.

A few seconds pass before they knock again.

Damn it!

Maybe it's the Wheelers coming by to tell me that they have looked through the contract and have then agreed to our terms.

Despite how groggy I feel, that last thought is the last push I need to lift my head off my pillow.

Struggling to sit upright, I accidentally knock over a vintage lamp that's on the side table beside my bed.

Oh fuck!

Somehow, I muster the strength to half limp, half drag my body to the door, and when I open it, the sight staggers me.

It is her.

Again.

Like I said, WORST TIMING EVER.

“You, again,” I groan.

“Hi Mr. Cole,” she says, with a fake smile plastered on her face. “I heard you weren’t feeling well, so I thought I’d come and offer my help.”

How does she know my name?

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need your help,” I snapped. “Just go away.”

“Not this again,” she says, pushing her way into the cabin. “I’m here to help, whether you like it or not. I know we have had our disagreements in the past, but I am just trying to do my job.”

I try to protest, but she ignores me, pushes through the door and walks inside.

She starts bustling around the cabin, picking up the dirty linen and tidying up. I can feel the anger boiling inside me, and I’m about to tell her to leave when she turns to me and says, “You know, if you’d just let me help, you might actually feel better.”

“I am just seasick. There is nothing you can do to help. Also, I am Max to you.”

Now why in the hell did I just say that?

“Actually, Mr. Cole-” I give her a stern look. “Max,” she amends, “I have asked around and I can give you something to help settle your stomach.”

“My stomach is doing just fine.”

The thought of her seeing me like this, all sick and vulnerable and, worst of all, defenseless irks me. I do not want her to see me like this.

“I am sure I can-”

“Can you please leave?” I cut her off.

She looks taken aback by my hostility, and I can tell that she’s hurt.

I already want to take it back, to apologize for constantly being an asshole towards her.

This is childish and juvenile, and I am very disappointed in myself, but I also don’t know how to act around her.

She has such bad timing, catching me when I am at the worst of my temperament.

“Fine,” she says, her voice cold. “But don’t say I didn’t try to help.” And with that, she turns and storms out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her.

I lean against the door, feeling angry and sick at the same time. Why does she always have to come around and mess things up? I can feel the pain in my stomach starting to intensify again, and I know I need to rest. I make my way back

to bed, trying to forget about my frenemy and the terrible interaction we just had.

I toss and turn the entire night but at around five a.m., I finally fall asleep.

I wake up feeling groggy and disoriented. It takes me a few moments to remember what happened—the food poisoning, the visit from the Uber driver. I sit up, trying to shake off the cobwebs, and that's when I realize... my fever is gone.

I tentatively tap my forehead, relieved to find that it's cool to the touch. I feel weak and a little unsteady, but the pain in my stomach has subsided. I get out of bed and make my way to the bathroom, splashing some water on my face.

When I come back to my room, there are two pills on the bed side table, a glass of water and a bottle of Gatorade.

I know these are from her.

I know I fucked up last night, and she could have easily decided to ignore me, but she did not.

She must have come in when I was still asleep and left these for me.

Despite how I acted, she was still nice to me, a total stranger.

Are we really strangers though?

I push the thoughts aside and pick up the glass of water.

I swallow the pills and then take a sip of the Gatorade. I feel so much better already.

Now that I am no longer knocking on heaven's door, I can fully appreciate how terrible of a human being I actually am.

She was nice to me despite me being a constant pain and being unreasonably rude to her.

The guilt burrows deep in my chest.

I can hear the sound of the yacht's engines and the waves gently lapping against the hull. I'm glad I'm feeling better, but I'm also a little apprehensive about facing her. I'm not sure how she'll react after our argument yesterday.

I take a deep breath and make my way up to the deck. The sun is shining, and the sea is calm. I see her, standing at the helm, looking out over the water. She turns when she hears me approach and I can see the surprise in her eyes.

"Mr. Cole... I mean Max," she says, her voice wary. "You're up."

I nod, not sure what to say. "Yeah," I reply, my voice a little hoarse. "I'm feeling a lot better."

She looks at me for a moment, then nods. "Good," she says, her voice softening. "I'm glad."

I can see the kindness in her eyes, and I realize that maybe she was trying to help, after all. I feel a wave of guilt wash over me, and I know that I owe her an apology.

"Listen," I say, taking a step forward. "I'm sorry about yesterday. I was feeling terrible, and I wasn't in the right state of mind. I'm grateful for your help."

She smiles, looking relieved. “It’s okay,” she says. “I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

“I really am sorry.”

For a moment, I think that she will ignore me completely, but she surprises me when she whispers, “You’re forgiven.”

We stand there for a moment, looking at each other, and I realize that maybe, just maybe, things could be different between us. Maybe we can start fresh, move past our past conflicts and be a little more cordial towards each other.

The sun rises higher in the sky, and I know that it’s a new day, a new start. And I’m ready to make the most of it.

Most of the people on the yacht are docile after the food poisoning incident including the Wheelers so I spend the majority of the day strolling around the yacht and experiencing what it has to offer. I go swimming in the afternoon then visit the casino right after.

I don’t remember the last time I had a moment to myself, so I enjoy my me-time.

I feel lighter and not just because I spent the whole of last evening with my head inside the toilet bowl, but also because my soul feels freer.

I am not busy.

The last time I wasn’t busy was over two decades ago, for sure.

I think I needed this trip for a lot more than business.

By the time the evening rolls in, I am languid and sore in such a blissful way. Like I have had a night of delicious sex.

Speaking of, I wonder what Mia is doing right now?

No. Not going there. I am going to focus on this one day I get to relax and rejuvenate.

I take a quick shower and then put on a robe and stretch on the bed.

I am reaching for the TV remote, I hear a knock on the door.

For some reason my heart beats a little faster.

I rub my hand on my chest.

What the fuck was that reaction?

It can only be one of three people, the Wheelers, a stewardess or... *the* stewardess.

I know only one of those could make my heart race as it just did, but I really don't want to take a deeper look at that.

I open the door and on the other side...

It is her.

It occurs to me that I never got around to asking her name. I have seen this woman in a period of three weeks more times than I have seen Mia in the last three months of our relationship.

I know for a fact that she knows mine.

A thrill tingles in my spine when I remember that.

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Hey. Good evening, Max.”

There it is again, my name out of her beautiful pouty lips.

Again, what the hell is wrong with me?

She is in her full stewardess uniform, but something is different tonight.

Her collared white button-up shirt, black knee-length skirt, and a pair of black heels. An ordinary uniform, but on her, it could as well be a sheer mini skirt.

Why the hell am I suddenly into her?

She also has on a silk scarf around her neck and I am suddenly plagued with thoughts of slipping it off her.

What the fuck is actually going on?

I am hyper aware that I am acting out of form. I blame this day of rest and relaxation.

This is an effect of too much sun for sure. It must be.

There is no other logical explanation.

Something in me has changed.

I clear my throat.

“Hey.”

She smiles at me.

“Hey Max,” she repeats, “I brought you some dinner.”

“Thank you,” I step aside to let her in, “You can come in.”

She drags in a metal cart I had not noticed before. On it, there are covered dishes.

“I was going to come down for dinner.”

“Oh,” she explains, straightening up, “We are bringing dinner to the clients for the rest of the week. It is a way for us to monitor food after the... uhm... incident.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Has this ever happened before?”

She looks a little confused by my question so I add, “The food poisoning,” to clarify.

“Oh. Not that I have heard of. But this is my first time serving for a yacht.”

That is an opening for me to ask so many other questions so I take advantage of the opportunity.

“I have been meaning to ask you...”

She shifts from foot to foot, “Okay, go ahead.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry?” she inquires.

“I mean,” I take a seat on the edge of the bed. “I mean, what are you doing working on a yacht? You just told me that it was your first time serving on a yacht.”

“Oh,” she visibly relaxed, “I got the job from an employment agency.”

Not much, but she does not look like she is going to expand on that, and I would rather not pry.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

I am aware that she is serving more than one guest and I have kept her in my cabin for a lot longer than is actually necessary.

“What’s for dinner tonight?”

“Well,” she lifts the lids off the tray, “To start you off, there is a bottle of Dom Perignon, compliments of the Wheelers as an apology for what happened yesterday.”

“Do you know what happened? I heard that almost everyone got sick.”

“That is still under investigation.”

And because I cannot help myself, I inquire, “Were you? Were you sick, I mean?”

The thought of her feeling the way I did last night sets off a pang in my chest. I know we haven’t always been on the best of terms, but I am suddenly overwhelmed by this need to know that she was alright.

“Actually, no. I missed dinner.”

“Why?”

I am hoping it had nothing to do with the water spill.

She looks away, “I had the night off and decided to sleep in.”

She is obviously lying but I don't push her.

“Okay, Dom Perignon. What else?”

“Our special tonight is scallops,” she informs me.

Sounds fucking delicious.

“The scallops are seared to perfection, with a golden crust and tender flesh and the citrus salad adds a refreshing contrast to the rich flavors.”

“Sounds fantastic. I can't wait to try it.”

“Excellent. I will just set up the table, if you don't mind.”

I nod and she walks over to the tiny mahogany table on the other side of the room.

I watch her as she slowly and methodically sets the dishes on the table, making sure the forks are in the right place.

It takes her about five minutes.

“All done.”

“Perfect.” I walk over and take a seat.

“I will leave you to eat your meal now. Is there anything else that you may need?”

I could ask her to stay. I don't know why I am even thinking of that so I take a sip from the bottled water and shake my head.

“That's excellent. I will come by in the morning with breakfast and fresh linens.”

She drags the cart to the door, opens the door and walks out.

I stare at her retreating form for close to fifteen minutes before I realize that I am just staring at a closed door, and my scallops are cold.

Fuck me!

I hate cold food, but I also don't want her coming in and finding the food untouched after I enthusiastically exclaimed that I was excited to try them out.

I fork the food to my mouth and swallow begrudgingly.

Well, fuck me!

Then I wash it all down with the bubbly drink.

I need to get back to wooing the investors, this whole lazing around thing is definitely bad for me and is slowly turning my brain into mush.

The next day, I compliment the scallops when she brings me my coffee.

"I am glad you enjoyed them. I will pass the compliments to the chef."

"Maybe I can get the same for dinner tonight?"

She is making a liar out of me.

She smiles brightly, "Of course! I will make sure of it."

That smile.

That gorgeous fucking smile arrests my breath. I notice that she smiles wide and tiny crinkles form around her eyes when she does that. Her beautiful brown eyes twinkle when she smiles.

“I know I should probably know this by now, but what is your name?”

“I am Maggie.”

Foolishly, I stretch my hand and shake hers, “I am Max.”

“I know that.” She smiles again and it does things to my heartbeat.

A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.

I think I might have a slight thing for her.

I am not going to do anything about it, nor am I going to tell anyone about it, but the least I can do is acknowledge it to myself.

I’m falling for Maggie.

As the days go by, I work to make amends with Maggie and I start to see a different side of her.

She’s kind, and I find myself enjoying her company more and more each day. We don’t spend a lot of time talking, but the few minutes spent when she comes by are honestly the most enjoyable of my days.

I even find myself looking forward to them.

“So,” I say, turning to Maggie. “How are you enjoying your time on the yacht?”

She smiles, looking content. “I love it,” she says. “I’ve met so many interesting people, and I’m having a great time. It took me a few days to get my sea legs, but once that happened,

I have been having a great time. This is a whole new experience for me.”

I nod, impressed. “That’s amazing,” I say. “You seem so confident and at ease here. I wouldn’t have even thought you were struggling with sea sickness as much as I was.”

She shrugs. “I met the nicest person on this trip. Her name is Hilda and she works with me and she has been helping a lot,” she says. “I’ve learned a lot, and I am enjoying my time here.”

Surprisingly enough, I want to say to her, I am enjoying my trip a lot more than I thought I would. But it’s not because of a *Hilda*. It is because of you.

Maggie is my Hilda.

She is the first person I see every morning, and the last person I interact with every evening.

She is my Hilda.

But of course, I don’t say that.

I decided to nod instead.

I don’t say anything at all.

Over the next few days, I work on the investment deal with the Wheelers and I can feel it getting closer. I am hopeful and I am highly convinced that I will be able to close this deal before we dock.

This trip was a lot more than I bargained for and I am so happy Finn got me to do it, despite the slight food poisoning.

In fact, the food poisoning fiasco brought Maggie right back into my horizon after all.

Chapter 6

Maggie

If you would have told me a few days ago that Max, the same man who has been popping up randomly and antagonizing the ever living shit out of me, is a gentleman, I would have laughed it off.

If you would have told me that I would meet the kindest, most bubbly human on a work trip, I would have scoffed before I met Hilda. She is the first person I have made friends with since Poppy. I haven't been able to make new friends or talk to anyone else about her. I don't want to burden them with my sadness, and I don't want to relive the pain of her loss. But the grief is still there, always lingering in the back of my mind.

If I had the money, I would definitely pay for the grief counselling which I so obviously need.

Hilda is still going on and on about a fisherman she once hooked up with, but I tune her out and discreetly pick up my phone.

I log into my account and swipe through some photos of me and Poppy. Us on campus, us at the very top of the Ferris wheel, us on a drunken girl's night out... That last one slams into me like a rock.

If only I had known that she was struggling, I would have helped. I would have helped her and maybe then, she would still be here.

"Hey!" I am ripped from the Pandora-sized pit of sadness I just opened. It's Hilda.

She is no longer on the other side of the room but instead she is seated on the bed beside me as she runs her hand up and down my back.

I must have completely zoned out because I didn't even hear her move.

"Honey," she prods again, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I choke out.

"Then why are you crying?"

I had not even realized that the rivulets of my tears were running down my cheek.

Her soft calm tone which is a lot different than her loud outspoken demeanor is the final straw before my dam breaks free.

My shoulders shake as I cry. Hilda gently wraps her arm around me.

"It's okay sweetheart. Everything will be alright."

“No, it won’t! Nothing will ever be the same again.”

Hilda is calm and collected as she continues to soothe me.

“Let it out, let it all out.”

I cry even harder.

“You’ll get through this. Whatever it is that is going on, I will go through it. I’m here for you, okay?”

I nod into her warm embrace as I continue to sob.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I haven’t told her about Poppy, who was quite possibly my other half and my very best friend but that’s just because I have not been able to talk about her to anyone. My chest hurts every single day she is not here. I want to talk to someone about her, without the accident changing how they viewed her—who she was before all of that.

“I don’t know how to,” I responded honestly.

She pauses a beat, “Well, whenever you are ready, I will be here.”

I nod my head again.

She patiently waits for the sobs racking through my body to die down before she eventually pulls away.

“Oh my God. I needed that.”

“We all need a good cry every now and then,” she reassures me.

I am beyond grateful that I did not have to go through this trip on my own. I am very grateful that Hilda has been here the last few days.

She is not Poppy. No one could replace Poppy, but in the few brief days I have known her, Hilda is damn near close.

“Thank you, Hilda.”

She shares a smile with me. “Don’t mention it. I am going to expect you to return the favor very, very soon.”

I appreciate that she still brings levity to what could have been a morning filled with sadness.

“My shoulder is ready for you.”

She turns around to change out of her blouse which is now streaked with mascara and my tears and I walk towards the bathroom to wash my face and redo my makeup.

“You and your shoulder better hurry the fuck up.”

“I am almost done, babe. I am almost done.”

And in less than five minutes, we are both presentable enough to report for our shifts.

We walk towards the kitchen to receive our breakfast orders and deliveries.

As soon as we have loaded our carts, we head off in different directions.

She is working with the cabins on the other side of the yacht.

“Bye. See you at lunch?”

“See ya!”

Then I head towards the VIP section.

First stop, Max Cole.

As I get ready to knock on his door, it occurs to me that I am filled with nervous energy.

That and a whole lot of anticipation.

Max has been one of the biggest plot twists of this trip. We have never really talked about all the bad interactions we have had in the past. We have never addressed any of it. But he did apologize for the last terrible interaction we had.

I was beyond ready to write him off after he asked me to leave his room, but it was literally my job and I had to try a lot harder, for both of our sakes.

And when I had knocked for a long while without getting any response, panic had immediately flared through me.

Seeing him laying in his bed, all sweaty and vulnerable. His hair was jutting out in every direction. There were dark circles under his eyes. Even at this state, he was still undoubtedly the most handsome man I have ever seen.

He looked so sad and vulnerable and defeated and I had to fight my need to touch him. To wake him and reassure him that he would be okay. To run my hair through those silky strands.

But he was still my boss, kind of.

So, I decided to do the next best thing.

In a show of good faith, I decided to forget about the previous night. I bought him a Gatorade to replenish his lost electrolytes, then I got him some Advil for his stomach cramps and a bottle of water to wash it all down. It was the same thing I had gotten Hilda and it had worked like a charm, and judging by the renewed sense of life when I saw him again later in the day, then it had worked wonders for him too.

I knocked on the door.

I expect to see him in his usual breakfast getup, a bathrobe signaling that he was just getting his day started, so when he opens the door in a completely different outfit, my breath stutters.

In the morning light, his eyes look a deeper gray than I have ever seen them, and his jaw is clean shaven.

“Maggie, hey. Good morning.”

My skin is flushed at the sight of him.

I can barely string together a sensible statement, so I reply to his greeting with, “Breakfast?”

He smiles so brightly then pushes the door wider to let me in.

As I drag the cart into his room, he walks in front of me and settles himself on his already made bed.

I take the opportunity to appreciate his butt and those muscular thighs. He is wearing a blue pair of trousers that does wonders for his physique. I drift my eyes upwards. He is

wearing a crisp white button up shirt that is folded at the arms to accentuate his big strong forearms.

His dark hair is slicked back with a hint of gel.

Forget handsome, the man standing in front of me this morning is downright sexy.

He is barefoot and the stark difference to the rest of him makes my insides wiggle.

Who knew I would appreciate feet? Especially well-manicured feet that belong to Max. Who knew?

“What are we having this morning? Talk to me, Maggie.”

His voice this early in the morning was deep and gruff. It was a little hoarse, as though he had just woken up even though he was already showered and dressed, meaning he has been up for a while now.

He speaks slowly and deliberately, his words slightly slurred as if he is still half asleep. His tone was low and gentle, almost like a whisper, but with a hint of strength behind it. The sound was comforting, like a warm hug in the early morning chill.

I inwardly groan.

What the fuck is happening?

“The chef went all out today.”

He beams at me, and I have to look away from his dazzling smile just to get the rest of the words out.

“So, today we have a variety of options.”

“Just what I like to hear. Hit me.”

God, he is so fucking charming.

I tap into my professional side as I narrate the day's breakfast options.

“If you're in the mood for something sweet, may I suggest our famous Belgian Waffles, drizzled with maple syrup and topped with fresh berries? Or, if you're looking for a savory option, our breakfast burrito with scrambled eggs, bacon, and melted cheddar cheese is always a popular choice. For something on the lighter side, we have a delicious yogurt parfait with fresh fruit and granola, or our classic oatmeal with brown sugar and raisins. And of course, we offer a range of beverages, including coffee, tea, orange juice, and fresh smoothies. So, what can I get for you this morning? Perhaps you'd like to try our daily special, which is a delicious avocado toast with poached eggs and a side of crispy bacon? Or maybe a classic bacon and eggs breakfast, a side of toast and hash browns?”

He is quiet the entire time I parrot the chef's special and when I am done, he finally speaks up.

“Wow! That's a lot.”

I giggle, “Yeah.”

“What is the occasion?” He leans forward like I am about to divulge my deepest darkest secrets to him.

I bend a little just to indulge him, “Between you and me, I think he is still making up for the whole food poisoning part of the trip.”

“Makes sense. Okay Maggie, what do you recommend?”

It takes me a lot longer than it should before I finally say,
“Coffee first, of course.”

“Always.”

“Then you can try the Belgian Waffles. I have heard some amazing things about them. And I think you would also enjoy the bacon and eggs.”

He gives me a quizzical look. “Have you not tried the waffles before?”

“Not yet.”

“Try them now.”

I almost choke. That is completely unacceptable. That would go against my training as a waitress.

“I don’t think I should—“

He immediately walks and stands in front of me. “Which dish?”

I reluctantly point to the dish that has them, and as soon as he lifts the lid, the entire room is flooded with their sweet aroma.

“Syrup or no?”

“Max, I don’t think I should...”

“I like mine with a bit of maple syrup.”

“Me too,” I whisper.

He picks up the bottle and drizzles a few dollops of syrup onto the waffles, then he picks up the cutlery and cuts a bit of them before lifting the fork to my lips.

I am mesmerized by the motion and the clenching and the unclenching of his biceps as he works.

“Open up, Maggie.”

Oh fuck! Why did that sound so fucking erotic?

My body follows his command before my brain even registers. I chew and take the time to savor the fluffy waffles. His eyes twinkle with merriment as he watches.

“Mmmh!” I groan. These waffles are perfect.

“That good, huh?”

I nod.

“Good. I will have the rest for my breakfast.” Then he places the cutlery back on the plate and puts his thumb in his mouth to lick off the syrup that drizzled onto his hand.

My body immediately tenses, and I can feel my panties soak a little.

What a fucking sight!

I realize I am biting my lip, watching him watch me when he finally clears his throat.

“I will set this up and then serve the other cabins.”

I think I hear disappointment in his voice when he responds with, “Okay, Maggie,” or maybe that’s just a case of my wishful thinking.

I hurriedly serve up his food and leave his room.

What the fuck was that? What the hell is happening? And why the hell am I so turned on by the prospect of any of it?

I don't see Max for the rest of the day.

After a brief lunch break with Hilda, I head back to my duties.

I go around delivering clean linen to my other clients.

When I knock on his door, there is no response which means he is still out for the day.

I wonder what he does to fill his days.

I bring in clean linen, change his bedsheets and fluff his pillows.

I wish I could bring the pillow to my nose and take a whiff of it, just to see if it has trapped a bit of his scent, but I don't do it. I don't do it because it is a little creepy and a whole lot of unethical and despite the line I crossed when he put his fork in my mouth, I would like to keep up a bit of professionalism.

You wish that he put something else in your mouth, don't you?

I have to chastise myself for my line of thoughts.

The Bakery.

I am doing this so I can reopen my family bakery, so I can keep my family legacy alive as the sole remaining member.

I am determined to keep to that, to stay motivated and focused but in the evening, when I lay my eyes on Max once

again, and he tells me that he missed me, my caution is tossed right out of the window real fast.

“You missed me?”

His ears turn a little pink. “Yes. I like seeing you.”

For a few seconds, I forget how to breathe.

“Did you miss me?”

Oh, if he only knew? I doubt he would appreciate my internal struggle when I contemplated sniffing his pillow so I go with the simplest of truths, “I missed you, too.”

He sighs. “Good. Now tell me, how was your day? Spill water on any of your other clients?”

“Max!”

“What? I just wanted to know if I was the only one. If I was special.”

I smirk, “Nope. You are the one and only. I don’t think I apologized enough that day.”

“Water under the bridge, Maggie.” He has a cheeky smile on his face when he adds, “Or in your case, water under the table, and chair... and people.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.”

“Also, I never apologized for how I snapped at you after, by the way. I am sorry.”

“It was on me. I should have been more careful.”

“I should have been nicer.”

“You should have,” I smirk.

“It’s just that our timing was always off. First the taxi, then you stole the last bottle of Merlot and then the water, with the meeting at the Wheelers. It was all bad timing, but that does not give me the right to be an asshole to you.”

“First of all, I never stole the Merlot.”

“Debatable,” he cuts me off.

“Second, I am glad you brought up the taxi thing. What was that all about?”

“You gave me a bad rating too, Maggie.”

“What rating?”

“On the Uber app.”

I am more confused than ever. “What Uber app?”

When Max finally tells me about the confusion on the first day we met, I have to hold myself up to prevent doubling over in laughter.

“The whole time you thought I was your driver?”

“Hell yes. I did not understand why you were yelling the entire time.”

“I thought you were trying to rob me.”

“Rob you?” Now it is his turn to double up in laughter.

“Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know, Max. A random man jumps in the backseat of my car and orders me to drive. What else would I have

thought?”

“You may have a point.”

Tears are running down my face.

“This is the funniest thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Well, me too Maggie. Me too.”

As I set the table for his dinner, I can't help but wish Poppy was here so I could relay the story to her. I am sure she would have found this as hilarious as we both did.

Chapter 7

Maggie

When Thursday arrives, it takes me a lot longer to get out of bed than usual. I can barely lift my head from the pillow.

Today marks exactly four years since the accident. Today marks the day my life completely changed. This was the day that Poppy lost her life.

I want to gasp, to scream, to do something, but I can't. Instead, I let the grief consume me.

I drag myself out of bed and take a longer shower than necessary.

I wish Hilda was around because I could really use one of her hugs just about now, but she spent the night with Zach so it's just me and my broken heart.

I am sluggish and although I just woke up, I cannot bring myself to perk up. Normally, I would argue that I am an early bird, always active in the morning, but this day makes a liar out of me.

They say that grief is the truest human emotion and today I feel it tenfold.

I miss her every single day.

I have been dreading this day for weeks but I underestimated how heavy my heart would be, especially now that I couldn't even visit her gravesite with flowers.

My chest hurts. My head hurts.

I have too many feelings trying to be contained in my 5 foot 8 inches body.

I drag myself to the kitchen to receive the orders for breakfast then head on over to the VIP section of the yacht.

A quick knock at Max's door opens up to reveal a disheveled man. He is nothing like the well-rested, chirper Max I have seen for the last couple of days.

"Morning Maggie," he greets me glumly.

"Good morning, Max."

He moves out of the way to let me in.

"What does the chef have for me today?"

I take up my professional stance and start parroting the options back to him as it was given to me.

"If you're feeling like something sweet, may I suggest our famous blueberry pancakes? They're light and fluffy, with just the right amount of blueberries and a drizzle of maple syrup on top. For something more savory, we have a breakfast burrito. It's stuffed with scrambled eggs, cheese, bacon or sausage, and

your choice of veggies. And if you're feeling really hungry, we can add a side of crispy hash browns. If you're trying to keep it healthy, we have a delicious acai bowl. It's filled with fresh berries, granola, and acai puree for a refreshing and nutritious start to your day. And of course, we can't forget the classic breakfast combo. Two eggs any style, your choice of bacon or sausage, and a side of toast or biscuits. We also have a variety of omelet and eggs benedict if you're in the mood for something a little fancier."

Even as I speak, I can tell that he is distracted and zoned out of the conversation.

"So Max, what'll it be? I'm here to make sure you have a great start to your day."

At that, he looks up to me and offers up a small smile.

"You are a great start to my day."

Despite my morose mood, I flush at his unexpected comment.

Is he flirting with me?

"Thank you, Max." Then I add, "I look forward to our mornings, too."

"Good. Good. Today I will take an acai bowl and a cup of coffee."

"Anything else?" I ask as I offload his meals and set up the breakfast table.

“No. That’s enough. I have a meeting with the Wheelers today and I want to be sharp for it.”

“Still following up on the investment?”

“Yeah. I have a good feeling about today.”

I wish I had a good feeling about today, too.

“All the best, Max.”

“Thanks.”

After I am done serving him, I excuse myself and leave. I serve the rest of the guests in a quick and efficient manner then retire back to our cabin to wallow in peace.

As I drift off into a deep sleep, I feel like I’ve finally found some relief from the stresses of the day. I am settled into a deep slumber when suddenly I’m jolted awake by Hilda.

“Maggie, wake up! You’ve been sleeping for hours! I came by at noon and you were still sleeping. It is close to four p.m. and you are still under the covers. Are you feeling okay?” she asks with concern in her voice.

I groggily open my eyes and blink a few times, trying to reorient myself. My friend’s worried expression comes into focus, and I realize that I must have been sleeping for a lot longer than I intended.

“I needed a nap. I really needed a nap,” I replied with a yawn.

She nods sympathetically and sits down beside me on the couch. “Well, babe, do you want to talk about what’s been

bothering you?”

“Maybe later. Thanks for waking me up,” I say with a smile. “I needed that.”

“Anytime,” she responds with a grin. “Now let’s get you up and moving. Maybe a change of scenery will do you good. I have been wanting to go to Ebony. Maybe we can head out there after dinner?”

The yacht was docked on land and Ebony was a secluded nightclub on shore.

“Is that even allowed Hilda? As the staff?”

She nods emphatically. “Of course, babe. I know the security guard on duty tonight. He can definitely get us in.”

Normally, I would say no, but I need to wash away the stresses of the day, especially after the day I have had. It has been way too long since I spent the night out, since I had any modicum of fun.

“You know what, Hilda, let’s do it.”

“Yeah?” she jumps up, her arms curled at her sides as she skips from foot to foot.

“Yes. Let’s do it.”

“Okay. Good. I hope you have something to wear.”

I ran a mental catalog of all the clothes I brought with me. I have a couple of pajamas and a silk robe. I have cut off jeans and a few t-shirts, but other than my work clothes, I have nothing that could be worn to a club. Come to think of it, I

probably don't have dresses that I could go out with in my closet back home.

"Actually," I pause, "No, I don't think so."

"That's okay," she replies unfazed. "I am pretty sure I have a dress or two that could fit you."

"You don't have to, Hilda."

"Oh, that's where you are wrong my friend. I definitely want to. In fact, I think I have just the thing."

She pulls out her suitcase and ruffles around for a few minutes before she pulls out one of the dresses.

"There is no way that is going to fit me," I tell her, picking the scrappy little number from her.

"But it will."

"You forget that I am a lot taller than you."

"Even better. That just means that it will hit you right above the knees."

"Okay," I reply, skeptical as I walk into our little shared bathroom to try out the dress.

I slip into the dress and feel it hug my curves just right. The fabric is soft and silky against my skin, and the hem falls just above my knees, showing off my legs.

The dress is a vibrant shade of red, bold and attention-grabbing. The neckline is plunging, revealing just enough skin to be alluring, but not too revealing.

I twirl in front of the mirror, watching the skirt flare out around me. The dress moves with me, almost like it has a life of its own. It makes me feel beautiful and confident, ready to take on the world.

The short length of the dress makes me feel a little daring, like I'm ready for anything. I run my hands down the smooth fabric and feel the hem brush against my skin.

All eyes are going to be on me, and I plan on relishing the attention. The dress is my armor, my shield, my way of expressing myself, pushing me out of my comfort zone.

It's a short dress, but it's so much more than that. It's a statement, a declaration.

I walk back to our room.

"What do you think?"

"My jaw dropped, babe! Wow, your legs."

I flush scarlet at her compliment.

"Thank you."

"You can thank me later. Buy me a cocktail and we call it fair."

"Fair trade."

"I will do you one even better. I covered your lunch shift, and it was not that busy. How about, you get ready and head to Ebony, then I can meet you up there?"

I am touched by her thoughtfulness. "You don't have to do that, babe."

“I want to. It looks like you need an extra hand today. Let me do this for you.”

I walk over and wrap her in a hug.

“Thank you!” I whisper into her hair.

“You’re welcome. See you at seven,” then she unwraps herself from my embrace and walks out of our room.

Instead of getting ready, I settle on my bed and take out my phone.

I log into my account and decide to scroll through pictures of Poppy. Time passes me by quickly as I take a walk down memory lane because the next time I look up from my phone, two hours have just flown by. Unlike this morning, when I was consumed by my grief, this evening, I feel happy and glad that I got to spend a great number of years with her in my life.

I drop my phone, straighten my bed and then walk into the bathroom to curl my hair and put on my makeup.

I dab a bit of concealer under my eyes to cover up the dark circles and brighten up that area.

Then, I apply a light layer of foundation to even out my skin tone and give me a healthy glow. I blend it in well, making sure to focus on areas where I need a little extra coverage.

Next, I sweep some blush onto the apples of my cheeks to add a pop of color and give me a rosy glow. I use a light hand to make sure it looks natural and not too overdone.

For my eyes, I apply a bit of neutral eyeshadow to give them some depth and dimension, and then line my upper lash line with black eyeliner. I finish off my eyes with a few coats of mascara to make my lashes look long and full.

Finally, I swipe on a bit of lip gloss to add some shine and complete my look.

I take a step back and look in the mirror again. My complexion is brighter, my eyes are more defined, and my lips are glossy and inviting. The makeup is simple, but it's enough to make me feel confident.

After that, I pull on a pair of strappy heels, put a few bank notes and my ID underneath the back cover of my phone because I do not have a purse with me then I lock up our cabin and head in the direction of the nightclub.

As I make my way down the dock, the bass of the music gets louder and my heart starts to race with anticipation. It is my first time on land since the charter began. The side of the yacht is stunning, all sleek lines and polished surfaces, and I can't help but feel a little intimidated by its grandeur now that I am looking at it from the outside.

I can feel the vibrations under my feet, and I can't help but feel a little nervous as I approach the bouncer at the door.

He scans my ID and gives me a nod. I step inside, ready to explore.

The first thing that hits me is the music—it's loud and pulsing, filling the air with energy and excitement. The dance

floor is already packed with people, their bodies moving in time with the beat.

The lighting is low and atmospheric, casting shadows and creating a sense of mystery and intrigue. I look around and take in the décor—it's all black and gold, with plush velvet seating and flickering candles.

As I make my way deeper into the club, I notice that there are several bars scattered around, all serving up exotic cocktails and premium spirits. I make a mental note to try a few before the night is over.

I'm struck by the energy and excitement of the place. There's a feeling of freedom and abandon in the air like anything is possible. The people around me are dressed in their finest, their hair styled and their makeup flawless, and I feel a little underdressed in my casual clothes.

But as I start to move to the music, letting the beat wash over me and feeling the rhythm in my bones, I realize that it doesn't matter if I technically wouldn't do this. I'm here to have fun, to let loose, and to experience all that Ebony has to offer.

And with that realization, I dive headfirst into the crowd, losing myself in the music and the moment. This is what I've been waiting for—a night of pure, unadulterated fun, surrounded by the pulsing energy of Ebony.

I'm dancing, feeling the beat of the music pulsing through me. My body moves in sync with the rhythm, and I close my eyes, letting the music take over.

Fuck! I needed this.

Suddenly, I feel a tap on my shoulder, and I turn to see a man standing there.

I take a moment to look at him, trying to gauge his intentions.

He's tall, with broad shoulders and a muscular build. His hair is short and styled in a messy, effortless way, and his face is chiseled and handsome. He's dressed in a dark suit that fits him perfectly, and he exudes an air of confidence and charm.

"I am Darien. Wanna dance?"

Despite his good looks, something about him makes me feel uneasy. Maybe it's the way he's staring at me, like he's trying to size me up. His gaze is completely fixed on my breasts.

"No, thank you."

I take a few steps away from him but he does not take the hint, instead following me.

"I am the son of a billionaire. You might want to give me a minute of your time," he shouts above the music just so I could hear him.

The douchebag.

"Thank you, but I am not interested."

"C'mon sweet tits..."

Did he think that was a compliment?

What in the actual fuck?

I am beyond irked.

Maybe it's the way he keeps persisting, even after I've declined his offer to dance.

Either way, I know that I don't want to get involved with him. He might be attractive, but he's definitely not my type. I continue dancing, trying to ignore him, but he doesn't seem to take the hint. He keeps hovering nearby, trying to catch my eye, and I start to feel uncomfortable.

I glance around for Hilda, hoping that she is finally here and that she can come over and rescue me, but she's nowhere to be seen. I start to feel trapped, like I can't escape this man's unwanted attention.

Just as I realize I can't get away from this unpleasant stranger, I feel a firm grip on my hand. Startled, I turned to see Max, standing by my side with a determined look on his face.

"Hey babe, sorry I'm late," he says, pulling me close and wrapping his arm around my waist. "Who's this guy bothering you?"

My skin prickles at the point of his contact.

Max is here!

The man looks taken aback, but Max doesn't give him a chance to answer. "Listen man, she's with me," he says firmly. "I think it's time for you to go."

The man hesitates for a moment, looking between Max and me, but finally he backs off and disappears into the crowd.

I let out a sigh of relief, grateful for Max's quick thinking and protective instincts. "Thanks, Max," I say, leaning into him. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

He smiles down at me, his eyes warm and reassuring. "I am happy to help. I wish you didn't need my help at all, but I am happy I was around. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

I smile at him.

"No. I am okay. Some men just don't take no for an answer. What are you doing here?"

He lets his hand drop from my waist and I immediately feel the loss.

"I met your friend, Hilda. She told me you'd be here."

I take the time to appreciate his outfit.

Max's button-down shirt is a classic style that looks both comfortable and stylish. The fabric is a light linen material, which drapes loosely over his broad shoulders and toned chest. The shirt has a relaxed fit, but is still tailored enough to accentuate his athletic build. As I take a closer look at Max's outfit.

His pants are just as stylish and comfortable as his button-down shirt. They are slim-fitting and made of a dark-colored denim or cotton material, which hugs his muscular thighs and tapers slightly at the ankle.

I want to touch it, feel the material brushing on my fingers. I shake my head, trying to focus my thoughts.

“So, you came?”

That came out a lot ruder than I meant, but Max looks unfazed as he replies, “I didn’t see you all day, and I wanted to give you an update on the Wheelers.”

I immediately perk up.

“And it couldn’t wait?”

What the hell is wrong with me?

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it—“

“It’s okay. I can go.” He turns around, ready to leave.

I grab his wrist.

“Please don’t. The guy threw me off. I actually really want to hear about the Wheelers.”

His eyes light up, and a smile spreads across his face. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Great,” then he does something that causes my insides to light up.

He wraps his massive hand around mine.

“In that case, we can get drinks and talk at the bar?”

“Yes, please.”

I feel a sudden rush of warmth spread through my body.

He leads me confidently towards the bar, his grip strong and reassuring.

I glance up at him and see a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. His eyes meet mine for a brief moment, and I can see the same warmth reflected in them that I feel in his touch.

As we approach the bar, Max maintains his confident stride, weaving through the crowd with ease. He glances back at me every now and then, making sure I'm keeping up and checking in to see if I need anything.

When we finally reach the bar, Max releases my hand and steps up to the counter.

“A bottle of Merlot, please.”

The bartender produces the exact same bottle of wine we almost fought over the second time we met.

“Is this okay, sir?”

“That's actually perfect.”

I perch myself on a stool and he takes the one next to mine. The place is cramped enough that he will have to lean down and talk closely just so I can hear him. Our knees knock behind the counter.

“You remembered?” I ask.

“I would have never forgotten the drink that almost cost me my life.”

I chuckle at his remark. “You exaggerate.”

He flashes his smile at me. “Of course not. Now can I tell you about the deal?”

“Yes!”

“I think they might close it by the end of the week.”

“That’s amazing, Max.”

As Max shares the exciting news about his investment deal, I can see the joy and pride in his face. His eyes light up, and his voice takes on a confident tone as he describes the progress that he made.

He gestures animatedly. I can feel his excitement, and his energy is contagious.

The bartender serves us our glasses of Merlot and I sip on it as I listen to Max enthusiastically explain the ins and outs of the meeting. It is the first time I have seen him uninhibited and so passionate.

I can see the pride and satisfaction that he takes in his accomplishments.

He talked uninterrupted for about fifteen minutes when he abruptly stopped talking.

“I hope I am not boring you with this.”

What gave him that idea?

I wish he knew the amount of pleasure I get watching him talk about something he is clearly invested in.

“Of course not. No. I want to hear all the details, Max. Tell me everything.”

“Are you sure?” His face flushes scarlet.

“Positive.”

He is tentative as he begins talking again, but a few minutes later, he is back in the world of ROIs and cash back.

When he is done, I beam at him.

“That sounds amazing.”

“You really think so?”

Of course I do.

“Yes Max, I really think so.”

“Good. Good. Some days, I feel like I don’t like what I do, especially when I get overwhelmed, but on days like this, I am so happy that I get to follow my passion.”

“And what is your passion?”

“Making money, Maggie. I like knowing that I am helping turn a profit.”

“I get that.”

“Yeah. And you? What is your passion?”

I take another sip of my Merlot.

He is patiently sipping on his own drink, giving me the time to verbalize my thoughts.

“I do enjoy my job, but my true passion is actually baking. I’ve been saving up to reopen my family bakery that closed a few years ago.”

“Baking? Wow! Maggie, that is fantastic.”

I feel my face flush with excitement. This is also the first time I have voiced my passion in a long time.

“Yeah. It really is. I used to make these fantastic chocolate chip cookies. Poppy would devour them one after the other, not even giving them a minute to cool.”

He smiles at me. “Poppy? Who is Poppy? Your mom’s name?”

I feel all the blood drain from my face.

Since the night began, I have been so caught up with the dancing, and the man, and Max. I almost forgot that Poppy was gone, and his question was a harsh reminder.

My breath becomes ragged.

“Poppy is my best friend.”

Tears sting the back of my eyes.

“That’s cool. Where is she now?”

I know that Max is just having a conversation, but this whole night is a can of worms, waiting to jump out and guilt me back into the submission of my grief.

My voice is barely above a whisper.

“Poppy’s gone.”

“Gone?” His voice is low.

I look up at his beautiful gray eyes.

Fuck I can’t do this!

I shouldn’t have done this.

Tears feel hot as they roll down my cheeks.

Max is immediately alarmed by the reaction.

“Maggie, what’s going-”

“I’ve got to go,” I say, practically jumping out of my seat.

“Wait...”

But I don’t hear the rest of his statement as I maneuver my way through the crowds of people pressing against each other on the dance floor.

I need to get out.

I need to get out *now*.

This was a really bad idea.

Chapter 8

Max

For some reason, I had been looking forward to seeing Maggie at dinner time like it was the norm, but instead of the feisty, beautiful woman I was expecting to see when I opened my door, a different hostess stands there.

“Good evening, sir. I will be your hostess for the night.”

What the hell? Why wasn't Maggie here?

But instead of barraging the poor lady who was just trying to do her job, I decided to step aside and let her in.

The name tag on her shirt read *Hilda*.

Couldn't be, could it?

I did not want to berate her with questions that could probably get Maggie in trouble so I stayed quiet as she explained all the dinner options for tonight.

“Lobster this... blah... blah... in almonds...”

To be quite honest, I barely paid any attention.

“I'll go with option one, please.”

Hilda smirks a little as she moves towards the table, beginning to set it.

I am lost in my thoughts again when I notice that she is looking at me like she is expecting some type of answer.

Fuck!

“Uhm, sorry Hilda, could you repeat that? I didn’t quite catch what you said?”

Hilda’s eyes sparkle with excitement.

“That’s alright Mr. Cole. I was just letting you know that the table has been set up. Is there anything else you might need?”

My answer is automatic, “No. Thanks.”

I barely have time to realize that the only chance of asking after Maggie is slowly slipping away. By the time I am snapped out of my reverie, Hilda is halfway out of my door.

“Hilda, wait.”

I turn so fast I almost slip.

Fuck! What the hell is wrong with me?

I choose the most tactful way of digging for information, a way that would not put her work ethics to question.

Not that there is anything to question.

Fuck.

Hilda is waiting patiently, her hands held in front of her. It is now or never.

“I was just curious...”

There is humor dancing in her eyes, “About what, sir?”

She must sense the truth. She must know that all I care about is Maggie’s whereabouts, but instead of letting me off the hook, she makes me say it.

“About the other stewardess, the one who has been helping me out the last couple of days.”

“You mean, Miss Fieldman?”

Is that her name? I have no idea.

What the fuck?

I have had business meetings a lot less tense than this.

“Maggie, I believe.” I add, pretending to be coy.

“Oh, Maggie? I am afraid she is unavailable tonight.”

What does that mean?

“Is she okay?” I ask, before I can stop myself.

Something like worry passes over her facial expressions. Something is definitely wrong.

“You can tell me...” I urged her.

Hilda looks to her left then to her right before leaning in conspiratorially, “She needed the day off.”

Again, with the vague fucking answers.

“Hilda,” I whisper, my emotions quickly turning from worry to frustration, “Just tell me she is okay.”

There is a small crinkle at the corner of her lips as she replies, “She will be. I will make sure she is.”

I am confused by her answer, and if it was not so frowned upon, I even entertain the idea of shaking the answers out of her.

“Hilda!”

She glances around again, “Look, Mr. Cole. According to the supervisor, she is unwell, and taking a sick day. But between you and me, she is sleeping in because she needs it, and then we are going dancing later.”

“Dancing?” I ask incredulously. That was not where I thought that conversation was going to go.

“Yeah. Ebony.”

“Ebony?”

“Ebony? You know?” Hilda repeats, as if that is the quickfire way of making sure I knew what she was talking about.

She must sense my confusion because she quickly adds, “The nightclub on shore. She is actually probably already waiting for me.”

Oh, right? I need to wrap this little interrogation up.

“Thank you, Hilda.”

“You’re welcome.” She beams at me, before pushing the cart and walking away.

I walk back into my cabin and try to distract myself with thoughts of work, or reports, of basically anything other than Maggie, but my efforts are futile.

I am like a starving man. I want to see her tonight. I need to.

Hilda made it pretty clear that something was going on with Maggie, and no matter how hard I try to ignore that, I simply cannot.

I try to eat the food set up for me, but it all tastes bland and boring.

Fuck it!

I pace around my room for a few minutes.

“There is absolutely no reason why I can’t go to a nightclub to grab a drink. That’s a pretty normal thing. If I happen to run into Maggie, then that would be coincidence.”

I know I am lying to myself even as I repeat the internal dialogue in my head.

It runs on a loop as I undress, take a shower and get dressed.

I am just going to check out the place, maybe grab a drink or two and then head back to this cabin.

Maybe I won’t even run into anyone I know.

Like Maggie.

Or maybe, I get to see her.

The thought causes my heart to race.

I hope I do get to see her.

I hurriedly get dressed and walk out of my cabin with hope blooming deep in my chest.

The club is located on the shore where the yacht is docked.

As I step outside, the salty sea air hits my face and I inhale deeply, feeling a sense of calm wash over me.

As I make my way down the steps, I can see the sea stretching out before me, the moon casting a silvery glow on the water.

Ebony is situated on a stretch of sandy beach, and I can hear the sound of the waves crashing against the shore in the distance.

The front of the club faces the shore, and I can see the masts of the yachts in the nearby marina bobbing up and down in the water. The lights of the boats twinkle like stars in the darkness, adding to the ambiance of the scene before me.

Overall, the exterior of the club Ebony is a striking contrast to the tranquil surroundings, but it's the perfect place for a wild night out in town. I see why Hilda and Maggie would pick this place.

I run my hand through my hair once, then push the door of the club open.

The thumping bass of the music hits me like a wave.

The dimly lit room is packed with people, bodies swaying and dancing to the beat. I scan the crowd, my eyes darting from face to face, searching for her. And then I see her.

There she is, dancing in her red dress, her body moving fluidly to the music. My heart races as I take in the sight of her, my gaze lingering on the curve of her hips and the way her hair swings with each movement.

The room fades away, and it feels like it's just the two of us. The music is the backdrop to our own private dance, and I can feel the pull of the rhythm in my bones.

I make my way through the crowd towards her, dodging people left and right, desperate to get closer. As I approach, I can see the smile on her face, the joy in her movements, and I know that I have to be a part of this moment.

I am just about to make my presence known when I catch sight of the other man standing beside her.

A bitter taste roils in my stomach at the scene before me.

Who the fuck is this?

A closer look at her gestures shows that she is not entertaining whatever conversation the man seems to be trying to corner her into.

She looks uncomfortable and out of place, her eyes darting nervously around the room. I push my way through the throng of people, determined to reach her.

I can see the panic in her eyes, and I know I need to act fast.

"Hey babe, sorry I'm late," I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her close. "Who's this guy bothering you?"

It takes every ounce of my strength to keep calm and not drive my fist into his gut.

How dare he come that close to her?

Maggie was mine.

What the fuck am I even thinking? Of course Maggie is her own person, but seeing her eyes flutter in panic had anger seizing my chest. At that moment, all I wanted was to get her out of the situation.

She relaxes a little into my touch as she trails her eyes upwards until they are locked with mine.

Fuck! She is so fucking beautiful.

And her scent, now that she is standing so close to me, is intoxicating.

I have the urge to grab a handful of her hair, push it to the side to expose her neck, and then I could proceed to lean in and bury my face right there, between her fucking shoulder blades.

I want to know if she smells as good, up close.

Maybe I could even lick her neck, taste her...

God! What the hell is wrong with me?

I look away, trying to control the devious and traitorous road my mind is wandering to, but then I catch sight of her whole body, and all rational thoughts flip out of my head.

The way that little dress is hugging her body in all the right places.

I suppress a groan.

That dress is downright sinful.

I want to peel it off her.

I have to shake my head in an attempt to regain focus on the conversation, and of the whole situation in general.

“Listen man, she’s with me,” I say firmly. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

The man hesitates for a moment, but ultimately he backs off and disappears into the crowd. I turn to her and wrap my arm around her waist.

“Thanks, Max,” she says, leaning into me. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

I can feel her body relaxing against mine as I hold her close.

“I am happy to help. I wish you didn’t need my help at all, but I am happy I was around,” I say, looking down at her. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Because if he did, if he fucking laid hands on her, I am not going to be liable for the things I will do to him.

No one touches my girl.

No one.

I have to hold in the growl trying to escape me, as the anger, jealousy and possession thrums through me.

She shakes her head, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“No, I’m okay. Some men just don’t take no for an answer. What are you doing here?”

Her line of questioning jolts me into realization.

I have no right to be acting so possessive, so irrationally about her. As far as she was concerned, I was just another man who gave her unrequited attention.

I contemplate lying to her, but I finally land on the truth.

“I met your friend Hilda. She told me you’d be around.”

Christ, I sound like such a fucking stalker.

I should have lied.

She takes a few minutes to reply and for a minute, I am afraid that I might have scared her with my honesty.

“So, you came?”

I want to tell her that I would have followed her anywhere.

That I had this inexplicable desire to see her.

I want to tell her things I am not ready to say yet, things she is not ready to hear either.

I land on a simple truth.

“I had not seen you all day, and I wanted to give you an update on the Wheelers.”

“And it couldn’t wait?”

Fuck!

Not the answer I was expecting from her.

I think this was a mistake.

I should have stayed in my cabin.

She obviously did not want me here.

“It’s okay. I can go.” It is obvious that we are on two completely different pages. I thought she was warming up after all the confrontations, but I guess I assumed wrong.

She says something else which I don’t quite catch.

I turn around, ready to head back onto the yacht.

This was quite obviously a mistake.

“Please don’t. The guy threw me off. I actually really want to hear about the Wheelers.” She stops me in my tracks.

I let out a sigh of relief. “Are you sure?” I smirk. The last thing I would want is to be somewhere I am not needed.

“Positive.”

Her dainty wrist is wrapped around my hand.

The contact sends shivers of pleasure up and down my spine.

“Great,” I pull her hand and touch my palm to hers.

I feel a sense of comfort and warmth spread through me. Her skin is soft and delicate against mine, and I take note of the quiver in her hand as I hold it.

As I wrap my hand around hers, I feel a jolt of electricity shoot up my arm.

I like touching her.

Her hand is smaller than mine, but it fits perfectly within my grasp. I can feel the texture of her skin, and the slight tremble of her fingers as she holds onto me.

Looking at her, I can see the vulnerability in her eyes, and I know that this simple act of holding hands means a lot to her. It's a gesture of intimacy and trust that I'm honored to share with her especially after the douchebag we just encountered.

“In that case, we can get drinks and talk at the bar?”

“Yes, please.”

I feel a surge of overprotectiveness spread through me as we walk, and I know that I want to keep holding her hand for as long as she'll let me. At this moment, nothing else matters except for the two of us.

I realize that the simple act of holding her hand and her letting me hold hers is not just about physical contact, but about emotional support as well.

I want her to know that I'm here for her.

At the bar, I order the same bottle of merlot we almost went into war for, which for some reason completely amuses her.

And as soon as our drinks have been served up, I delve into details about the deal.

I'm so excited to tell her the news. I've been working on closing the deal with the Wheelers for days now, and it looks like it's finally going to happen.

“It's been tough, let me tell you. But I finally managed to get them to agree to the terms we proposed. It's going to be a game-changer for our business, Maggie, I can feel it. And the best part?” I say, grinning from ear to ear. “I managed to secure a deal that's even better than what we originally

proposed. The Wheelers are going to be one of our biggest clients.”

She nods appreciatively.

I go into details about the numbers and profit margins we are looking at if everything pans out as planned. I realize that I have been talking for way too long when the couple sitting to Maggie’s left signals for their check.

I guess the excitement got to me.

“I hope I am not boring you with this.” I look for the tell-tale signs of boredom that often pass Mia’s face whenever I talk business, but instead Maggie looks at me intently.

“Of course not. No. I want to hear all the details Max. Tell me everything.”

“Are you sure?” I couldn’t help the flood of warmth in my belly when she said that.

“Positive.” She reassures me.

So I oblige her with more numbers and figures of projections and sale plans.

As I do this, I realize that I do like talking to her. Unlike Mia, she actually looks interested in what I have to say. This is all so rare.

Everything is going great until we start discussing our passions. I had no idea that she was into baking, understandable since I am just getting to know.

Then with one random question, all blood drains from her face.

“Poppy? Who is Poppy? Your mom’s name?”

It was a random enough inquiry.

I can tell that something is off with Maggie. The conversation was going well until she suddenly whispered, “Poppy’s gone.”

My heart races as I try to understand what she means.

“Gone?” I ask, my voice low.

I look into her eyes, and I can see the pain and guilt etched on her face. It’s almost too much to bear.

I want to reach out and comfort her, but I don’t know how.

Suddenly, she breaks down in tears, and I feel like I’ve failed her.

I try to ask her what’s wrong, but she’s already jumping out of her seat, saying she has to go.

“Wait,” I say, reaching out to stop her.

But it’s too late. She’s gone, and I’m left feeling helpless and confused.

Who was this woman who had her in such a tail spin? Maybe her sister? Or her close friend? Or a lover?

I see Maggie run outside of the club, and without hesitation, I follow her. I catch up to her a few steps outside the door, and she’s leaning against the wall, taking deep breaths. I can see

tears streaming down her face, and my heart breaks at the sight.

“Maggie, what’s wrong?” I ask, my voice laced with concern.

She looks up at me, her eyes red and puffy, and shakes her head. “I can’t do this, Max,” she says, her voice choked with emotion. “I thought I could handle it, but I can’t.”

I reach out to touch her arm, but she pulls away. “Maggie, please, talk to me,” I say, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

“I can’t be here,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I need to leave.”

I take a step closer to her, wanting to comfort her, but she steps back, her eyes filled with fear. “Maggie, you don’t have to go through this alone,” I say, my voice gentle. “I’m here for you. Whatever it is, we can work through it together.”

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine, and for a moment, I think she’s going to let me in. But then she shakes her head, her expression closing off.

“I’m sorry, Max,” she says, her voice barely audible. “I just can’t.”

And with that, she turns and walks away, disappearing into the night.

I stand there for a moment, feeling helpless and lost, wondering how I can help her when she won’t let me in.

A few minutes later, I see the top of her head as she boards the yacht. Without a second thought, for the third time this evening, I chase after her.

“Maggie, wait up!”

Her beautiful dress still clings to her, but now, her arms are covered in goosebumps.

I am not sure if it is the weather, or the conversation we were having.

A quick glance at her face shows that she is still crying.

My heart breaks at the sight.

“Sweetheart. Please don’t cry.” The endearment falls off my lips so naturally.

She lifts her face to lock her big beautiful brown eyes with mine.

“Maggie,” I say, my voice gentle. “Please, just hear me out.”

Fuck! I want to hold her so badly, but I don’t think she would let me.

Tears streaming down her face, her voice cracking up, “Max, I don’t know what to do,” she says, her voice trembling. “I feel like I’m falling apart.”

“Let me hold you together.”

I can tell that my declaration has surprised her as much as it has me.

A sharp inhale leaves her.

“Max...” her voice is barely above a whisper.

“You’re not in the right state to be alone. Let me take you somewhere safe.”

She hesitates for a moment, looking at me with a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

“Where would we go?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

The thought slaps me from nowhere, “My cabin.”

“Your cabin?” she stutters. “That’s not professional.”

“Why not? We are friends, aren’t we? And right now, I am inviting my friend over to unwind and talk after a long day. There is hardly anything wrong with that, is there?”

I am surprised that my weak explanation actually wins her over.

My heart rate increases as she nods her head once in agreement.

The sound of the water lapping against the sides of the boat is soothing, and I hope it will help Maggie calm down.

“Welcome aboard.” I say cheerily.

She does not smile, but her shoulders lift a little.

I help her settle down on my bed, making sure she’s comfortable.

“I have some chamomile tea somewhere around here. Would you like some?”

I know that a hot drink can help calm the nerves and ease anxiety, and I hope it will help Maggie feel better.

Again, she nods in acquiescence.

I fill the kettle with water and turn it on.

As the water boils, I turn to Maggie and ask, “Are you okay?” My voice is soft and gentle, and I hope it will help her feel more comfortable opening up to me.

She looks so small, so defeated lying in my bed.

She looks up at me, and I can see the tears in her eyes. “I don’t know,” she says, her voice barely audible. “I just feel so lost.”

I sit down next to her and take her hand in mine, feeling her soft skin against mine. “It’s okay,” I say, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. “Just talk to me, Maggie. Please.”

She looks at me, her eyes searching mine, and for a moment, I see a glimmer of hope in them. “Poppy died, Max,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I squeeze her hand gently, knowing that what she is about to tell me will take a toll on her.

We sit there in silence for a while, just holding hands, and I can feel the tension start to ease out of her body.

Pop!

The kettle goes off.

The water is ready.

I reluctantly let go of her hand, put two tea bags in the mugs left on my dining table, adding a dash of honey and some milk. I hand one mug to Maggie, and she takes a sip, her eyes closing as she savors the warmth and sweetness.

I pick mine up and join her on the bed.

We sit there for a while longer, quietly sipping on our tea until she finally speaks up.

“Poppy died a while back. She was like family to me.”

I want to say something, anything, but she seems too raw right now so I give her a minute to gather her thoughts.

She sips a little more of her tea.

“It was an accident.”

Does she mean—

She must have sensed the direction of my thoughts because she shakes her head vehemently. “It was not like that. I wish I would have prevented it and that’s the one thing I will never accept, but lately, it’s like every single thing reminds me of her, of all I lost, you know?”

I nod.

“Can I show you some pictures of her?”

I am honored that she would even ask me this. “I would really like that.”

She shifts, unfolding her legs from under her so she can dig for her cell phone.

I sip my tea in anticipation, not sure what to expect.

“Fuck!” she taps on her phone screen.

“What’s up?”

“My phone battery is dead. Guess I forgot to plug it in today.”

“That’s okay. You can describe her to me.”

Her eyes glow immediately.

“You really mean that?”

“Yes. I think it would do us some good to remember her tonight, what do you think?”

She settles the pillow on the headboard and sits upright.

“Okay.”

I scoot over, letting our knees touch. “Okay, Maggie. What was she like?”

“She loved my baking, even the really bad batches. I could never throw away a burnt cookie with her around.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. And she always made these funny declarations whenever she was chomping on them. One time, I burnt cookies that I made after a German recipe. I was so frustrated, but she gave them all names, and apologized to them as she ate them. It was childish and funny, but it made me laugh. She always made me laugh.”

She takes another sip of her tea.

As Maggie continues to describe Poppy, my curiosity intensifies. I listen intently as she speaks, hoping to get a

glimpse of the person who has been weighing on her so heavily.

“Poppy was.. .she was something else,” Maggie says, her voice softening. “She had this fiery spirit about her, you know? She never let anyone tell her what to do or how to live her life.”

I nod, trying to picture this person in my mind.

“And her hair,” Maggie continues. “It was this vibrant shade of red, like a flame. She always wore it long and wild, like she was defying anyone to try and tame her.”

I can almost see Poppy now, with her flaming hair and rebellious attitude, and for some reason, the image that comes to mind is Pen.

My brother’s Pen.

“But she had a softer side, too,” Maggie says, her voice growing wistful. “She loved music and poetry, and she had this laugh that was just infectious.”

I can hear the emotion in Maggie’s voice as she speaks, and it’s clear that Poppy meant a great deal to her. As she finishes her description, I can’t help but feel a sense of loss for someone I’ve never even met.

“She sounds amazing. I wish I had met her.”

She sighs wistfully. “Me too, Max. Me too.”

We sit in silence for a while, just basking in each other’s company.

“Can I tell you one more thing about her?”

“I want to hear all your stories, Maggie. Every single one of them.”

Her lip trembles with emotion. “Well, back on campus, she used to organize girls’ nights out.”

I lean in, ready to absorb any morsel of information she is willing to give.

This is a very different Maggie from the woman who ran out of the club tonight.

Eventually, Maggie’s voice starts to grow quieter and more slurred, and I realize that she’s starting to fall asleep. I watch her for a few moments, taking in the way her features soften as she drifts off.

Without even thinking, I stand up and walk over to the table to put my mug down, then I pick up hers and do the same.

Maggie is curled up, already asleep.

I take off her shoes then I grab a soft blanket and gently drape it over her, tucking it in around her shoulders.

I take a step back and look at her, feeling a sense of protectiveness wash over me. She looks so small and vulnerable, and I want to make sure she’s safe and comfortable.

Then I lie down at the foot of the table, letting thoughts of today’s events play on a reel in my head. This has been a long day.

I pick up my phone and find a couple of texts from my brother.

Finn: I know I would have been married to her by now.

Finn: I miss her.

Finn: She should not have died.

Finn: Fuck!

Finn: I took flowers to her today.

Finn: Wish you were here, bro.

Fuck! Today was the anniversary of Penelope's death and I was so preoccupied with the Wheeler deal and then Maggie that I completely forgot to call him.

I walk over to the bathroom and close the door behind me.

The call goes straight to voicemail so I call my assistant instead. She informs me that Finn left work for a little bit then came straight back to the office.

I thank her and hang up, before calling his chauffeur. He informs me that Finn has been home all evening.

I try him once again but he is still unreachable so I shoot him a text instead.

Max: I miss her too. I know she is watching over you. She loved you too, so much. Call me as soon as you get this. I wish I was there too.

Then I lie back down and watch the slow rise and fall of Maggie's body as I slowly but surely join her in slumberland.

As I'm dozing off, I'm jolted awake by a knock at the door. I glance at the clock on my nightstand and see that it's nearly midnight.

Who could be coming by at this hour?

I slip out of bed and make my way to the door.

"Hi, sorry to bother you so late," Hilda says. "I have been trying to reach her, but Zach told me he saw you two leave together. I just wanted to check in."

"Zach?"

I'm so confused.

"Is she okay? She was in a bad way all afternoon." Hilda asks.

I feel a sense of relief wash over me as I realize that Hilda is here to help. "Oh, of course," I say, stepping back to let her in. "Come on in."

Hilda walks past me and into the living room where Maggie is still sleeping on the bed. She takes one look at her and her face falls.

"Oh, Maggie," she says softly, walking over to the couch and gently touching her friend's arm. "I'm so sorry I was late."

I stand back, feeling like I'm intruding on a private moment. But at the same time, I'm grateful that Maggie has someone who cares enough to come and check on her.

"Do you mind if I wake her?"

All my instincts scream for me to say no. To tell Hilda to leave, but I push them down.

“Yeah. She needs the rest.”

“We have a staff meeting in the morning. I don’t think they would appreciate it if she was late.”

I want to argue that I can get her there on time, but I don’t.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” she says, her voice soft and coaxing. “Time to head home.”

Maggie stirs and blinks, looking disoriented for a moment before she remembers where she is. “Hilda?” she says, her voice hoarse.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Hilda says, smiling. “Come on, let’s get you back to your bed.”

I watch as Maggie sits up slowly, rubbing her eyes and yawning. She looks so small and fragile at this moment, and I feel a sense of protectiveness wash over me.

“Are you okay to go?” I ask.

Maggie nods, looking up at me with a grateful expression. “Thank you for everything,” she says. “I really appreciate it.”

I smile, feeling a sense of warmth in my chest. “Of course,” I say. “Anytime.”

As Hilda helps Maggie to her feet, I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and hand it to her. “Stay hydrated,” I say, smiling.

Maggie nods, taking the bottle and tucking it into her bag.
“Thanks,” she says.

I need to let her go, let her process tonight as I do the same.

Something major happened tonight, with her, with us and I know she will need to sleep on it.

As they disappear down the hallway, I lean against the doorway, feeling the weight of exhaustion and sadness settling in. But even as I feel the weight of the day’s events dragging me down, I know that I’ll see Maggie again soon.

A text chimes in.

It’s from Finn.

Finn: It’s one day at a time. I’ll call you in the morning.

He has no idea how true that statement is.

And now that I know he is okay too, I get changed and settle into bed.

This was a long ass day and I need the rest.

Chapter 9

Maggie

I wake up the next morning still wearing the party dress from the night before. As I get up and stretch, the events of the previous night come rushing back to me. My heart aches as I remember everything that happened, but I know I need to get ready for the day ahead.

I take a quick shower and change into my work uniform, trying to push aside the feelings of grief and sadness that threaten to overwhelm me. When I'm done, I head over to Hilda's bed and gently shake her awake.

"Hey, wake up," I say, my voice soft.

Hilda stirs and blinks, looking up at me with sleepy eyes. "What time is it?" she asks.

"It's time for our staff meeting," I say, trying to inject some enthusiasm into my voice.

Hilda groans and sits up, rubbing her eyes. "Ugh, I'm not ready for this," she says.

I smile sympathetically, feeling the same way. But I know we have to go, no matter how difficult it might be.

“C’mon. I will make you some eggs and toast for breakfast.” That finally gets her moving and in a few minutes we are out of our room.

As we make our way to the meeting, I can’t help but think about Max... and her.

“Thanks for last night, Hilda. I mean it.”

She shoves me playfully, “We are going to talk about it later, about you being in his bed.”

I blush. “It wasn’t like that.”

“You’ll tell me how it was later.” She gives me a cheeky smile, which I can’t help but return.

Which reminds me, I need to thank him for being there for me last night, for helping me through one of the toughest moments of my life. I make a mental note to do so as soon as possible.

Despite the heaviness in my heart, I try to focus on the meeting, on the work that needs to be done. It’s not easy, but I manage to push aside my grief for a little while, knowing that there will be time to mourn later.

As the meeting ends and we start to make our way back to our workstations, I feel a sense of relief. The worst is over, for now.

I grab the cart and fill it with clean linen.

It is time for my rounds now.

First stop, Max's room.

I take a deep breath as I make my way down the hallway towards his room, carrying a bundle of clean linens in my arms.

I knock on the door, but there's no answer.

I have to swallow the disappointment at that.

After a moment, I decided to go in. I push the door open slowly, peeking inside to make sure Max isn't there. When I see that the room is empty, I step inside and set the linens down on the bed.

I must fight to keep down the feelings when I remember nestling in his sheets last night.

Fuck!

If there were professional boundaries in place, I am pretty sure we have crossed that line already.

I am too distracted by my thoughts to hear the shower running. After changing his bedding, I head out of his room and pick up new towels from my cart.

Without even thinking to knock, I push the bathroom door open and step inside.

As soon as I do, I realize my mistake.

Max is standing in the shower, water cascading down his back, facing away from me.

“Fuck! Fuck that feels so good.” His deep voice is followed by the subtle shift of his hips, his clenched butt and the slow pumping of his hand.

It takes me a minute to fully process the scene in front of me.

He lifts one hand, slapping it against the wet tiled walls. His hand moves faster.

I am transfixed.

“Fuck!” he groans.

My mouth becomes dry, my nipples suddenly aching for attention.

He is masculine, so uninhibited.

So fucking sexy.

His breaths leave him in jagged sounds and I am tempted to slip my hand down my pants just to confirm what I already know.

The few minutes I have spent watching him has my panties wet.

My breath deepens.

I taste blood, as I continue biting hard on my lip, trying to keep all the sighs and moans inside.

Being this close to Max, with his wet hair and glistening skin, is making me feel things I can't quite put into words.

With one particularly guttural sound, the muscles on his back bunch up and his neck rolls back in evident pleasure.

“Fuck!” I whisper, a little too loud.

Max turns around, his massive cock still in his hand, his stormy gray eyes burning with desire.

“Maggie?”

I can feel my cheeks flushing with embarrassment as I stand there, frozen in place. I’ve never felt so exposed, or so out of place.

I cannot explain what possessed me to stay. To watch such an intimate moment, but I simply could not look away.

My heart skips a beat as I realize my intrusion. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” I stammer, turning on my heel to leave.

But Max’s voice stops me in my tracks. “It’s okay, Maggie,” he says, his tone surprisingly calm. “I’ll be done in a minute.”

Done? What does he mean? I thought that sound meant—never mind...

“I am so sorry. Um, I just wanted to change your towels,” I say, gesturing to the bundle in my arms.”

“No worries,” he says, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around his waist. “I should have locked the door.”

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as I turn back to face him. I’m acutely aware of his proximity, of the fact that we’re standing in such close quarters.

A trickle of water runs down his torso and I am overcome with the sudden desire to lick it. What the fuck is happening to me?

“I’ll just, uh, let you do that.”

With that, he steps past me and out into the hallway, leaving me alone in the bathroom. As I work to replace the towels, I can’t help but feel a flutter of excitement in my stomach. It’s clear to me now that my feelings for Max run deeper than I’d noticed before.

I take longer than is necessary, giving him time to get dressed.

I can’t help but feel a sense of mortification washing over me. I know that Max is a kind and understanding person, but I still can’t shake the feeling that I’ve crossed a line.

Taking a few deep breaths, I walk out of the bathroom only to find him fully dressed and waiting for me.

Fuck he looks good in a suit.

“Max, I just wanted to apologize again for walking in on you while you were in the shower,” I say, my voice shaking with nerves.

“Are you really sorry?”

Blood rushes to my cheeks.

“Yes.” My voice is a lot lower than usual. “Let’s just forget it happened.” I add.

He steps closer, his eyes locked on my lips.

“Forget, you say?”

“Yes.” My voice is now breathless.

“Why? Did you not like what you saw?”

Oh! He has no fucking idea the can of worms he just unleashed. He has no idea how much I fucking enjoyed it.

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“We have crossed lines, Max. I was being very unprofessional.”

The air is thick with anticipation as he looks at me with a gaze that seems to say everything and nothing at the same time.

Fuck!

He moves closer to me, and I feel my heart rate increase. His hand brushes against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through my body.

“I like you unprofessional, Maggie.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, bracing myself for what’s to come.

His lips press gently against mine, and I feel a rush of warmth and pleasure course through me. It’s as though we’ve been building up to this moment for weeks, and now that it’s finally here, everything else falls away.

We kiss, soft and slow at first, but soon our passion grows, and I find myself lost in the moment. I run my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, and he responds by deepening the kiss.

It's like nothing I've ever experienced before, and I know that I never want it to end. In this moment, I am lost in him, lost in the sensation of our lips meeting, lost in the feeling of being wanted and desired.

As we finally pull away, gasping for breath, I know that this is only the beginning.

But as I open my eyes, reality hits me like a ton of bricks. What am I doing? This could get complicated. I can't risk losing my job or ruining my reputation that I am trying to build at the temp agency.

I have the bakery to think about. My rent. My future.

But as he looks at me with a mixture of concern and desire, I know that I can't ignore what just happened. I take a deep breath and speak, my voice trembling slightly.

"I... I don't know what to do."

He nods slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. "I understand."

My heart races at his words and I can feel the tension between us growing.

"We shouldn't have done that."

His eyes immediately lock with mine.

"Maggie-"

The air is heavy with unspoken thoughts and desires.

"I have to go."

Before he can say anything, I turn around and run out of his room.

Without a second glance, I leave him standing there.

I am confused, scared and turned on, and I don't know what I should do about any of it.

Chapter 10

Max

I wake up a lot earlier, anticipating seeing Maggie again when she comes in with breakfast, but I am disappointed when in her place, Hilda comes by instead.

“Morning, Mr. Cole. I’ve brought you clean linens today.”

“Hey, Hilda. Thanks, you can come in.”

She lets herself in with a cartload of linens followed closely behind by a cartload of chafing dishes which I assume is my breakfast.

“Sorry, Maggie is indisposed today, but I am available in case you need anything.”

I am disappointed but not shocked. Maggie is constantly escaping confrontation, and after our kiss last night, I expected her to avoid me and save face. Doesn’t make it hurt any less, though.

“Indisposed? Really, Hilda?”

She contemplates lying to me, but for some reason, she lands on the truth instead.

“I don’t know what happened between y’all but she asked me to take over her shifts, which I obliged.”

“So she’s avoiding me?”

“I did not say that.”

“Yeah,” I shake my head, “just heavily implied it.”

“Look. She will come around, please give her the time and a chance to do that.”

“Okay.”

And true to Hilda’s words, that same evening, Maggie comes knocking on my door.

Seeing her again after missing her the whole day is different.

“Maggie!” I gasp out. “I did not expect to see you tonight.”

And looking so fucking sexy too, I want to add, but I do not.

She is wearing the same dress she had on the night at Ebony, and all her curves are visible and sensuous.

Fuck!

“Is this a bad time?”

“Of course not,” I turn to let her get in. “Please come in. I am surprised to see you, but it is never a bad time when it comes to you.”

She passes by me, leaving behind a trail of her perfume. The same damn perfume I am too ashamed to admit, caused me to sniff my pillow after she had laid on it. I am so fucking gone for this woman.

She turns around to face me, her hair curling around her shoulders. She is biting her lip nervously, and the sight is shooting jolts of electricity straight to my cock.

She looks good enough to eat.

“Have you had dinner yet?” she asks.

“Your friend Hilda just dropped off fillet mignon with truffle butter and risotto. The champagne is still on ice, though. I haven’t started on it yet. Would you care to join me?”

She hesitates.

“Maggie,” I gesture towards my bed, “Can you please sit down?”

She follows my instructions, perching herself off the edge of the bed.

I walk over to the covered dishes and take out a side dish.

“Any allergies I should know about?”

She shakes her head.

I transfer some of the food from my plate to hers, then pass it to her.

“Snack on this as I order us dinner.”

“This is more than enough.”

I stare at the inconsequential meal on her plate, “Are you sure? I can get you food, Maggie.”

“I am okay. And that’s not why I came over by the way.”

“I should hope not.”

“I am so sorry,” her cheeks turn red.

“Don’t be, and let’s talk after we eat. Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

She lifts a forkful of food to her sensual plump lips and I watch in fascination as the tines slip into her mouth, as her pink tongue slips out to lick her lips in satisfaction, as she swallows and groans in pleasure...

“Fuck, Maggie!”

She pops her eyes open and stares at me in confusion.

“What?”

“Do you have to make those kinds of sounds right now?”

“What sounds?”

“The kind only derived from pleasure.”

“Max, I wasn’t doing that on purpose. I promise.”

“I know that, beautiful. I am just reacting to you doing absolutely normal things. To be quite honest, I find every single thing you do sexy.”

She giggles.

“I am so glad you find that funny.”

“I am just surprised.”

“Well, at least now you know.”

“Now I know.”

We eat the rest of our food in silence, seated side by side on the bed, with just our knees touching.

“That was amazing. Thanks,” she says as I pick the plate from her.

“You’re welcome.”

Her beautiful brunette hair perfectly frames her face.

God! She is so fucking beautiful.

I can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking, what she wants.

Maybe by some miracle, she wants what I want, too.

“Hey,” I say, stepping closer to the bed.

“Hi,” she replies, her voice quiet.

We sit on the bed facing each other, and I can sense that she’s nervous. It breaks my heart to see her like this and I want to make things right.

“I’m sorry I left like that,” she says, looking down at her hands.

“It’s okay,” I reply. “I just want you to know that you can talk to me. You don’t have to be scared around me.”

“I know.”

“You can tell me anything, sweetheart.”

Her eyes bulge out at my endearment.

“The thing is... I’m a virgin,” she says, her voice barely audible. “And when things started to get more... intense, I got really scared.”

I’m surprised by her confession, but more than anything, I feel concerned for her. “You didn’t have to be scared. We could have taken things slow, at your pace.”

“I know, but... I just couldn’t help it,” she says, tears welling up in her eyes.

I pull her into a hug, holding her tightly. “It’s okay. We’ll take things slow. We don’t have to rush anything.”

We sit there in silence for a few moments, both lost in our thoughts. Then I pull away slightly, looking at her with a smile.

“Can I kiss you?” I ask, my heart racing.

She nods, and I lean in slowly, my lips meeting hers in a soft, gentle kiss.

As we kiss, I can feel her body start to relax, her fears and anxieties melting away. I pull her closer, running my fingers through her hair, and I feel a surge of desire run through me.

I want her, but more than that, I want her to feel safe and loved. So I take things slow, letting her set the pace.

Eventually, we pull away, both of us gasping for breath. I look at her, and I can see the desire and tenderness in her eyes.

“I want you,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “Fuck baby, I want to make you feel so good. But only if you’re

ready.”

She nods, and I can see the blush rising to her cheeks. “I’m ready,” she says, her voice shaking slightly.

“Are you sure? You know you can ask me to stop at any time.”

She leans down and takes my lip in her mouth, sucking gently, “I want to feel good. I want you to make me feel good.”

I smile at her, pulling her into my arms once again. “We’ll take it slow,” I say, kissing the top of her head.

“Okay,” she breathes out.

I lay her down, push her hair off her neck.

“I am going to lick your neck now.”

“Okay.”

I lean down and trace her collarbone with my lips and my tongue. I feel her shudder beneath me.

“Now, I am going to push the top of your dress down and take your nipple in my mouth.”

“Mhm.”

I lift my head and gaze into her beautiful brown eyes, “That’s not going to work baby. Use your words.”

I capture her lips in mine, kissing and sucking until a breathy moan escapes her.

“Yes, yes. Please Max.”

“Good girl.”

Then I drag my hand down, dragging the neckline of her dress with me.

Her nipples push back against the lacy material of her bra. Without taking it out, I lick the right nipple through the fabric.

“Fuck!”

“Told you I like you unprofessional, baby. Look at how beautiful you look right now.” Then I lean down and do the same to her left nipple.

Her eyes blaze with desire.

“Fuck Max. I want to feel you.”

I am excited by the prospect of pushing her underwear aside and sinking into her, but I harness all my self-control.

“Maggie. Don’t say things like that to me. Tonight, I just want to make you feel good.”

“But I already feel so good,” she pants.

“Well, I can do better. Your thoughts are too coherent right now. I need to scramble them.”

“Fuck,” she lifts her head to meet my lips and I devour her in slow sensual kisses.

When she turns feral and starts biting on me, I wrap my hand around her throat.

“Steady. I set the pace tonight.”

“Please, Max!” she pleads, and her words set my blood on fire.

With my hand on her throat, I roughly tug down her bra to expose her breasts to me.

I lick and suckle and bite one before giving the other one the same attention. She whimpers.

Then I blow onto them before massaging them softly.

Her hips undulate, seeking friction.

I push her legs apart and cradle between them, hissing when my crotch perfectly aligns to hers.

“I am going to make you come with your clothes on.”

“Max.”

“Yes, baby.”

“Please.”

I wrap my hand around her right thigh and push it up, opening her to more of my humping.

My slow pace makes her eyes roll back in pleasure.

She whimpers beneath me, quickly reaching the edge, but it's still not enough.

She needs more.

I lift myself a little to get rid of my shirt, but I keep my pants on.

Then I let my body lie on top of hers, letting her pebbled nipples rub up against my chest.

Her breathy moans egg me on.

I push her legs wider, her dress riding up her thighs.

I can see indentations forming from the grip I am using to hold her open for me.

Fuck!

The thought of marking her, leaving marks just for me, makes me absolutely feral.

I wrap my hand around her throat, slightly choking her, then mimic the punishing strokes I am going to give her once we finally get together.

When her breathing begins to falter, I use my other hand to roll her nipple and then crush my lips onto hers to absorb her moans and whimpers.

She bites me so hard she draws blood.

Her eyes roll back.

Her whole body shakes, and I have to suspend myself above her and watch the marvel that is her coming apart.

It takes a lot longer than I expected, her thighs quivering, her fingers gripping the sheets as her back bows a little.

Once she is heaving and spent, I finally release my hand from her throat, and smooth her beautiful back.

“You are so beautiful.”

“Th-thank you. Fucking hell, Max, fuck.”

“What?”

“I... I just—fuck!”

Like I had promised, her thoughts are completely scrambled.

My cock is rock hard in my pants and I am sure just one touch from her would make me detonate, but I ignore it, watching this beautiful woman try to regain her composure.

“Are you okay, baby?”

She shifts her head to stare at me from the position she is still lying in. “I am perfect. I want to do that again.”

I laugh. “My greedy girl.”

“What can I say Max? I really liked that.”

“I am so glad you did. Can I hold you now?”

“Yes, please.”

With my chest bare, my cock hard and her in disarray, I lay down on the bed and drag her to me, reveling in the way she feels in my arms. And as we lay there, wrapped in each other’s arms, I know that I want to make her feel loved and cherished. I may want her, but more than anything, I want to protect her and make her feel safe.

“Thank you for letting me do that for you,” I whisper into her hair.

“Mmmh.”

I continue to hold her in my arms, feeling the weight of her body against mine. I rub soothing circles on her back, feeling the tension in her muscles begin to ease.

As I stroke her hair, I can't help but admire how beautiful she is. Her brunette locks fall around her face in soft waves, and I can't resist running my fingers through them.

But as I look down at her, I realize that she's dozed off in my arms. I smile to myself, feeling a sense of warmth and contentment wash over me.

I continue to stroke her hair, not wanting to disturb her peaceful slumber. She looks so peaceful, so innocent, and I feel a fierce protectiveness well up inside of me.

I can't believe how much I care about her. From the moment I met her, I felt a connection with her, even though I was annoyed and confused when we first met. Now that I've gotten to know her better, I can't imagine my life without her.

As I hold her, I realize that I want to be there for her, to protect her and care for her in any way I can. I want to be the one she turns to when she needs comfort, the one she trusts with her deepest fears and desires.

I brush a strand of hair away from her face, marveling at how delicate and precious she seems at this moment.

Suddenly, she stirs slightly, her eyes fluttering open. I freeze, not wanting to wake her, but as she looks up at me with a small smile, I feel a sense of relief wash over me.

"Hey," I say softly, returning her smile.

"Hey," she replies, her voice groggy.

"You fell asleep," I say, continuing to stroke her hair.

“I did?” she asks, looking up at me with a hint of surprise.

“Yeah,” I say, feeling a small sense of pride that I was able to help her relax.

She snuggles closer to me, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her close. I feel a sense of peace wash over me as I hold her, feeling her warmth and her presence in my arms.

“I’m sorry I got so scared earlier,” she says suddenly, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s okay,” I say, running my hand through her hair. “You don’t have to be scared anymore. I’ll always be here for you.”

She looks up at me, her eyes shining with emotion. “Thank you,” she says, before leaning up to kiss me gently on the lips.

As we kiss, I feel a sense of tenderness and love wash over me.

“Stay.”

“What?” she lifts her gaze to meet mine.

“Stay the night.”

“I have to work in the morning.”

“I will set an alarm. Stay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“In that case,” I rise from the bed and walk towards the dresser where I pick up a packet of wipes, “do you want me to

help you take off your makeup?” I ask, hoping she’ll say yes.

She nods gratefully.

I take the wipe and gently begin to wipe away the makeup from her face, careful not to get it in her eyes.

As I wipe away the last traces of her mascara, I can’t help but admire how beautiful she looks without all the makeup. She looks so natural and radiant, and I feel lucky to be able to see her like this.

“Thanks,” she says, smiling up at me as I finish wiping her face.

“My pleasure,” I reply, tossing the used wipe in the trash bin.

I gently take her hand and lead her to my dresser, opening the drawer where I keep my t-shirts. I pull out a soft, oversized shirt and hand it to her.

“Here, you can sleep in this,” I say, smiling at her.

She takes the shirt from me, holding it up to her body. It’s a little too big for her, but it looks cute on her nonetheless.

“Thank you,” she says, grinning up at me.

I smile back, feeling a sense of satisfaction at being able to take care of her.

She heads off to the bathroom and comes back wearing nothing but my t-shirt.

Fuck! She looks so good in my clothes.

I peel off my pants and get in bed with a raging boner and a pair of boxers.

She slips in after me, wrapping herself around me.

We settled down on my bed, cuddling close to each other. I wrap my arms around her, feeling her warmth and her presence in my arms.

I could definitely get used to this.

“Good night, beautiful.”

“Goodnight, Max,” she mumbles, already half asleep.

I pick up my phone and set an alarm for her, then I let myself revel in the feel of her, the feel of this perfect night.

Chapter 11

Maggie

“**W**here have you been? Did you spend the night with him?”

I try to dodge Hilda’s line of questioning as I look around for a towel so I can take a quick shower before the staff briefing.

“Can we talk about this later?”

“Nope.”

I pull the bottle of champagne I got from Max’s room.

“Even if I bribe you with a three thousand dollar bottle?”

She squeals in excitement as she grabs the bottle from me.

“Thought so. Now, let me get into the shower so we are not late, then I will fill in the details later.”

“That’s okay by me.” Hilda replies, all her attention drawn to the bottle in her hand.

I grab my towel and run into the shower.

Still dressed in Max's oversize t-shirt and his oversize sweat pants that he let me borrow, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror to take stock of all the marks he left me with.

Several hickies line my neck and collar bone.

I slowly peel off the clothes, marveling at how much he marked me.

There are bruises on my thighs from his grip, bite marks on my chest and breast, and my nipples are sore from all the licking and suckling. My lips feel equally sore after we spent a whole thirty minutes making out like teenagers instead of getting ready for work.

I didn't even know I could get an orgasm from nipple play alone, but damn did he prove me wrong.

I smile at the thought, the remembered sensation.

And the entire time, he didn't even let me near his cock.

Sigh! I can't wait to see him, all of him.

To touch him, to feel him.

I feel my insides clench at the thought of that.

"Wow! Enough of that!" I chastise myself, before jumping into the shower to get my work day started.

I take half the time I normally would to get ready, but the entire time I am daydreaming and thinking about Max, and his body and the things he could do to my body.

By the time we are dispersed from the meeting, I am already flustered and anticipate seeing him and Hilda makes sure to

make fun of me the entire time.

I just saw the man last night, he saw me half naked, made me come, and then let me lay in his arms the entire night, but still I blush as I knock on his door.

Max opens the door and I have to gasp at the sight of him.

His hair looks a little disheveled and instead of the suit I am used to seeing him in, he is in a white fluffy robe.

“Good morning, Mr. Cole.”

He steps outside, looking at both sides of the hallway before grabbing my neck and pulling me to him.

“Good morning, beautiful,” and then he crashes his lips on mine.

Fuck! He tastes so fucking good.

I wrap my hand to grab a fistful of his hair, deepening the kiss.

Then he turns us, pulling me into his cabin with him.

Before I know it, I am pinned to the wall, his hands in my hair, his thigh between my legs.

“Hey baby!” He grinds into me and I moan a little.

“Hey.”

“I missed you.” He doesn’t give me the time to respond before he is devouring me again.

“Fuck!”

“Yes baby! Grind on my leg like that. I want you to come before I can start my day.”

“Sir... Max. I already came this morning,” I argue without conviction, as his hands move lower, opening the buttons of my blouse. My skirt is hiked up my thighs and my heels are digging into the floor.

“Again. I want you again.”

With my breasts exposed, he nips on my already bruised neck, marking me afresh, then he grabs my waist, controlling the pressure of his thigh into my centre.

“I am so close,” I breathe out.

“I can tell.”

Then he is pinching my already sensitive nipple and I am tumbling off the edge again.

“Baaaaaaby!” I scream into his neck.

“That’s it.” He coaxes as my rhythm turns frenzied. I grab onto his hair, his robe, his arms, trying to stay upright but to no avail.

After my orgasm has crested, I am left limp with him using his whole body to hold me up.

“Good morning, baby,” he pushes my hair back.

“Morning.”

He lifts me and carries me to his bed, lying me down.

Then he drags the carts with my supplies and his breakfast into his room before locking the door behind him.

“That was fucking amazing. You like it a little rough, huh?”

He flashes me his panty-melting smile, “I like everything with you.”

“Okay. I still need to deliver breakfast to the other guests.”

“How many minutes can you spare?”

“Ten.”

“I can do a lot in ten minutes, Maggie,” he unties the robe revealing his perfectly muscular body, his chest and thighs only rivalled with Greek statues.

“You look good.”

He pushes the robe off his shoulders, remaining in a pair of black briefs that leave very little to the imagination.

“I am glad you think that. Did you bring syrup with you?”

I am surprised by his tangent in conversation.

“Yes. Chef’s special was pancakes. I brought maple syrup. Why?”

He has an excited glint in his eyes as he growls. “Take off your blouse. I don’t want it to get messy.”

“Messy?” I ask, even as I pull it off me.

“Yes, baby. I am about to make you very, very sticky.”

Oh God!

My panties are already soaked from the orgasm he gave me against the wall, but I am somehow already trembling with need.

“Sticky?”

This man has reduced me to silly one-word answers.

“Very sticky.”

And by the time I stagger out of his room to get breakfast for my other guests, my nipples are deliciously sore and I am extremely sticky, just as he promised.

“Hilda, how many orgasms can one person have before they pass out from exhaustion?”

She giggles at my dumb inquiry.

Yep, it is confirmed. Max has turned me into a blubbering fool.

“Why? What is this man doing to you?”

“Oh!” I sigh. “I wish I could tell you.”

“You could, then we can trade stories because Zach has been pulling these moves that I have been dying to discuss.”

I giggle.

Hilda has become my second favorite part of my day. I miss Poppy every single day, but Hilda is an important facet of my life right now and she makes it all worthwhile.

I am still not going to share my sex life with her.

“Nope. I am not telling you. Just know, a lot of syrup was involved.”

She squeals in excitement.

“Tell me more.”

“Nope. In fact, it is almost time for dinner, and we have to get going.”

“I am going to need details. Max’s dinner can wait.”

“No it cannot, and no you are not getting details.”

She pouts playfully.

“Fine. But now I am not going to tell you about Zach and his belt.”

“Belt?”

“A trade for a trade.”

“Not going to happen,” I laugh.

“Worth the try. Let’s go.”

I pull her out of our cabin heading to the kitchen to grab instructions and dinner.

And ten minutes later, just like in the morning, I find myself pinned against the wall, breathless and having another orgasm.

“Fuck!” he groans as I come apart.

Fuck yes!

I straighten my clothes, run my fingers through my hair, trying to make myself look presentable.

“You keep messing up my makeup, Max.”

He runs his finger over my mouth, smearing my gloss a little more.

“Are you complaining?”

I shake my head. “Not about that.”

He frowns at me, grabbing my hair and turning my face to him. “Maggie?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t distract me.”

I lick my lips, obsessed with the feel of his firm hand holding me in place.

“Are you complaining about something? What do you need? I will give you anything.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, trying hard to gather my courage.

His eyes soften as he releases my hair just a little.

“Talk to me, Maggie.”

“It’s just that—“

“It’s just, what?” Worry clouds his eyes.

“I have never seen you come. I want to see you come.”

“What?” There is amusement in his eyes.

I run my hands down his chest, slipping lower and lower until my fingers are dancing on the edge of his briefs. “I want to see you come. I want to feel you come.”

He lets go of my hair, pushing the strands back. “I thought we were taking it slow.”

“We are. But I did tell you I am ready.”

“Maggie.” There is a low warning in his voice.

“I am ready, Max.”

I run my hand lower, over his erection and he hisses in pleasure.

“I want this Max. I want you.” I add.

I bite my lip in anticipation.

“You drive me crazy.” Then he is cupping my face and lifting my face.

Our eyes lock again, and when his lips descend towards mine, there is something tentative and slow about the way he touches me.

I feel his hands gently caress my face as he leans in closer to me. My heart races as our lips finally touch, and I let out a soft sigh. He starts off slowly, his lips moving gently against mine, savoring the moment. I can feel the warmth of his breath on my skin, and I close my eyes, lost in the sensation.

As the kiss deepens, I feel his tongue gently probing at my lips, asking for permission to enter. I open my mouth and allow him in, and our tongues dance together in a slow, sensual rhythm. The kiss becomes more intense, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him even closer.

I can feel the passion building inside me as we continue to explore each other's mouths. His touch is electric, sending shivers down my spine. I can't get enough of him, and I know that this moment will stay with me forever.

Finally, we pull away, both of us breathing heavily. I open my eyes and look into his, seeing the desire mirroring mine.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," I moan.

"What about your other clients?"

"I can call Hilda to cover me. It might cost you another bottle of champagne."

"A fair trade." Then he leans down kissing me again.

"Then I better call her right now?"

"Can it wait a minute?" He slips his hand up my skirt. "Part your legs for me, baby."

I oblige him, giving him access to me.

He rubs his knuckles on the wet fabric and my breath hitches at the contact.

"I love how wet you are right now. Is this from the orgasm you had or the one you are about to have?"

I grab onto his shoulders, steadying myself.

"Use your words."

"I can't. It feels... it feels so fucking good, Max."

“Then,” he bites my ear lobe before licking it, “tell me that.”

“Oh God!”

He grabs one of the straps of my thong and drags it down. Once it is down to my knees, trapping my legs together, his hand slides up again, seeking me.

The first touch of his fingers on my clit has me humming.

“So wet, baby.”

“Max, please.”

“Please what?”

“Put your fingers inside me.”

“Fuck yes.”

He pushes me backwards towards the bed and I land on my back. Then he slips my undies off.

“I am going to make you come on my tongue before I can give you my cock.”

“Okay.”

“Now part your thighs.”

I do just that, my breath heavy, my fingers grabbing onto his sheets.

Before I can register it, he swipes his tongue through my center and I shudder.

“Fuck Max.”

“Just breathe, baby.”

I am too distracted by the feel of his tongue as he laps at my clit, in slow deliberate circles, then I feel the slight intrusion of his finger.

“Max.”

“Be a good girl and breathe for me.”

He doesn't take the finger out, just gently pushes it in, as he uses his tongue to lubricate me.

I am just adjusting to his feel when he adds a second finger.

“You are so goddamn tight Maggie.”

I can't think, can't speak.

All I feel is his tongue, his teeth, his beard scraping my inner thighs and his finger as he massages me from the inside out.

“Fuck Max!”

“That's right. You better remember who is between your legs right now. Now, grab your phone and text Hilda. Tell her to cover your next guest.”

With trembling fingers, I reach for his phone off the nightstand.

“What should I say?” My brain is too flooded with endorphins to think straight.

Max scraps his teeth against my clit making me yelp, “Come up with something. And do it fast. I am about to dive into you.”

I type up the text, ignoring all the typos and autocorrect messages before sending it.

His fingers pump in and out of me in slow strokes.

“Done?”

“Yes-ssss!”

“Good. Now grab onto something, baby. I am adding a third finger.”

The intrusion makes me moan so loud, I am scared everyone on the yacht hears me.

“Are you okay?”

“It feels so fucking good. So good. Max. So good.”

I am moving my hips, matching his pumping strokes, feeling the tingling sensation already forming.

“I want you to come for me.”

“Wait Max!” I yell, and he immediately stills.

“Do you want us to stop? I can stop.”

“Don’t you fucking stop, babe. I want you inside of me.”

“I don’t have a condom,” and even as he says this, his languid torturous fingers continue stroking into me.

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

He pushes my hair back and kisses me gently on the forehead. “I want to. Of course, I want to. I always wear a condom. That’s why I didn’t enter you.”

“Do you want to fuck me, Max? Bare?”

“Fuck yes, I do. I’ll pull out because I want to come all over your perfect tits.”

“Then do it.”

His thumb caresses my clit as he continues the scissoring motion inside me. “Please. Max. I want you inside me when I come.”

My back bows in pleasure.

Max eyes turn dark with desire. He pushes his briefs down, takes out his fingers before lining his cock with my entrance and thrusting in, fast and deep.

My legs tremble from the sensation, tears trickling down my face.

He doesn’t move.

He just lets my body adjust to the fast and brutal invasion. He continues wiping my tears and peppering my face with kisses until the pain turns into a dull throbbing ache.

“You can move now.”

“Okay.”

The first thrust feels so raw that I think he might rip me apart. His cock is huge inside me and I am all stretched out to accommodate him.

The second thrust hits something inside me that has my nipples tingling.

He pulls out a little and on the third thrust, he massages my clit with his thumb. That is all the coaxing my body needs

before my back is bowing off the bed.

I scream so loud, my throat turns raw.

“So beautiful,” he murmurs over and over again, but I am too far gone to reply.

I can feel his cock jump and twitch inside me, and once he resumes his rough strokes it doesn't take long before he is shuddering, pulling out and spilling all over my breasts.

“So goddamn beautiful.”

By the time he comes back to clean me up with a warm washcloth, my body is jelly and my mind can barely comprehend anything.

All I know is that I just had sex for the first time, and it hurt like I expected, but it also felt so damn good.

So good, I am pretty sure I want to experience that again.

Maybe later, when I can actually say the words.

I am going to have to buy some condoms from Hilda for the duration of the trip.

He cleans me up, takes off my clothes and puts me in his t-shirt, then he pulls the sheets off the bed but not before I see the few blood spots on them.

Then, he peppers me with kisses, rubbing my back as I slip off into slumberland.

Chapter 12

Max

Maggie is on her knees, my cock between her lips and this is my idea of heaven.

“Am I doing it right?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Just add a little more pressure with your hand, and graze my cock with your teeth.”

She pulls me out of her mouth with a loud pop. “Okay.”

Then she runs her hand up and down my shaft, using one to massage my balls while the other squeezes close to my head.

Her head bobs up and down as she adjusts her jaw to accommodate my length.

“Just like that, baby.”

I grab her hair, using it to direct her motions, and before long, my hips are moving with a mind of their own.

Her eyes soften with unshed tears, as I sink in and out of her warm silky mouth. It doesn't take long before she takes me to

the back of her throat, gags and has me spilling all over her face.

“I love when you mark me like this,” she says, still kneeling on the floor.

“I love it, too.”

Her dainty tongue darts out of her mouth to lick her lips in satisfaction.

She has been on a mission to make me come in her mouth ever since I gave her three back-to-back orgasms with my mouth.

Now this is my kind of healthy competition.

“Stay right there,” I tell her as I walk into the washroom to get a warm cloth.

I clean my cock first, then shove it back in my pants.

Then I grab another washcloth and return.

I come back and find her kneeling in the same position I left her in.

I wipe my come off her face in soft gentle motions, then kiss her cheeks, nose and eyelids after.

“You said you wanted a prize if you got me to come in under ten minutes, and you did. So, Maggie, what would you like?”

She smiles shyly at me as she rises from the floor walking over to sit beside me on my bed.

“Well, Hilda has been telling me something I would like to try.”

“Oh, I would just love to hear this.”

“Hey,” she perches herself on my lap, “She spared a whole box of condoms for us. You better be nice.”

“Fine, tell me, baby.”

“Can I—”

“Can you what, Maggie?”

Her cheeks turn a brilliant red.

“Can I sit on your face?”

I groan, blood already rushing to my cock.

“You don’t have to ask twice.”

I pull myself towards the headboard.

“Take off your skirt and panties and come here.”

It takes a few minutes before she is straddling my chest.

“Now what?”

I grab her thighs and pull her up even farther.

“Grab the headboard and sit down.”

“Will you be able to breathe though?” she laughs.

“Well, Maggie. There is only one way to find out.”

I lay in bed next to Maggie, her head resting on my chest as we finished up dinner. The room is filled with the comforting aroma of the lasagna we just ate, and I feel content and relaxed in her presence.

She looks so beautiful like this.

I want to know more about her and that begins with her passions.

“Hey, Maggie, can you tell me more about your dream of owning a bakery?” I ask, curious to hear what she has in mind.

She looks up at me with a smile and says, “Well, I’ve always loved baking and my family used to own a bakery when I was a kid. It was a really special place for us, but unfortunately it had to close down due to financial difficulties. I’ve always wanted to reopen it and bring it back to life.”

I can see the excitement in her eyes as she talks about her dream. It’s clear that this is something she’s passionate about and has put a lot of thought into.

“What are your plans?” I ask, curious.

She tells me about her strategy—she’s been working hard and saving up money and she plans to use her earnings to fund the reopening of her family’s bakery. She’s already started doing research and planning out the logistics and she’s confident that she can make it a success.

As she talks, I can’t help but feel proud of her. It takes a lot of courage and determination to pursue your dreams, especially when they involve starting your own business. But

Maggie is fearless and has a clear vision of what she wants to accomplish.

I listen intently as she describes the bakery, picturing it in my mind—the sweet smells of fresh-baked goods, the cozy atmosphere, the happy customers. It sounds like the kind of place that would become a beloved community gathering spot, just like her family’s bakery was when she was a child.

“Poppy was always there for me and if I were to fulfill this dream we nurtured together, I know she would be proud.”

“I know for a fact that she would be so fucking proud.”

I lean down and plant a kiss on her forehead.

“You know, if you do need financial help, I am here for you.”

“Max, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I would like to. I would like to think that you know you can rely on me. That it is not just sex for me.”

“It’s not just sex for me, either.”

“Good,” and because I can’t resist, I kiss her lips again, “then know that I will do anything I can to help you with this. I already finalized my contract with the Wheelers and I am not handling any huge clients at the moment. I could be all yours, babe.”

“Wait, you finalized the contracts.”

“Yes, I did.”

She leaps into my arms, hugging me fiercely.
“Congratulations, babe!”

I will never get used to her calling me *babe* no matter how many times I hear it.

“Thank you. I will forward the details to my brother for final touches, but that’s it. When we dock in a few days, all will be done.”

“I am so happy for—“ but she does not get to finish her line of thought.

Maggie suddenly jumps out of bed and rushes towards the washroom, looking pale and queasy. I can tell that something’s wrong and I immediately jump up to follow her.

As I enter the washroom, she is hunched over the toilet, looking miserable. I hold her hair back and rub her back, trying to comfort her.

Fuck! I really hope this is not a second bout of food poisoning again.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, concerned.

“I’ve just been feeling unwell,” she says weakly, “I ate a bad sandwich in the morning, and I think the lasagna is not agreeing with me. Plus, you bending me like a pretzel every chance you get does not seem to be helping.”

I chuckle at her ability to have a sense of humor even in her most miserable state.

“Please go away. I don’t want you seeing me like this.”
Then she punctuates her statement with another round of throwing up. I feel a pang of worry in my chest. Seeing her in pain like this is not easy for me. I want to take care of her and make her feel better.

“Baby, I have seen you naked. It’s okay,” I reassure her, “I’ll get you some water and something to soothe your stomach.”

I help her up and walk her back to bed. I sit beside her, rubbing her back and offering her water.

As I take care of her, I can’t help but realize that I’m falling in love with her. She’s vulnerable and needs me, and all I want to do is take care of her. I want to be the one she can rely on and trust, the one who will always be there for her.

I have been falling for her since she screamed at me when I thought she was an Uber driver.

Our orbits have been crossing over and over and over again.

But I also know that it’s still early days in our relationship. We’re still getting to know each other, and I don’t want to scare her off by saying too much too soon. So instead, I decided to tell her how much I like her.

“Maggie,” I say softly, “I just want you to know that I really like you. I enjoy spending time with you and getting to know you better. And I want to be here for you, no matter what.”

“Even when I am being yucky and disgusting?”

I push her hair back and place a kiss on her clammy forehead. How did I not notice how feverish she was? It is like

my pheromones are on overdrive around her and I can't think about anything else but her.

“Even then, baby.”

I pass her a bottle of water which she takes tentatively and takes a few sips of.

“Can you please pass me my phone? I was supposed to meet Hilda for drinks, and I don't think I am going to make it.”

“Of course.”

I pass her the cell phone which she unlocks and shoots a quick text to her roommate.

“Oh, by the way,” she looks up from her phone, “I really like you, too.”

I smile at her, feeling a warmth spreading through my chest. Maybe it's too early to say, “I love you,” but I know that what I feel for Maggie is strong and real.

I climb into bed beside her.

“Come here, let me hold you for a little bit.”

“What if what I have is passed to you?”

“Then,” I kiss her forehead, “I will gladly take it.”

She groans before burying her face in my neck.

It does not take long before her breathing slows down, a tell-tale sign that she is falling asleep.

As Maggie starts to drift off to sleep, I can feel her body relax against mine, and I know that she's feeling comforted.

As we lie there in the quiet, she suddenly speaks up.

“You know, I never showed you any pictures of my best friend, Poppy,” she says, her voice soft and sleepy.

I’m surprised by her sudden change in topic, but I don’t want to interrupt her train of thought. I nod, encouraging her to continue.

“Talking about the bakery really brought back memories of her. I really miss her. And I wish you two could have met, you know. She was the best person I ever met.”

I can feel her sadness and pain, and I wish there was something I could do to make it go away.

“I wish I could have met her, too.”

Then, she takes out her phone and starts scrolling through photos.

“Actually, babe, I think I know just the right picture to show you.

Here, this is us,” she says, stopping at a picture of two girls sitting side by side in what looks like a park.

That is definitely a younger version of the woman I am falling in love with, but surprisingly, I recognize the young girl seated right next to her.

Same eyes.

Same face.

Same smile.

I have seen several variations of her face, but the one that stands out most is the blown-up picture that was used at the memorial.

My heart skips a beat as I look at the photo.

It's the same woman who was engaged to my brother before she tragically died in a car accident.

Penelope.

A car accident in which her best friend was driving.

Her best friend, Meg.

Like the world's most tragic puzzle, everything falls into place.

Penelope and Meg.

Maggie and Poppy.

Poppy.

Maggie.

Finn.

My Maggie.

Finn's Pen.

Fuck!

I feel my stomach drop in shock and I don't know what to say.

Maggie notices my reaction and looks at me quizzically.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

“I... I know her,” I say, struggling to find the right words.
“Poppy was Pen. Pen was my brother’s fiancée.”

Chapter 13

Maggie

“**W**hat the hell are you talking about?”

Max practically jumps out of the bed, a look of pure horror evident on his face.

“Pen is Poppy,” then pointing at me, he adds, “That means you’re Meg.”

My throat immediately closes up.

He shakes his head vehemently. “You can’t be the same Meg. It is not possible. You are different. You can’t have been the one... the one responsible...”

I can hear my heart break in my chest at his accusation.

Everything else comes flooding back in.

How I was barred from my best friend’s funeral.

Her fiancé sued me for everything I had.

He was the reason I was at a low-income job on a yacht, in the middle of nowhere despite my severe aversion to the sea.

He was the reason I was on the verge of losing my house,
my car.

My family bakery!

My dream.

Finn Cole is the nightmare that has haunted me the last
couple of years. The person whose shadows I feel every single
day I wake up.

As if losing Poppy was not enough, he had made sure that I
had lost everything.

And here I was, like a goddamn fool, falling for his brother.

Sleeping with him.

I had given this man my virginity.

Angry tears spill down my cheeks.

“Max. Tell me you are lying.”

I am pulling the sheets off his bed, trying to hide underneath
them, trying to reverse the events of the last couple of minutes.

I just admitted that I liked this man, only to find out that he
is related to the one person who hated my existence more than
anything—all because I had decided to keep it a secret.

All because I had tried to protect my best friend, my family,
even in death.

“Tell you?” Max runs his hand through his hair. “Tell you
what? I am the one who should be asking for answers.”

The look he gives me staggers me. It is a look filled with revulsion, disgust, anger.

“You are the reason I almost lost my brother. Pen was his whole life. He was devoted to her. And then he lost her and I lost him.”

“What about me?” I scream. “I fucking lost her, too. I lost the most important person in my life and no one seems to get that.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should have been a better driver.”

The silence that follows his words is palpable.

How dare he?

How fucking dare he? After everything I had shared with him, told him.

If there is one person who would have understood where I was coming from then maybe it would have been the man I was sharing a part of myself with.

How wrong I was.

This can't be the same man who minutes ago was confessing his feelings for me.

Tears are now freely slipping down my cheeks.

“I should go.”

There is anguish and panic on his face, but he does nothing to stop me.

To comfort me.

The Max that was holding me as I got sick in the bathroom less than one hour ago is long gone.

The man who stands before me now is a colder version of him.

“I think that’s for the best.”

Those are the last words he says to me.

Not, *I am sorry for what my family put you through.*

Nor, *I am sorry you lost your friend.*

None of it.

He is detached and cold, like the man who I met and almost wrestled for a bottle of Merlot.

This is Max Cole.

Brother of Finn Cole.

The man I knew is gone.

I can’t believe what just happened. My heart is shattered into a million pieces. I trusted Max, I thought he would understand. But instead, he blamed me for Poppy’s death. How could he say that? I loved Poppy like a sister, she was my best friend, and I miss her every single day. How could he think that I had anything to do with her passing.

As I storm out of his room and make my way across the yacht, I can feel the tears streaming down my face. I’m crying so hard that it’s difficult to see where I’m going. My whole body is shaking with anger and hurt. How could he be so cruel?

I make my way back to the room that I share with Hilda, and as soon as I walk in, she can tell that something is wrong.

“What happened?” she asks, her voice full of concern.

I collapse onto the bed, tears still streaming down my face, and tell her everything.

I am tired of shouldering all these secrets.

I tell her about the accident. How I showed Max a picture of Poppy and he recognized her as his brother’s fiancée who passed away. How he blamed me for her death, as if I were actually responsible for it.

I know he thinks I did, but the least he could have done was have a conversation with me to get to the bottom of this instead of shutting me out.

“Actually,” Hilda, says as she rubs soothing circles across my back, “I know it’s bad timing, but I need to talk to you about something.”

Hilda continues listening to me quietly, her hand on my back, offering me comfort and support.

“Sweetheart, it will all be alright. I am so sorry.”

I burrow my face deeper in my chest.

“Actually, the thing I wanted to talk to you about, it’s kind of urgent,” she adds.

I look up at Hilda, surprised by her sudden change of topic. “What do you mean?” I ask, my voice hoarse from crying.

Hilda takes a deep breath before continuing. “I’ve been thinking about your sea sickness and food poisoning, and I couldn’t just sit by and watch you suffer. So, I talked to one of our colleagues, and she gave me something that might help you feel better.”

I sit up, wiping away my tears. “What did you get?” I ask, curious and hopeful.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a small container. “It’s a natural remedy that she swears by. He said it’s helped him and his family with all kinds of stomach issues.”

I take the container from her and open it, inhaling the scent of the herbs inside. “Thank you, Hilda,” I say, my voice filled with gratitude. “You didn’t have to do this.”

She smiles at me. “Of course, I did. We’re in this together, remember? We take care of each other.”

“Thank you.”

“There is one more thing. When I mentioned the symptoms, she also gave me something else alongside the remedy.”

“What is it?”

She pulls a small box out of the same bag.

A pregnancy kit, and my heart immediately stops.

“I know it’s a long shot, but I couldn’t help but wonder if that’s what’s been making you so sick lately.”

No, no, no.

“I used condoms, Hilda.”

“Every time?” she asks, lifting her brow in question.

Then it all comes crashing back in. The first night. Max pulled out to come on my tits. That was the only time we didn’t use a condom. After that first night, I got scared of this exact thing, and we have used condoms since, but like a cruel twist of fate, here I am.

Possibly pregnant.

Could it be possible? I’ve been feeling off for the last few days, and I’ve been too afraid to even consider the idea of being pregnant. But now, as Hilda hands me the box, I can feel my heart pounding in my chest.

As I take the pregnancy kit from her, I can feel the weight of the world on my shoulders. “What if it’s positive? What will I do? How will Max react?”

Hilda takes my hand in hers. “Then we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. But for now, let’s just see what happens.”

Half an hour later, I am standing outside Max’s cabin door with a positive pregnancy test in my pocket.

I take a deep breath and knock on Max’s door, my heart pounding in my chest.

When he opens the door, I can see that there is no way this conversation is going to go well.

“Max, we need to talk.”

He doesn’t even look at me as he starts talking. “How could you not tell me that your friend Poppy is my brother’s Pen?”

he says, his voice filled with anger.

“I didn’t know that you knew her,” I say, trying to explain myself.

“Stop making excuses, Maggie,” he snaps. “You knew exactly who she was and you didn’t tell me. And now, you come here, acting like everything’s okay, when you’re the reason she’s not here anymore.”

I feel like I’ve been punched in the gut. How could he blame me for Poppy’s death? I try to defend myself, but he’s not listening.

“We should have never done this, pursued any of this.”

He tells me that our whole relationship was a mistake, and he slams the door on my face.

I stand there, devastated and alone, tears streaming down my face.

And in that moment, I know that everything has changed.

The pregnancy kit in my pocket suddenly feels heavy.

Chapter 14

Max

Three days later

I make my way to Finn's office, feeling a sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. We need to discuss the contract about the yacht, but I can't focus on that right now. All I can think about is Maggie and the way everything ended.

When I get to Finn's office, he looks up at me with a confused expression. "Hey, Max. What's going on? You seem a bit withdrawn."

I take a deep breath and try to compose myself. "I've had some personal stuff going on," I say, my voice a little shaky. "But we need to talk about the contract with the Wheelers."

He nods, but I can tell he's still concerned. We go over the contract details, but I'm barely paying attention. All I can think about is how I'm feeling betrayed by Maggie. I can't believe that I never considered her best friend Poppy to be our Pen.

Finally, Finn looks at me and says, “Max, what’s really going on? You seem like there’s something else going on besides just the contract.”

I hesitate for a moment, not sure if I’m ready to tell him. But I know that I need to talk to someone about it, and Finn is the closest thing I have to a confidant.

“I broke up with Maggie,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Who the hell is Maggie?”

“This woman I was seeing.”

“I thought you were seeing Mia.”

“Well, Mia and I took a break, especially after I went on the yacht instead of flying over to see her.”

“Wait, what? What are you talking about?”

“Mia and I had a different kind of relationship, and when we decided to put it on hold, I thought I was going to focus on work, and then I met Maggie.”

“Okay?”

“Don’t look at me like that. After our first kiss, I called Mia the next day and told her that I didn’t think we would ever be getting back together.”

“Ouch!” Finn hisses, “And how did she take that?”

“Surprisingly well. She said that she was down for fun whenever we were in the same town. Now enough about Mia. I am telling you about Maggie.”

“Go on...”

“Maggie knew Poppy.”

Finn looks at me with a mixture of surprise and concern.

“What do you mean she knew Poppy? Who is Poppy?”

“Poppy is Pen.”

He immediately sits up at the mention of his late fiancée’s name.

“Pen? My Pen?”

I take a deep breath and explain everything to him—how I met Maggie, the incident with the wine, the discussion about the bakery, skipping most of the sex stuff.

Finn’s face is unreadable as he listens to me.

When I finish, he looks at me with a mix of hurt and anger.

“Maggie? Maggie as in Meg? So, you slept with the woman who killed my fiancée?” he says, his voice barely above a whisper.

I feel like the air has been knocked out of me. I had never thought of it like that before. “I didn’t know, Finn,” I say, my voice shaking. “I swear, I had no idea.”

Finn stands up, his fists clenched at his sides. “I can’t even look at you right now, Max,” he says, his voice filled with anger. “You slept with the woman who killed my fiancée, and you didn’t even know it. How could you be so clueless?”

I try to explain myself, but he isn’t listening. He grabs his jacket and storms out of the office, leaving me alone with my

thoughts.

I sit there for a few minutes, feeling numb. I can't believe how quickly everything has fallen apart. I thought I had found someone special in Maggie, but now it seems like everything was a lie.

I pick up my phone, wanting to call her—to tell her how much I miss her, to get more answers from her, but ultimately decide not to.

This involves a lot more than my broken heart.

It also involves Finn, and I wouldn't do that to him.

As the hours pass, I realize that I may have lost Maggie forever.

Just like my brother lost Pen.

And for the first time ever, I finally understand a fraction of the pain he must have gone through.

This kind of heart ache feels unhealable. Even worse is the hole our breakup ripped in my heart.

Chapter 15

Maggie

I'm unpacking the last of my boxes in the new apartment Hilda and I just moved into. The room feels so empty and unfamiliar, like a blank slate. It's not as grand as the yacht we stayed in, but it feels nice to have a place of our own. It's been a week since I last saw Max and I'm still reeling from the pain and hurt of our breakup.

I've been keeping myself busy by trying to settle into the new space. I've been hanging pictures on the wall and arranging furniture. But no matter how much I try to distract myself, my mind keeps wandering back to Max.

It hurts to think about the way he closed the door on me, the hurt and anger etched on his face. I still can't believe that he blamed me for Poppy's death, especially when I had no idea who he was when we met. The news that she was his brother's fiancée shook me to my core. And now, I'm living with the guilt that I slept with the man who accused me of killing her.

Fuck!

It still hurts to think about.

The Coles cost me a lot.

My future, my livelihood, my peace of mind.

As I sit on the bed, surrounded by half-opened boxes tears start to stream down my face. It's been so hard trying to keep it together, to pretend that everything is okay. I miss Max so much and I hate that things ended the way they did.

But I have to keep reminding myself that I deserve better. I deserve someone who won't blame me for things that aren't my fault, someone who will love and support me through the good times and the bad.

A partner.

A father for my child.

And even though it hurts now, I know that in time I'll be able to move on and find someone who will love me for who I am.

I have to.

It's the only way I can survive this.

I am in the middle of moving one of the boxes containing my books when my phone buzzes with an incoming call.

A quick glance at the screen has my heart stopped in my tracks.

It's a number I had saved after several visits from his lawyer.

A number for a man I only saw in pictures and videos, but never in person. Poppy was trying to introduce us. But strange enough our schedules were so different and Finn went on work trips a lot, that we never actually met in person.

A man who deemed me so unworthy of his time and attention that he sent his lawyers to hound me in his stead.

Finn Cole.

Poppy's fiancé.

I wonder what he wants to talk about. I contemplate letting the phone go to voice mail, but on the last ring I pick it up. This is a man my best friend was ready to dedicate her life to, the least I could do is give him a few minutes of my time.

"Hello, Mr. Cole."

He is taken aback by my recognition.

"Miss Fieldman. Meg... I mean, Maggie. Hello."

"Hey."

"Look, I am in your neighborhood right now. Do you think we could meet up and talk?"

How does he know where I live? Better yet, what would we talk about?

"Please Maggie. I won't take a lot of your time."

Bound by a loyalty to Poppy, I agreed to meet him in half an hour.

I take the time to shower and get ready, opting to wear an oversize crewneck and leggings. It is way too early but I'm

still paranoid that my pregnant belly would show.

I arrive at the café and see Finn sitting at a table outside. He looks up and sees me and I can see the pain and anger etched on his face.

Trying to be as civil as possible, I exchange pleasantries with him before I sit down across from him.

We sit in silence for a few moments, none of us not really sure where to start.

Finally, Finn breaks the silence. “I wanted to talk to you about what happened with Max,” he says, his voice strained.

My heart sinks as I realize that this conversation is going to be just as painful as I thought it would be. “I know,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

Finn looks at me, his eyes searching mine. “I can’t believe he slept with you, Maggie. After what you did to Pen,” he says, his voice full of hurt and anger.

I feel tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I quickly blink them back. “I never would have slept with him if I had known who he was.”

He looks at me, his face softening slightly. “I know,” he says, his voice gentler now. “I don’t blame you for what happened to Pen, not anymore. I just... I don’t know how to deal with this. It feels like a betrayal.”

He doesn't blame me for what happened with Poppy anymore? What happened? What changed? Because the last

time I heard from this man, he was willing and ready to sue me for everything I was worth.

As if sensing my line of thoughts, Finn finally delves into an explanation.

He tells me that he found the diary of Pen. And that he could not read it until recently.

I can see tears forming in his eyes.

“I had to read that she had an alcohol problem and was really struggling. It hurt so much. The feeling that I didn’t really know her.”

He tells me about hiring a private investigator to find me. I feel a knot forming in my stomach.

“He told me some things about you. About us suing you, your family bakery and then the temp agency...”

I realize that I don’t know what to expect from this meeting.

But as we continue talking, I feel that he deserved the truth.

I have been keeping it a secret so long, and it no longer protects her, or serves me to do so.

So, with a deep breath, I tell him that Penelope was driving drunk the night of the accident. It’s difficult to say the words out loud, and I feel a lump in my throat. I feel guilty of letting her drive.

Finn is shocked and hurt by the revelation and I can see the anger and pain in his eyes. But he also seems relieved to finally know the truth. I can’t blame him for feeling that way.

He lost his fiancée and I lost my best friend. It's only natural for him to want some kind of closure.

“I had no idea she was driving that night. Now things make more sense. How did I not know about her struggle with alcohol?”

“Honestly, neither did I, until it was way too late. I felt so bad that I dragged her to that party that night, that I knew the only way I could compensate for letting her down like that, was protecting her.”

“And then we prevented you from attending her funeral, and sought reparations for a crime you never even committed?” I can feel the pain and frustration in his voice.

“You didn't know.”

“Does not excuse it. I am going to write you a check. You should get back all that you lost. It is not nearly enough, but it's a start.”

As he offers to refund all the money I lost from the lawsuit, I'm taken aback. I didn't expect that from him, but I know I can't accept it. I don't want his money. I don't want anything from him. All I want is to move on and try to make peace with what happened.

“I appreciate your offer, Finn, but I can't accept it,” I say firmly. “I don't want your money. I just want to try and move forward from this.”

Finn nods understandingly, but I can see the disappointment in his eyes. I feel a pang of guilt for not being able to give him

the closure he wanted, but I know that this is the best I can do. The truth is out there now, and we both have to find a way to deal with it.

We may never fully understand each other's pain, but at least we can try to move forward and heal.

We say our goodbyes and as I leave, I feel a mix of emotions swirling inside me. Relief that the truth is finally out, sadness for what happened, and a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, we can both find some kind of peace in the aftermath.

And beneath all that lurks the pain of losing Max, too.

That accident took too much from me and all I can do is hope to heal.

Chapter 16

Max

I'm sitting in my house, staring blankly at the TV. The news is on, but I'm not really paying attention. My mind is consumed with thoughts of Maggie and the pain of losing her. The guilt and betrayal over Pen's death weigh heavily on my shoulders and I can't shake them off.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door and I hear Finn's voice calling out to me. I get up and walk to the door, opening it to find my brother standing there with a serious expression on his face.

"Max, we need to talk," he says, pushing past me into the house.

I follow him to the living room and we sit down to talk. Finn tells me that he hired a private investigator, after he found Pen's diary. He also tells me that he went to find and meet Maggie.

My head is spinning with the news, and I feel like I've been punched in the gut. Hearing her name hurts so much.

“What did you find out?” I ask.

“Pen was actually driving that night. She was drunk, and according to her diary she could not control her alcohol intake or her actions when she was drunk. She needed help. And I did not see it, I did not know about it. I wish I would have been there for her to help her through that difficult time.”

Finn lost his voice.

“I can’t believe this,” I say, running my hands through my hair. “I had no idea.”

He nods sympathetically. “I know, it’s a lot to take in. But you need to understand that Maggie did not drive that night. She just found out about Pen’s problems and tried to protect her.”

I feel a sense of anger rising in me. “But she must have known that our Pen is her Poppy.”

Finn leans forward, his voice firm. “You love her. You can’t let your own guilt and anger blind you to the truth. Maggie is the woman you love, and you can’t let her go without a fight.”

As he speaks, I begin to realize that he’s right. I’ve been foolish and I’ve let my own emotions cloud my judgement. Maggie is the woman I love, and I can’t let her slip away because of my own mistakes.

“I have to go after her,” I say, feeling the determination rising in my chest. “I have to make things right.”

He nods, a small smile on his lips. “I knew you’d come to your senses, eventually. Go get her, Max.”

I stand up, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. I grab my keys and head out the door, ready to make things right with Maggie.

As I drive to Maggie's apartment, a sinking feeling sets in. What if she's moved on? What if it's too late to make things right? But I can't give up before I've even tried.

When I arrive, I find the apartment empty. There's no trace of Maggie, no sign of her belongings. I ask around, but no one seems to know where she has gone. My heart sinks and I feel a sense of despair wash over me.

I take out my phone and dial Finn's number. "Hey, Finn," I say when he answers. "I went to Maggie's place, but it's empty. Do you think the P.I. could help us find her?"

Finn doesn't hesitate. "Of course, I'll give him a call right now. Just hold tight."

I wait anxiously, my mind racing with possibilities. Where could she have gone? Has she moved away? Is she trying to forget about me?

Finally, Finn calls me back. "The P.I. has a lead. He thinks Maggie and Hilda moved together to a new apartment not far. He's sending me the address now."

Relief floods through me. "Thank you, Finn. I'll head over there now."

I jump back in the car and make my way to the address. As I drive, I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. What if she doesn't want to see me? What if I've already lost her for good?

When I arrive at the new apartment building, I take a deep breath and head inside. I make my way up to the fourth floor and knock on the door.

Seconds later, the door opens, and there she is, standing in front of me.

Chapter 17

Maggie

I'm sitting at home, feeling frustrated and stressed. I need to find a job quickly to support myself, the bakery, and the new life growing inside of me. I've been submitting resumes and applications, but nothing has panned out yet.

Suddenly, there's a knock on the door. My heart skips a beat. Could it be Max? No, it couldn't be. He made it clear that he never wanted to see me again. I shake my head, trying to push the thought out of my mind and make my way to the door.

When I open it, I'm surprised to see Max standing there. My heart starts pounding in my chest. I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks, and I'm not sure what to say.

"Hi, Maggie," Max says, his voice low and hesitant.

"Max," I reply, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"I've been looking for you," he says, his eyes searching mine.

"Why?" I ask, my heart racing.

“I need to talk to you,” he says, his voice softening.

I’m hesitant to let him in, but I eventually relent and invite him inside. He looks around the small apartment, taking in the boxes and the sparse furnishings.

“You moved,” he says.

“I had to,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” he says, taking a step closer to me. “I was wrong. I let my own guilt and anger cloud my judgement. I never should have blamed you for Pen’s death.”

I can feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I’ve missed him so much, but I’m scared to let myself believe that he’s really here, that he’s really sorry.

“Max, I…” I start, but I don’t know what to say.

“I know I hurt you,” he says, taking my hand in his. “But I want to make it right. Please, Maggie. Give me another chance.”

I can feel my heart swelling in my chest. I want to believe him, to forgive him, but I’m scared. Scared of being hurt again, scared of losing him again.

“Max, I don’t know,” I say, my voice trembling.

“I’ll do anything, Maggie,” he says, his eyes locking onto mine. “Please, just give me a chance to make things right.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I look at him, really look at him, and I see the pain and regret in his eyes. I know that I still love him, despite everything that’s happened.

“Okay,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

His face breaks into a huge smile, and he pulls me into his arms. I can feel his warmth and his strength, and I realize how much I’ve missed him.

“I promise, Maggie,” he says, his voice soft in my ear. “I’ll never hurt you again.”

“Good. You better mean that, because I have news for you.”

“What is it?”

I take a deep breath, and suddenly the words come tumbling out of my mouth. “Max, there’s something I need to tell you,” I say, my hand instinctively going to my stomach.

“What is it?” he asks, looking at me with concern in his eyes.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt out, the words sounding louder than I intended.

Max’s eyes widen, and for a moment, he looks like he might faint. “What?” he whispers, his voice barely audible.

“I found out on the yacht,” I explain, tears welling up in my eyes. “I tried to tell you, but I couldn’t find the right moment.”

Max looks stunned for a moment, but then a smile spreads across his face. “That’s incredible news, Maggie,” he says, pulling me into a tight embrace. “I can’t believe we’re going to have a baby.”

I lean into him, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. For a moment, all of our past hurts and betrayals seem insignificant

in the face of this new life growing inside of me.

“But there’s something else you need to know,” I continue, pulling away from him slightly. “Hilda took me to the clinic, and they confirmed that it’s a girl.”

Max’s eyes widen even further, and a look of joy and amazement crosses his face. “A girl,” he repeats, his voice filled with wonder. “We’re having a daughter.”

I nod, feeling a sense of happiness and contentment settle over me. It’s as if all the pieces of my life are finally coming together, and I can’t wait to see what the future holds for us.

“I love you, Maggie,” Max says, looking at me with a tenderness I haven’t seen in a long time. “And I love our baby girl.”

“Penelope. Her name is Penelope. And I love you too,” I say, feeling my heart overflowing with love and happiness. “And I can’t wait to start this new chapter of our lives together.”

“Penelope. That’s fucking perfect, Maggie.”

“It really is.”

Epilogue

Eigtheen months later, Max and Maggie stand hand-in-hand at Pen's gravesite, gazing down at the lush green grass that now covers her final resting place. Poppy toddles around them, her chubby little fingers reaching out to touch the flowers and the headstone.

"I wish she could see how beautiful our daughter is," Maggie says, her voice breaking with emotion.

Max wraps an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. "She's with us, Maggie. I know it."

They stay there for a few moments longer, lost in their thoughts and memories, before finally making their way back to the car. As they drive away, Maggie turns to Max.

"Do you remember what you said to Pen at her grave nine months ago?" she asks.

Max nods, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Of course, I do. I told her that I understood her struggle and that I was in love with her best friend."

Maggie's eyes fill with tears. "I never thought I could love someone as much as I love you, Max."

Max pulls the car over to the side of the road, turning to face Maggie. "Maggie, there's something I've been meaning to ask you," he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small velvet box.

Maggie's hand flies to her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise. "Max, what is this?"

Max takes a deep breath, opening the box to reveal a diamond engagement ring. "Maggie, from the moment I met you, I knew that there was something special about you. As I got to know you better, I realized that I had found the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. You make me laugh, you challenge me, and you make every day brighter. I promise to be your partner in life, to support you in your dreams, to be your confidant, and to be your best friend. I promise to love you unconditionally, to be patient with you, and to always put you first. I want to grow old with you, to experience all of life's adventures with you, and to create a lifetime of memories together. Will you marry me?"

Tears stream down Maggie's face as she nods her head, barely able to speak. "Yes, Max. Yes, of course, I'll marry you."

Max slips the ring onto her finger, and they both lean in for a passionate kiss, their hearts overflowing with love and happiness.

As they pull away from each other, Max takes Maggie's hand and squeezes it tightly. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Maggie. You've brought so much light and love into my life, and I'm grateful for you every day."

Maggie smiles up at him, her eyes shining with joy. "I love you, Max. Forever and always."

They drive back to the bakery, eager to start their new life together. As they walk into the shop, hand in hand, they're greeted by the delicious smells of freshly baked bread and pastries, and the sound of laughter and chatter from the customers.

Maggie turns to Max, beaming with pride. "I can't believe we've made it this far, Max. From the depths of despair to this. It's a miracle."

Max nods, taking in the scene around them. "It's a testament to your strength and determination, Maggie. You never gave up, even when things seemed impossible. And look where we are now."

They spend the rest of the day working side by side in the bakery, laughing and joking with each other and with their customers. And as they close up shop for the night, Max turns to Maggie once again.

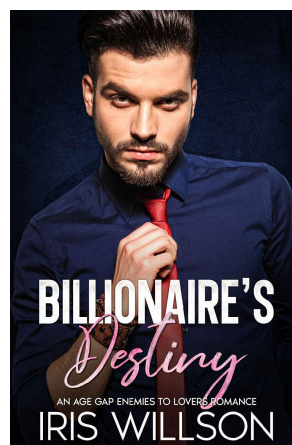
"I can't wait to meet our son," he says, a grin spreading across his face.

Maggie's eyes light up with excitement, patting her belly swelling with their expected second child. "Me too, Max. Me

too.”

The End

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About Author

Iris Willson



IRIS

writes contemporary romance novels that contain a mixture of emotions and excitement plus a whole lot of sexiness.

Born in Germany with a love for outdoor sports, travel and adventure, she has lived in several different countries, like Brazil and Australia and worked in a number of different jobs, including on a super yacht, on a sheep farm and a vineyard.

You will find some of her own adventures in her stories.

In 2018, love brought Iris to the United States.

She currently lives with her husband and their dog “Toffee” in Northern California.

When not spending hours on the laptop crafting billionaire heroes and sassy heroines, Iris can be found in a yoga class, or

traveling with her husband and dog in their minivan.

Connect with Iris:



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